CHAPTER 2
THREE YEARS IN THREE DAYS:
SCHOOL EXCURSIONS AS A MICROCOSM OF JAPANESE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

“Oh Look! It has “School Excursion” written on it!”
When we saw this, everyone was so excited and we all screamed loudly.

These were the words Yamaguchi-san wrote next to a photograph of the
Shinkansen, Japan’s high speed railway, in the scrapbook she created in art class in the
weeks following the school excursion early in her final year of junior high school. She
was referring to the destination signs located beside the door of each car which in this
case instead of Tōkyō or Ōsaka displayed “Shūgaku Ryokō” (or “School Excursion”) as
the terminus. This unexpected recognition of their elevated status in the form of an entire
train chartered especially for the occasion excited students, who screamed, squealed,
pointed out the sign to their friends, and rushed to take photographs of it in the few
moments before they were called by their teachers to quickly board the train. Embarking
on this “School Excursion” shinkansen was a thrill analogous to hopping on Harry
Potter’s Hogwarts Express, and students were beside themselves with anticipation of a
tour full of magic and mystery.

That one could palpably sense an air of mystery surrounding this journey is all the
more surprising because very little was unknown to students about the details of
destinations, activities, and expectations. Students, with their teachers and assistance
from a travel agent, had been planning the excursion for three years, almost from the
moment they had entered junior high school. In the months and days leading up to
departure, the planning schedule was stepped up, with student groups reporting to their
classes the results of research on destinations, devising small group tours and time schedules, choosing leaders for committees and other responsibilities, and meticulously finalizing other arrangements such as seating assignments on busses and a list of authorized contents for student duffle bags. No detail was considered too small, and a handbook (shiori) created especially for the excursion and accorded near-Biblical status painstakingly enumerated each item. Students carried the handbook throughout the excursion, referring to it for time schedules, event locations, rules of comportment, maps of accommodations and travel destinations as well as bus and train seating assignments. The handbook also included student forms for reflecting daily on their activities, reporting personal expenditures, and checking supplies and personal items. Teacher handbooks contained an additional schedule more than six pages in length and mind-boggling in its complexity that indicated the numerous duties for every teacher throughout each day, accounting for their time between 4:30-5:30 in the morning until well after midnight.

Despite the hours of formal class activity extending over a period of years during which they were involved in making these arrangements, students were overwhelmed with excitement the moment the train “just for them” (as one student described it) pulled into Shin-Kōbe station. Though students were well-aware of where they were going and what was to occur, the step from planning future activities to actually performing them was a considerable one. Their limited experience participating in an event of such a grand scale contributed to the sense of mystery, and added to this was the magic of traveling to far-away places in the company of friends and classmates, eating extravagant meals, and sleeping in slumber party-like surroundings without parental supervision.
But wasn’t this a “school” excursion? Could “fun” and “school” co-exist in Japan, especially given the images of Japanese education that circulate in North America? Can “serious” learning occur under such circumstances and, if so, how might we better understand this learning process? In this chapter, I suggest that the grade 9 school excursion is a microcosm of Japanese junior high school, a rich node of activity within which the fundamental pedagogical objectives of junior high school are realized. As a three-day culminating performance, the school excursion demonstrates student mastery of procedures developed and practiced over three years at school. Viewed by teachers as a significant educational experience, the importance of the grade 9 school excursion lies in its ability to transcend personal, interpersonal, institutional and community boundaries while extending student learning by expanding their repertoires of experience through participation in real-world interactions within novel out-of-school settings. Certain features of the school excursion suggest it is a rite of passage, but most significant for students are the vivid memories of the moments interacting with their friends. This intense interaction concentrated over a period of only three days has the potential for developing dense social networks and intimate friendships able to withstand stressors and support students through the rigors of grade 9 as they prepare to sit for high school entrance examinations… and beyond.

**Recognizing the significance of Japanese school excursions**

My interest in school excursions was piqued more than a decade ago when as an Assistant English Teacher (AET) on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program I accompanied Hashimoto-sensei to the gymnasium of the junior high school where I was then employed. We entered the building to find the grade 9 cohort already assembled
before us, organized according to homeroom and seated on the floor in alternating rows of girls and boys. Behind the students were forty chairs neatly arranged in ten rows of four, each row consisting of two pairs separated by an intervening space. As I scanned the gymnasium trying to discern the purpose of this assembly, my inexperience with Japanese schooling practices in my first year in the country left me at a loss. The formal arrangement of chairs clearly served some purpose, and I continued to watch, intent on discovering what that might be.

I did not need to wait long, for several minutes later, Class 3-A stood up and moved toward the center of the gym, stopping to form a line beside the rightmost column of chairs. Then, following instructions from their teacher, the students – first the boys and then the girls – proceeded to walk in single file down the center aisle of the chair formation to take their seats one-by-one. After everyone was seated, the front most pair of students on the left was instructed to stand up and vacate their seats, and they were followed by the other students in single file, first on the left side from front to back, followed by the right side.

As I watched these maneuvers, I turned to Hashimoto-sensei and asked the purpose of the activity. During my previous nine months at the school, I had become accustomed to seeing students regularly performing activities not present in American schooling. These included demonstrations under teacher supervision of bicycle riding in the playground to ensure safety during the commute to school, and repeated practice creating human pyramids with large bamboo poles in preparation for Sports Festival. But I could not discern the purpose of the routine I was presently observing. By now, though, Hashimoto-sensei was accustomed to my many questions and replied that “the students
are practicing getting on and off the bus.” Perhaps noticing a perplexed look on my face, he explained further that students were practicing how they would board and disembark the bus in an orderly fashion on the upcoming school excursion. When I asked whether this bus-boarding simulation was really necessary, unmasking myself further as an ingénue, his matter-of-fact response was that “we have to make sure.”

For the remainder of the 50-minute period, we watched the students repeat the same routine until the teachers were satisfied with their performance. Later during my three years at the school, I would observe many similar routines of the “we have to make sure” type. Although I was eager to observe how students performed these routines on the actual school excursion, my annual requests to the administration to join in were declined because I was not a member of the grade 9 team of teachers.

Ten years later at my field site in Kōbe, equipped with more experience, education, skill with the language, and time in the country, I could recognize the detailed planning and routine rehearsals for excursions with ease, but as I observed and participated in excursion preparations with three cohorts of students, I began to recognize that this event, though occurring only once in a student’s junior high school career, signified something much more grand, representing nothing less than the culminating event of Japanese public schooling.

Teachers, parents and the community all joined together to promote the event as one of even more profound significance, with the power to extend beyond the temporal boundaries of junior high school to become “the memory of a lifetime” (isshō no omoide ni naru). This meaning was revealed to me on the day we departed on my first school excursion:
Shibata-sensei walked in a random pattern among the dozen closely assembled rows of grade 9 students seated behind their overstuffed backpacks on the floor of Shin-Kōbe station. Several teachers from the lower grade levels accompanied us to the station to wish us a fond farewell, carrying signs of support and encouragement. It was a warm spring day as I stood there with my own backpack awaiting a short ceremony to inaugurate our travel, followed by instructions from the head teacher to proceed to the ticket gates.

Shibata-sensei eventually walked over in my direction and wished me a good trip. At that moment, our attention was suddenly drawn to a loud voice that, it turned out, emanated from Nishimura-kun, a grade 9 boy who was considered a “problem student.” Often talking back to teachers, refusing to follow instructions, and recently sneaking away from school at lunchtime with a few other boys to play hooky in the afternoons, Nishimura-kun and friends had been causing considerable trouble for their teachers who were then required to roam the local community in search of them and, when found, to escort them back to school. Though his exact words were inaudible by the distance between us, it appeared that Nishimura-kun was responding to Matsuoka-sensei’s attempts to have him sit properly, stop talking, and tuck in his shirttail.

As I watched this exchange, I wondered what difficulties Nishimura-kun might present for teachers during the excursion when he could enjoy a relatively freer range to exercise his wanderlust. I asked Shibata-sensei his view of the situation, suggesting that a similar type of behavior in American schools might lead to exclusion – or the threat of exclusion – from the school event as a form of punishment. If participation in an event was considered a privilege, then a misbehaving student would not deserve to participate. Pausing for only a moment, Shibata-sensei replied, “Well, I see what you are saying, but we really couldn’t do that. It would be depriving him of a memory of a lifetime. That wouldn’t be right, and parents would probably get angry too.”

(Fieldnotes, April 2001)
Although this was not the answer I anticipated, it revealed to me that the school excursion held far greater significance in Japan than the fun, marginally educational, event they are commonly understood to be in the United States. With respect to Nishimura-kun, teachers hoped that the excursion would encourage him back into the fold of junior high school life by strengthening his relationships with friends and classmates and, with this network of support in place, subsequently appeal to his sense of responsibility and obligation in the daily practice of schooling such that, ultimately, he could proceed more smoothly on the path to adulthood in later years.

**Japanese school excursion defined**

Excursions are a long-standing feature of Japanese schooling. Although they have been explicitly included as a core element of the compulsory curriculum only since 1956, excursions have taken place periodically since 1886, and less formalized precursors are recorded as far back as the Edo Period (1603-1867) during the days of *terakoya* parish schools (Yamamoto and Konno 1974). Contemporary school excursions are included in the Japanese Ministry of Education’s *Course of Study for Lower Secondary Schools* under the category of “special activities” (*tokubetsu katsudō*), the aim of which is to promote the “harmonious development of mind and body through desirable group activities to develop individuality, to enhance the self-awareness of being a member of a group, and to cultivate self-reliant independent and practical attitudes to enrich school life in cooperation with others” (2003b: 104-105, emphasis added).\(^1\) Additional

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\(^1\) These stated objectives for an official component of the curriculum that comprises up to 25% of time at school lends explicit support for the argument developed later that the fundamental curriculum of Japanese junior high school is to develop in students a sense of individuality and group consciousness that through the daily practice of schooling allows students to become comfortable and capable “individuals within a group.” This is discussed further in chapter nine.
objectives specific to school excursions include broadening students’ knowledge and experience in diverse contexts, deepening their understanding of themselves as Japanese, providing them with opportunities for practicing the rules of group life and public morality, and cultivating a sense of belonging toward the group that may motivate them towards increased involvement in school life.

Excursions are a fundamental part of the educational program at the elementary and junior high school levels, usually occurring during the spring of the students’ graduation year. Elementary school students in grade 6 and junior high school students in grade 9, accompanied by their teachers, travel on two to four day itineraries to destinations deemed historically, culturally, or environmentally significant. High school excursions, by contrast, are usually taken in grade 11 in the year prior to preparing for university entrance examinations, and in recent decades often include overnight ski trips or even excursions abroad. During excursions, students typically stay in Japanese-style inns or hotels where they share a room with four to six classmates. They sleep on futon on tatami-matted floors, and spend their free time in the evening chatting, playing cards, and enjoying one another’s company. Students eat meals together in large banquet halls or dining rooms where they are offered local specialty dishes and are lavishly catered to by lodging staff. Also, as is common at Japanese-style accommodations, students bathe in gender-segregated groups in a large communal bathtub.

Features of the school excursion that mark it as special for students include the opportunity to experience an event together with the entire grade cohort, and it being often the first occasion to travel without parents and to receive special treatment from the travel industry as legitimate customers in their own right. The perception of this event as
an exceptional occasion in which virtually every minute is savored allows the entire cohort to participate in the development of social capital (Bourdieu 1986) that will pay dividends later. Students are expected to develop confidence in establishing social relationships, and later to be motivated to draw on support from this network during, for example, the challenges they encounter as educational attention shifts to high school entrance exams. Demonstrating this capacity for smooth interpersonal interaction even when faced with novel or challenging circumstances is an important signpost of maturity that teachers cultivate throughout the three years of junior high school and which forms the basis for teacher evaluation of the success of the event and predictions for the remainder of the school year.

A key feature of the excursion is the manner in which it blends individual and interpersonal encounters that allows students to feel special together as persons. Over an extended event such as a school excursion there exists a range of activities and social spaces within which all students appear to be able to find opportunities to demonstrate some degree of confidence in expressing their individuality among peers. At the same time, the range of roles held and responsibilities performed in the numerous student-led activities that take place during the excursion requires that students listen carefully to and value the contributions of other students, in the process validating their own contributions as central participants in those activities. The broader community also validates the exceptional nature of the experience by suggesting it will become a “memory of a

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2 This was true even for students for whom I was privately skeptical as to whether the school excursion would have a positive outcome. Mischievous Nishimura-kun described earlier, irrepressibly shy Watanabe-san, and unskilled returnee Maeda-kun, all struggled at school but managed to come together with classmates to not only survive but revel in the school excursion experience.
lifetime,” which further builds students’ anticipation of the journey and motivates their investment in it.

**Excursions at Ume Junior High School**

During my fieldwork, I traveled with Ume students on their excursions, participating in all aspects of preparation and post-event activities. From May 31st to June 2nd, 2001 students journeyed from Kōbe to Hiroshima, Akiyoshi Dai and Hagi in Yamaguchi Prefecture, and Sumiyoshi in Ōita Prefecture. The broad goals of this specific excursion plan were four-fold: 1) to contemplate the significance of important sights by, for example, reflecting on the meanings of “peace” at Hiroshima, marveling at the wonders of the natural environment at Akiyoshi Dai (an area along the northern coast of Western Honshū with rolling tablelands dotted with rock spires and with hundreds of enormous limestone caverns beneath the surface), realizing the long history of Japan at Hagi (a picturesque feudal castle town with important historical connections to the uprisings leading to the Meiji Restoration in 1868 that ushered in the modern era in Japan), and enjoying a multi-sensory leisure experience at Sumiyoshi Beach in Kyūshū; 2) to appreciate “the simple life;” 3) to nurture independence, cooperation, and individual responsibility through group living; and 4) to make memories that last a lifetime by deepening friendships through small group, homeroom, and grade level activities (Ume school excursion handbook 2001).

Excursion destinations vary from school to school, and these days also vary over time at any given school. The following year, for example, I traveled with students along the Tateyama-Kurobe Alpine Route in central Honshū, visiting the Hakuba Ski Jump of the 1998 Nagano Olympics, lodging at an onsen hot spring, and exploring Wajima, a
coastal town on the Noto Peninsula, famous for its lacquer ware and early morning
farmer’s market. Regardless of destination, however, excursions are structured to focus
on historical, cultural or environmental appreciation, experiential learning, and group
living, though over time, higher family incomes, increased opportunity to travel great
distances by high-speed train and airplane, and urban consumer culture have gradually
changed the nature and texture of excursions. The introduction of an “integrated
learning” (sōgō gakushū) course in the curricular reforms of 2002 has introduced further
content areas that teachers try to incorporate into the excursion experience (Nihon
Shūgaku Ryōkō Kyōkai 2003) such as international understanding, health and welfare,
and volunteer or co-op work experiences of a type similar to but shorter in duration than
“Let’s Try Week,” a week-long apprenticeship in local businesses or municipal offices
that I discuss later in chapter nine.

No matter where excursions may take them or in which specific activities they
engage, students seem to find highlights at every turn, demonstrated by the sparkle in
their eyes, the pointing of fingers and exclamatory comments, and the tugs on friends’
shirt sleeves to call attention to a specific scene. In her diary of the events of the first day
spent in Hiroshima, Takahashi-san captured the complex assemblage of emotions with
the succinct comment “Today was full of tears and laughs.” Layered within exciting
enjoyable events are opportunities for reflection and contemplation, of peace at
Hiroshima and of the historical aspects of their Japanese identity at Hagi.

Hiroshima

Students visited Hiroshima on their first day of travel to address the theme of
“peace education and the devastation of war” (Ume school excursion handbook 2001).
Pre-departure preparation included lessons on the historical events leading up to the detonation of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the ensuing devastation, and the famous story of the young girl Sadako Sasaki who became ill and eventually died from leukemia, the “atom bomb disease,” after having created more than 1,000 origami cranes. Students visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, where they read information about the atomic bomb and viewed authentic artifacts gathered in the aftermath as well as exhibits re-creating post-detonation scenes of devastation. They also visited bombed ruins and a memorial to the victims, holding a brief ceremony to honor the victims and offer handmade origami paper cranes, reminiscent of Sadako’s story and symbolic of world peace. Sugiyama-kun characterized his Hiroshima experience in his scrapbook in Japanese under the English title “The Serius [sic] Content:”

The Atomic Bomb Dome is in the background of this photo. I think it can be said that this is one of the famous symbols of the atomic bomb. It’s the first time for me to see it with my own eyes, though, and I could really get a sense of the terrible suffering that happened here during the war. Within the school trip schedule, Hiroshima is one of the biggest themes, and “peace” is one of the most important of all.

Contemplative while immersed in the landscape of Hiroshima surrounding the Peace Museum, students were physically moved by a presentation by Matsuyama-san, an atomic bomb survivor in his 70s who spoke to students about his recollections not only of the moments immediately before and after detonation, but also of his experiences in

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3 At least two versions of this story exist with different endings. One version is as stated above, while in another version, Sadako dies before being able to fold one thousand cranes. Her classmates, then, finish folding the remaining cranes in her memory. Prompting the crane folding initially was an old Japanese legend that suggests anyone who folds one thousand paper cranes will be granted a wish.
Hiroshima during the following days and weeks. His speech was part of his continuing mission, sponsored by the Peace Museum, to ensure that a similar horror is never repeated. Ikeda-san wrote of her experience in the following way:

> Tears flowed from my eyes as I listened to the experiences of atomic bomb survivor Matsuyama-san, and his lengthy discussions of the horrors of war and the importance of peace. In his talk, he explained in great detail the terrible brightness of the moment when the atomic bomb fell and the frightful images of shadows left on buildings where people had been during that moment. Compared to reading about this in books, it made a strong impression in my heart hearing the true situation of someone who experienced this. I am going to pray very hard for “world peace.”

Matsuyama-san’s description of despair, death, and later discrimination as he, like many bomb survivors, was shunned by fellow Japanese brought many students to tears. Koyama-san, who had been assigned the task of thanking Matsuyama-san on behalf of her school after his presentation, said the following with tears streaming down her face:

> Today you have given us a valuable talk. Thank you. While coming to understand the terrible effects of war, we could also come to appreciate the importance of peace. We are all living now. We have inherited this from the people who survived the war. It is our duty to continue to regard life as precious and important. You’ve given us hope for living, and shown us the joy of living. Thank you very much.

Later in her scrapbook, Koyama-san described what she had been feeling during Matsuyama-san’s lecture, followed by a reflection on her own performance:

**Peace Lecture**

We listened to the presentation of Matsuyama-san, who actually experienced the war. While listening, I was filled with various emotions…feelings of misery (pity), fear, gratitude, and awe.
Expression of Gratitude

I had the duty of formally thanking Matsuyama-san. So many emotions and feelings welled up inside of me that I cried uncontrollably, but I’m glad that I could honestly express my feelings.

After returning from the trip, students wrote moving letters thanking Matsuyama-san for his presentation, and he replied by sending the school his own artistic vision of Hiroshima on that fateful day along with a message for world peace that was hung prominently in the school entrance.

Hagi

The visit to Hagi provided students with another perspective from which to contemplate Japan’s past. Lodging at a hotel in Hagi, students were indulged in an elaborate meal that included crab and other local delicacies, after which they bathed in the hotel’s large communal bath and then shopped for souvenirs at the hotel’s gift shop opened especially for them. On day two of the excursion, students divided into pre-arranged small groups (han) and cycled around Hagi, visiting destinations along a course they had decided upon weeks earlier and which passed by their teachers stationed at various checkpoints. Although each group had carefully prepared their sightseeing route and schedule and had assigned to each member specific duties such as leader, navigator, time keeper and so forth, many groups found the task of moving from planning stage to performance to be difficult and were forced to improvise in order to reach the final gathering place on time. Such occurrences, however, pressed students to draw upon both individual and group resources to determine how plans could be revised and executed –
stretching their abilities to draw from prior learning experiences to work out a new solution, in the process demonstrating to teachers the extent of their developing maturity.

Teachers had prepared the students for the possibility of getting lost, instructing them to ask for directions from local residents, a strategy the group with whom I traveled resorted to several times after overcoming an initial reluctance to ask for help. Students seemed to find this exchange with local residents energizing, as it allowed them to continue on their way with renewed confidence in their abilities to get back on track through their own efforts. They also enjoyed listening to the speech of local residents and would later discuss each exchange for several minutes, expressing their curiosity about regional dialects and their relief (and surprise?) that they could make sense of it.

Unexpected situations such as getting lost occurred frequently and commanded special attention in the scrapbooks that students later created to commemorate their experiences. Many students appeared to relate with pride their ability to overcome the various mishaps and hurdles they encountered, perhaps indicating a growing self-realization that they were indeed capable of handling new and difficult situations, increasing both their confidence and augmenting their emerging repertoire of life skills. Titles written in bold typeface were accompanied by dramatic photos or illustrations that captured the surprising event and often an exaggerated emotional reaction as well.

Yamazaki-kun recounted “The Episode of Rent-A-Cycle” – a situation that challenged his group to step beyond their comfort zone and improvise by utilizing resources that they had been alerted to beforehand by teachers and which allowed them in the end to make their way to their destination on time. He wrote:
In my group, no one can read directions at all, so we started (through the streets of Hagi) by following another team from our homeroom class who was a little ahead of us…. They became annoyed by our shadowing them, though, so when we reached a bridge, we stopped and stood there for a while and they went on their way. One street looked to us like it would be really interesting, so we proceeded that way, but ultimately it was a dead end and we had to go all the way back! By the time we crossed back over the bridge, we were determined to find the right way to go, and after looking carefully at the map again, we went in another direction. But this turned out to be the wrong way too. Finally we stopped a woman on the street and asked for directions. By this time, we were really in trouble since we had no time left to reach our destination. We began riding at a furious pace in the direction that the woman told us. In the end, it turned out that we were the first group to reach the meeting place. In other words, we hurried too much…

Given the challenges students encountered as they attempted to follow their schedules and reach appointed meeting places on time, one might question the extent to which students were able to soak up the historical significance of Hagi as an old feudal town. However, students had researched the town thoroughly, and during the ride were impressed by the architecture of private residences as they rode along the quiet,

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4 The last sentence above indicates an awareness by this student, in hindsight, of one of the major pedagogical goals underlying not only this activity but many others throughout junior high school – facilitating students’ ability to demonstrate in practice a realization that maintaining a balanced approach to the process of learning is more desirable than concentrating one’s efforts purely on goal-directed activity requiring a level of concentrated focus not healthy or sustainable over the long term. Teachers focus their efforts on establishing smooth student interactions during everyday activity, not during peak performance, realizing that successful peak performance can only be achieved by first establishing a strong foundation for learning. In chapter six, I will introduce grade 7 student Miki-san, whose leadership is excessively goal-focused during her first opportunity to direct a cleaning activity. She later learns, through debriefings with a teacher advisor, a less-controlling, more process-oriented leadership approach. That such a fundamental goal reflected in activities throughout junior high school has been forgotten during the confusion of the moment during a grade 9 school excursion, as indicated above, illustrates the difference between personal disposition or intellectual awareness of a concept and its tacit demonstration in practice. This distinction between focal knowledge and wisdom demonstrated effortlessly through decisions made in practice is further discussed in chapter nine, and it is this latter ability that is the focus of junior high school pedagogy.
meandering streets of the old samurai quarter. Tsuda-san expressed her impressions of the day as follows:

This activity was a lot of fun, and I enjoyed touring around with my group members as if we were adults. We were supposed to go to a lot of places, but in the end we only wound up having time to go to three… But it was a lot of fun!!

In many ways, this group activity provided an enjoyable social space (purposefully structured by teachers) for students to examine the boundaries of their abilities by relying solely upon themselves and their groups for success, and with opportunities to share in laughter over the mistakes they made, the serendipitous observations they made, and the local people they encountered. At the same time, there are also lasting implications for personal and social identity development that forms an important network that will propel students through the remaining months of junior high school and provide a strong foundation for high school and later adult life. These are discussed later in this chapter.

**Sumiyoshi Beach**

The excursion took another dramatic turn when students arrived at Sumiyoshi Beach Resort Park on the evening of day two. Throughout the day during the six-hour ride between Yamaguchi and Ōita Prefectures in a convoy of six busses (one for each homeroom class), a young female tour guide smartly dressed in company uniform joined by a student in charge of recreation together led each homeroom class in quiz games, bingo, stand up comedy, and best of all, raucous karaoke. Though tired from traveling, as we neared our destination at the beach resort, students were enlivened by the ocean views and grew excited in anticipation of the evening’s Jingisukan, an all-you-can-eat Mongolian barbecue. Upon arrival, students seated outside on a large patio chatted,
laughed, and examined the hotplates in the middle of their tables as they awaited formal greetings from the manager of the Resort Park and a brief statement by a member of the student committee in charge of mealtime responsibilities.

As servers began to arrive with large platters heaped with thinly sliced uncooked mutton and vegetables, the din of conversation evolved into boisterous exclamations of surprise over the large amounts of food. Students took numerous pictures as hot plates heated up, and the conviviality continued as they cooked their own meals. Immersing themselves in the gastronomic experience, many students ordered second helpings. By the time the meal was officially over, students were massaging their stomachs and exclaiming how stuffed they were. In her scrapbook next to photographs of her friends and the plates of food on the table, Yanagi-san wrote:

The barbeque was so delicious! Everyone’s eyes were wide and sparkling when we saw the food. The more we ate, the more delicious it was, and we had a terrific time. The tea was really cold too. It was the best!!

More excitement was to come the following day, when students were introduced to several “marine sports” by tanned young men of around 18-years old described by Kitaguchi-san as “extremely friendly, and of course, excellent wind surfers.” According to Yanagi-san, “this was the event that I looked forward to most of all.” Throughout the morning, students on a rotating basis participated in four types of activities: wind surfing, riding a banana boat pulled by a jet ski, touring the bay on a hydrofoil (one of only two in Japan), and enjoying free time playing water tag (oni gokko) or building sand castles on the beach. The most challenging activity by far was wind surfing, yet students decked out in wet suits thoroughly enjoyed receiving training by their young instructors.
who spoke in a heavily-accented Kyūshū dialect. Morita-san characterized her experience in the following way:

Wind surfing was really interesting! I thought the water would be chilly, but it wasn’t. Getting up on the board to ride was very difficult, and it was slippery so I was scared. The rope was especially hard to hold onto to pull and make steady. In the end, it was really hard, but it was fun.

The banana boat, an inflated yellow raft upon which students were pulled by an instructor on a jet ski, was another highlight. The students zipped across the bay hanging on desperately as their speed increased. By the looks on their faces, it was a thrill not to be forgotten. Suzuki-san noted, “The banana boat was excellent!! We put on life jackets and boarded the boat. I thought with the life jackets on that I would have no fear, but as soon as we got going it was scary!! It was exciting at the same time too. I’m glad none of my friends fell off.” Though activities such as “marine sports” represent recent trends in school excursions, the underlying aim remains traditional; that is, to introduce students to new types of experiences that provide a context for learning, an increasingly challenging task for contemporary teachers.

Ethnopedagogical views of school excursions

Examining the school excursion as a context for learning reveals embedded Japanese cultural values, pedagogical goals, and expectations. The integrated approach to the design and implementation of school excursions in terms of the range of activities and experiences that occur during the journey, the detailed preparation prior to departure, and careful examination of the process in later debriefing are characteristic of Japanese teachers’ general approaches to learning. Process is emphasized over outcomes, and the strategy of minimizing potential missteps through pre-emptive planning is observed
repeatedly throughout Japanese schooling, as is the reflection on past performance that is based on a belief that wisdom emerges from experience and that performance can always be improved with each new attempt.

Teachers design the macro-structure of the excursion to meet two broad educational objectives, with the original mission of introducing students to historically and culturally significant sites today being eclipsed in importance by the goal of providing them with opportunities for independent and group decision-making. While teachers and travel agents do the initial planning, students provide substantial input in the planning process over their years at junior high school which draws students into the activity, provides them with a sense of ownership, and builds their expectations.

Grade 9 school excursions are scaffolded for students through a series of smaller fieldtrips extending over the preceding three years, the experiences from which are drawn upon in preparations for subsequent trips. At Ume, grade 7 students take an overnight camping trip in which students in small groups participate semi-autonomously with minimal guidance from teachers in relatively narrowly focused activities such as orienteering, building campfires, and cooking curry rice. In grade 8, they plan by themselves a fieldtrip around the city, mapping destinations, creating a schedule, and then carrying out the plan of touring in small groups the city of Kōbe with which they are already quite familiar.

While the preparations for these events help to develop students’ organizational skills, the planning, implementation, and debriefing phases of these preparatory fieldtrips provide multiple contexts within which students, interacting among themselves, with teachers and with members of the surrounding community, demonstrate their developing
maturity as junior high school students. These events provide students with out-of-school opportunities for practicing social life, building interpersonal relationships, experimenting with provisional notions of self-presentation in public settings, and receiving feedback as to whether those notions are validated. Teachers use feedback from these events to plan the direction for future learning by identifying areas that require further attention. Students are drawn into this process through post-event discussions in the classroom that focus on successes and failures, with teachers encouraging students to reach beyond their current levels of competence at the next opportunity.

This gradual development of skills through variation over time in the roles taken up by individual students and in the specific activities of these recurring events is characteristic of Japanese junior high school and is especially evident in school excursions. As the culminating event, the grade 9 school excursion provides students with a public stage upon which to demonstrate their competence by taking on responsibilities and, by following the conventions of social behavior as they participate in enjoyable activities with minimal adult intervention, revealing the extent of their growth and maturation over the preceding three years. Teachers gauge students’ progress and use this feedback to plan further instruction by estimating how well a homeroom class will cooperate as it copes with the future challenges of grade 9. According to Honda-sensei, a grade 9 veteran teacher, “If the school excursion goes well, the rest of the school year generally proceeds smoothly.” In her view, the grade 9 school excursion demands the most complex articulation of the skills that have been developed at junior high school. Freed from the physical confines of the school and charged with making choices in a
real-world context only minimally structured by teacher involvement, students must engage in social practice with real-world consequences.

To an outsider viewing the regularly recurring events of school *from the perspective of the activities themselves*, Japanese junior high school may appear to be an incessant parade of repetitive drill-like activities that culminate in a payoff for students in the form of an enjoyable, highly anticipated, but marginally educational event. A cynical observer might even question the efficacy of the entire Japanese educational enterprise. However, when viewed *from the perspective of the individuals participating* in these recurring activities, the ethnopedagogical goals are clear. The seasonal, annual or otherwise regularly recurring events that generally fall under the category of “special activities” (*tokubetsu katsudō*) within the formal curriculum serve a crucial function in enhancing the polycontextual complexity of the school environment, thus providing students with opportunities to layer additional experience onto existing know-how and, in this manner, further extending their expertise. For each of these events, the specific roles played by any given student change with each repeated occurrence, thereby shifting the characteristics of the interpersonal relationships that must be managed as they participate in it. Similarly, the details of the event itself vary with each iteration. Consequently, from the perspective of students engaged in the activity, the novel characteristics of each iteration of a familiar event presents new learning challenges, and it is this combination of familiarity and novelty that allows students to extend their learning by building upon

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5 The notion of “polycontextual development zones” for student learning, a spatial metaphor extending Vygotsky’s temporal notion of the “zone of proximal development,” as well as the related educational implications of “special activities” integrated within the formal curriculum vis-à-vis those deemed to be “extra-curricular” are discussed in chapter six.
past experiences. For teachers, “special activities” provide familiar recurring contexts that transcend individual, interpersonal, institutional and community boundaries and within which they can, over time, help to facilitate the educational growth (or build up the expertise) of students. For students, however, each recurrence is a new event, a novel situation to manage, though it is an event within which a growing fund of social capital is available to be drawn upon.

Many other features of Japanese junior high school activity that support the fundamental educational goal of students “becoming individuals within a group” embodied in the school excursion can be observed throughout the various contexts of schooling (including within the activities of formal classes on academic subjects), and in many cases transcend boundaries between institution and community to suggest broader Japanese cultural values and beliefs. These include an emphasis on small group activities conducted independently of active teacher direction and focusing on collective problem-solving, on integrated forms of participatory learning that activate all of one’s senses (demonstrated through the examples of marine sports above), and the establishing of close relationships with peers and teachers through intense activity during events such as the school excursion but also through extensive opportunities to participate together in the ordinary daily operations of schooling. Small group activities are structured so that each student holds responsibilities that are genuinely necessary for the group to function smoothly as a unit, and these serve to nurture cooperation among members and a self-awareness that individual behavior and decisions can positively or negatively impact the group. The nature of the activities also place responsibility for public morality on all
members of a group as they come to realize that their actions form the basis of views of themselves and their institution within the broader community.

Additionally, experiences such as sharing meals together and communal bathing are activities imbued with cultural meanings that serve to help establish closeness among students that cannot easily be achieved in other ways. Eating meals together holds powerful cultural meaning, symbolizing the importance of sharing significant, sometimes challenging, experiences together. As the proverb “onaji kama no meshi o kuu” suggests, one only truly comes to know friends by (literally) “eating rice out of the same pot.”

The experience of communal bathing, which Western societies consider to be a quintessential feature of Japanese culture, is much less familiar to Japanese adolescents than one might expect. Youth in contemporary Japan have little, if any, experience with communal bathing at either onsen (hot spring resorts) or sentō (community-based facilities) (Clark 1994; 1998). Teachers have a heightened consciousness of the varied objectives for school excursions, and their desire to reconnect students with fading cultural traditions is apparent in such actions as requiring communal bathing facilities as a necessary criterion for accommodations to be included on the itinerary. Although there were private bath facilities at one of the hotels on the excursion, students were not permitted to bathe in their rooms but were instead required to join their classmates at designated times in the communal bath. Communal bathing both literally and figuratively exposes one completely before one’s peers and is within traditional Japanese culture considered to be an important means of peeling away the layers that separate human beings, thus cultivating a sense of closeness that is difficult to replicate through other means.
With limited or no experience in the practices of public bathing, students find it difficult to suddenly adapt, especially at a time when they are experiencing growth spurts that result in a great diversity in their physical appearances. Teacher guidance eases the tension somewhat as students initially focus on the task and the time allocated to it. Under the title “Bath Time,” with illustrations of bubbles floating around the words on the page, Abe-san wrote in her scrapbook:

We were sweaty, so getting in the bath felt really good. When I got undressed, everyone was there and I felt a little embarrassed but there wasn’t much time, so I took off my clothes quickly and got in. It was fun with everyone in the tub. There was really high tension with everyone naked and exposed. But eventually we all joked around and had a good time.”

Excursions as a rite of passage

In addition to its significance as an event through which students demonstrate through masterful participation their growth over the three years of junior high school, the grade 9 school excursion also gains significance by being a special rite of passage according to Van Gennep’s (1960) tripartite schema of separation, transition and incorporation, lending further significance to the event as a marker of the culmination of a process of student transformation as they each develop as mature social actors. Students leave for the school excursion still children, but return as veterans possessing a high level of expertise in the ways of junior high school. Hill-Burnett (1969:4) notes that “rites of passage provide the individual with practice in new orders and distribution of interaction entailed in a change in his status in the system.” The excursion offers comprehensive practice in multi-layered activities learned incrementally throughout junior high school. Their newfound status as veterans of junior high school serves to
diffuse tensions by reducing ambiguities within interpersonal interactions and establishes stable social relationships that will be crucial throughout the rest of the year as students and their teachers begin to focus on preparations for entrance examinations.

Journeying away from the physical boundaries of school, separation is further amplified in several ways. Lower classmen hold a brief departure ceremony to formally bid farewell and wish safe travel to the grade 9 class, and they design banners of support and encouragement that are hung on the exterior of the school above the entrance. Parents, former students, and teachers from lower grades all gather at the train station smiling, waving, and holdings posters wishing the students well. Local newspapers such as the Köbe Shim bun (city newspaper) chronicle the excursions of local schools in a section called “School Excursion News,” providing the departure date, institution’s name, and a brief listing of destinations and events. For Ume, the newspaper stated: “[May] 31st (Ume Junior High School) Peace offering in Hiroshima. Experience the splendor of Akiyoshi Dai, and arrive in Hagi to spend the night.” The following day’s events read: [June] 1st (Ume Junior High School) Explore Hagi, then go to Kyūshū. Evening meal is barbecue followed by activities.”

Further, teachers ask mothers to write notes of encouragement and affection, to be placed in students’ lunch boxes for the first day of the excursion when initial separation may be difficult for students. One mother wrote:

Dear Yumi,
Just about now you’re in Hiroshima, right? For these three days, you’ll be able to have a lot of experiences and do many things together with your friends. It’s an important time that happens just this once. Have a lot of fun. Come home with many wonderful memories of your junior high school life. Take care of yourself, and after two nights,
As Hill-Burnett (1969:8) noted with respect to homecoming at an American high school, these are “event[s] that [bring] together students, former students, and the community in general, and that [give] expression to every significant relationship in the student system – because successful execution of the ceremony demand[s] the operation of all these relationships” (emphasis in original). Similarly, with the school excursion, the broader community serves as witness to the transformative process, while junior cohorts serve in a capacity that allows grade 9 students to demonstrate their mastery of schooling processes and acceptance of the responsibilities associated with being senior students (senpai) vis-à-vis the junior cohorts (kōhai).

Transition is marked by the journey itself, though excursions in many ways are as much about inner journey as with any physical journey. It holds symbolic meaning as the “final big activity of the students’ junior high school career,” as expressed by the principal and teachers. By focusing on the social context of the excursion, journeying is externalized as a transformative process, and the liminality of students on the threshold of a new status is made clear. Though excursions provide students with opportunities to create friendships and expand their social networks, the inner journey helps them form new confidence as self-reliant, responsible and cooperative individuals that bolsters such new externally-recognized status identifications as senpai (senior students) and jukensei (students preparing for examinations) upon their return to school. Additionally, several of the destinations along the journey help students to broaden and extend already
established features of their identity, as visits to Hiroshima and Hagi, for example, deepen their understanding of their own identity as Japanese.

Some students seem not only to recognize their own personal transformation but also to be capable of representing it in more general terms of human development. In an essay Kojima-san wrote about the school excursion, she included a photograph of two girls (herself one of them) squatting down on the beach at Sumiyoshi with their backs to the photographer and heads facing down in deep conversation as they watched the small waves roll in. The caption written directly on the photograph reads: “se, seishun!? (the springtime [springtide] of life / youth), and in her essay she wrote, “We were young here. The bloom of youth comes only but once. We must enjoy our youthful days.”

Upon their return from the excursion, grade 9 students are roundly welcomed with a similar gathering of parents, teachers from lower grades, former teachers and students, and other community members. Junior cohorts acknowledge the return of the grade 9 cohort with a short ceremony and new banners hung from the school entrance. During the excursion, grade 9 students are prodded to strengthen bonds extending beyond their grade level and to take on new leadership roles by selecting and purchasing souvenirs to give to club advisors, homeroom classes in the lower grades, and family members. Upon their return to school, students write reflective essays about the excursion, exchange photographs with others in their homeroom and grade level, and create rich documentary and interpretive scrapbooks as mementos of the occasion.

After a few days of rest and with post-event activities underway, teachers encourage students to recognize their new status as “students preparing for examinations” (jukensei), a term embodying far greater responsibilities than the more neutral “grade 9
students” (sannensei) they were prior to the journey. The careful pre-event construction of the excursion followed by its live performance and immediate post-event rituals that are revisited symbolically throughout the year build the excursion into an idealized model of collective effort, support and unity. This model has the capacity to provide both an immediate and long-lasting motivational force that propels students toward preparations for the entrance examinations but also lives on as an enduring nostalgia that transcends – like a summer romance – the brief temporal boundary of the lived episode.

The Magic of Excursions

There is no mistaking the significance of the junior high school excursion as a memorable rite of passage in the Japanese lifecourse. In conversations with Japanese adults on any number of topics, I am surprised to find references to the grade 9 school excursion emerging often and spontaneously. One sixty-year old university professor has recounted his school excursion experience in my presence numerous times, each time focusing on the same three elements – the excitement associated with two “firsts” (his first train ride and first visit to a zoo) and the disappointment of having a fellow classmate unable to make the journey due to family and financial reasons. For him, it has become, in truth, the memory of a lifetime.

Despite the extensive planning leading up to the school excursion and the wide-ranging activities during the event, what tends to be recounted most frequently afterwards in student scrapbooks are simply the enjoyable times shared with friends – staying up past curfew chatting, playing games and singing songs on trains and busses chartered just for them, and the inevitable unexpected occurrence. In their scrapbooks, students write, draw pictures, and paste photographs of the experiences that most thrilled or moved them.
in some way. Sometimes these are recounted in the form of brief captions on a photograph such as, “When we got back to our room, it was game time!” They are often embellished, however with small sidebars and colorful illustrations. One student drew a picture of herself lying beneath the covers of her futon with her eyes wide open and with an expression of obvious exasperation radiating from her face, accompanied by the following comments: “Just before going to sleep, we were telling each other a lot of scary stories. Afterwards, I just couldn’t get them out of my head. I couldn’t sleep…. But everyone else immediately fell into a sound sleep as soon as the light was turned off!”

Unexpected situations such as “The Episode of Rent-A-Cycle” discussed above are often given special attention in students’ constructed memories of the school excursion experience. In her scrapbook memories, Miyamoto-san wrote about an episode involving her friend under the title “Katō-san’s Incident:"

After we got on the special reserved train, Katō-san burst out crying when she realized she had lost her backpack. We all looked around for it, but we couldn’t find it anywhere. Then suddenly Naka-sensei appeared in our car. Why? Seeing Katō-san crying, he came over to talk to her and she told him she forgot her backpack. Just then, Naka-sensei brought her bag out from behind his back and handed it to her. We were all surprised! Evidently, when we had gotten on the train, Naka-sensei saw a backpack left behind on the platform and thought ‘now, whose is this?’ It was Katō-san’s! She was really lucky!

Adjacent to photos of Katō-san, with tears of happiness now rolling down her face, receiving her backpack from Naka-sensei in formal Japanese style with arms extended are Miyamoto-san’s concluding comments, which sum up the nature of serendipitous events: “After all, many things happen when traveling.” If traveling is a metaphor for
journeying through life, then the memories of school excursions become a significant signpost along that lifetime journey.

Not recounted often in recollections of excursions are details of the sites visited or factual knowledge that was gained. On the return from this excursion I casually asked Kimura-san and her two girlfriends what had been their favorite part of the trip. Expecting to hear any number of responses -- their first attempts at windsurfing, cycling around the old feudal town of Hagi, or even enjoying multiple heaping helpings of “Jingisukan,” the all-you-can-eat Mongolian barbecue, I was taken aback when, after pausing for just a brief moment, she responded, “Karaoke!” At the moment I asked the question, we were all tired from the numerous experiences of three days of travel together, and I had asked the question merely to make small talk rather than for any other purpose. But since karaoke is an activity readily accessible anytime, I could not hide my surprise and blurted out “What?.” to which she responded by again confirming that singing karaoke had been her favorite part of the excursion. When I suggested that it was not necessary to travel hundreds of miles to enjoy karaoke; she responded, “No, it wouldn’t be the same. Our whole class sang karaoke on the bus and it was such a good time. We couldn’t capture that same atmosphere if we sang karaoke in Kōbe, and all the members of the class wouldn’t be participating. It was great because we all joined in.”

For Kimura-san, the best experience of the entire three-day trip was six hours of travel on a chartered bus between Hiroshima and Akiyoshi Dai the entire time during which two microphones were passed from student to student, with each singing along with a cassette tape they had pre-recorded especially for this purpose.
As important an event as teachers understand the school excursion to be, and despite the extensive and detailed preparations involved, my experience on that trip and others, as well as with the preparations, with the event itself and with the numerous follow-up activities, suggests to me that teachers do indeed recognize that memories will emerge within events such as karaoke, and in the crammed itinerary of a school excursion, they purposefully plan for these spaces within which students will be able to develop closer relationships with peers. Teachers realize that relationships established during an excursion have the potential to energize an entire class and lead to smooth and cooperative interactions among themselves and with teachers for the remainder of the school year.

Further, teachers are also well aware that sometimes the most significant opportunities for learning are not recognized as such – or recognized as educational experiences in the least – by the learners themselves. On this excursion, as the students sang karaoke at the top of their lungs for six hours, Honda-sensei had been sitting toward the back of the bus with her head leaning against the window on a rolled up jacket, watching the students as she attempted to catnap. I was soaking up the madness of the moment as students screamed, kneeled on their seats, and sang into amplifiers that created such reverberations throughout the bus. I was surprised not so much by the roar of activity – for student antics are often similarly beyond control in the ten minutes between class periods at school – but rather, by Honda-sensei’s apparent lack of concern. Not a lenient teacher in the classroom, Honda-sensei here on the bus chose not to take an authoritative role, giving students great latitude in making the experience their own. At one point when I caught her eye, she remarked to me, “It’s pretty incredible, huh? But
they are having a good time, and they can make strong friendships and good class relationships this way. I’m just going to try to get some rest.”

Oblivious to the serious import of even the intervening moments between scheduled events, students revel in and later commemorate their antics that they sometimes understand to border on the rebellious (though as they realize they will be submitting their scrapbooks to teachers, they understand that these activities remain well within acceptable bounds). Sasayama-san provides a brief glimpse of this in her essay titled, “Memories of Our School Excursion”:

At ten, the light was turned off by Ueno-Sensei. But we kept talking among friends. We opened a window and stuck our heads out (which, of course, was not permitted). We looked around, and classmates who were staying in the next room stuck out their heads too! We talked with each other outside the window. We had such a great time!

The bonds formed on excursions are not an accidental by-product of the event but an explicit pedagogical objective with broader educational implications. School excursions take place most frequently in May and June, shortly after the start of the school year in April. With the new school year, new homeroom classes are formed of students who for the remainder of the year will study all subjects together, most often in their homeroom classroom. Consequently, during the weeks preceding the school excursion, students remain early in the process of becoming acquainted with new classmates and of developing a homeroom identity and atmosphere. The excursion thus provides a relaxed environment within which students from the same homeroom can build relationships. These connections become foundational to the success of the homeroom, for the bonding that spontaneously arises from a successful excursion eases
both for teachers and for students the subsequent transition into the remainder of the grade 9 mission for the year – exam preparation. But for the students, pedagogical destinations matter little; what matters is the magic of traveling there, not the arrival. Kawamura-san, at the end of her scrapbook wrote, “I don’t want to return to Kōbe. I really don’t want to go home. The school excursion was like a dream world. I’ll never forget it for the rest of my life.”

Summary

While many observers of Japan have given no more than a cursory nod to school excursions in their writings on Japanese schooling before moving on to more “serious” topics, my dwelling on the subject here is not to suggest that school excursions are heavily intellectual activities. In fact, much of the ‘heavy lifting’ of school excursions is masked to students during the performance of the event itself. On its face, the school excursion is an exciting, enjoyable event that appears to function as nothing more than mere entertainment or perhaps a necessary respite from the rigors of school before students return with renewed vigor to the greater task of entrance exam preparation. However, at its base, the excursion serves as a fundamental component of the learning process at Japanese junior high school by consolidating and extending through actual practice in places remote from the safe environment of the school the learning that has occurred during more than two years of preparation. Through these experiences, understandings from the classroom are transformed into wisdom immersed not only in the bodies of students but also in their imaginations, and which remain with them not merely for the remainder of the school year, but often for their lifetimes.
The grade 9 school excursion must be viewed not simply as an event functioning as entertainment or constructed merely to pay lip service to activities stipulated in a national curriculum. Rather, it must be viewed as a venue for activities integrating cognitive and non-cognitive developmental domains and providing spaces for students to move dress rehearsal into performance. Excursions provide opportunities for students to exercise and advance their social skills, develop their emotional capacities for new experiences and social relationships, and even challenge their individual physical abilities through new types of activities. The excursion is certainly not unique as a pedagogical event lending itself to a holistic view of the individual by providing opportunities for students to operate within and exercise several developmental domains simultaneously. Nor is it unique in its ability to transcend intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional and community boundaries. Activities that lend themselves to a holistic and relational view of the individual can be identified throughout Japanese schooling, as will be discussed in later chapters. However, the grade 9 school excursion, because it incorporates substantial pre-event preparation, careful execution, and significant post-event amplification, draws developmental domains together in seamless integration and with a complexity the extent to which is not found in any other activity throughout the school year or, indeed, the three years of junior high school. It is a rite of passage with significance that can be readily measured both in the amount of time devoted to it throughout the three years of junior high school and also by the attention it receives in the nostalgic recollections of many Japanese people.

Contrary to how Japanese junior high school education is portrayed in the press, and indeed even in the limited attributions made by some scholars of Japan, the
fundamental curriculum of Japanese junior high school is not math or science; it is not preparation for entrance examinations. There is no dispute that academic subjects and exam performance are important components of Japanese secondary schooling, and if by happenstance one observes Japanese schools over a short period of time, from a narrow theoretical perspective or from within a highly circumscribed context such as the classroom during formal lessons or the teacher’s room, for example, one might very well leave with the impression that Japanese junior high school centers on intense competition, monotonous exercises, or incessant focus on intellectual activity. Those moments do exist at Japanese junior high school.

The question is not of salience or not, but rather, of which activities to bring to the fore as most significant. Ume students and their teachers readily admit that the best place for learning math or for preparing for high school entrance exams is not at junior high school, but at cram school (juku). Junior high school has a much different fundamental mission. As one student put it, school is a “place to relax” (ochitsukeru tokoro) and be together with friends. She may not be aware that through those activities at school she is developing as a mature social actor, a master of junior high school who will carry that wisdom with her into her adult life. The curriculum of Japanese public junior high school is not primarily intellectual. It is focused on a general mission, the development of young adolescents into confident and skilled “individuals within a group,” a mission that is not on the agenda of other educational institutions.

Later chapters of this dissertation will examine the educational process in the early years of junior high school that aims to eventually support an event like the excursion discussed above, developing students’ confidence in themselves and among
peers and challenging their capacities to grow and mature by participating in a broad range of activities that span many months and interpersonal relationships. Before turning to this elaboration of the learning process, however, the next chapter provides some necessary background on my fieldsite, Ume Junior High School, along with discussion of my entry into the school, relationships with students and teachers, and research methods that allowed me to gain this novel perspective of Japanese junior high school.