

# Education for what?

## The community of learning

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This paper draws on wide-ranging research on causes of social breakdown, and focuses on the necessity of community connections for positive human development. Results of a survey of strengths and weaknesses of key developmental assets in the home, school, and community in Yamaguchi, Japan is presented. Noting the elements that are missing in connecting academic learning, character education, and community interaction, the author highlights promising pilot-projects aimed at revitalizing important developmental assets including community connections through an integrated “Full-Circle Learning” model. Implications and examples for those who are teaching English either in public school settings or in private conversation schools are offered.

この論文は、社会崩壊の原因についての幅広い研究と、前向きな人格形成のための地域のつながりの必要性について記述したものである。また「日本の山口の家庭、学校、地域社会における重要な啓発的財産のもつ強さと弱さ」の調査結果も述べられている。学問的学習、人格教育、地域の相互作用の連携の中で、現在失われつつある重要な要素に着目し、フルサークルラーニング全体モデルを通して、地域との関わりを含め、啓発的財産を再び活性化することを狙った前途有望なテストプロジェクトを著者は強調する。公立学校または英会話学校の英語教育者のための暗示と例が述べられる。

**S**ocial and educational breakdown are issues that have surfaced as topics of great public concern in Japan. It is apparent that high academic goals when not accompanied by positive social learning and experience can have negative effects. When Japan’s current Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, addressed the newly formed “Education Rebuilding Council” he remarked, “To guarantee every child the chance to achieve high academic standards and learn social morality, it’s imperative to reform public education and revitalize education at home and in the community.” (“Abe oversees 1st steps in education reform,” Oct 19, 2006, p. 1)

Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology (MEXT) has recognized that over-feeding of academic facts and figures without adequate connection to spiritual and social experience has led to social disconnection for many young people. MEXT has clearly identified goals for enriching the foundation of children's educational experience by suggesting that steps be taken to connect classroom learning to local and global community experience through integrated approaches in formal and informal educational settings. (Complete text in English of Ministry of Education goals can be found at <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/>).

This paper draws on the results of a survey of the relative strength or weakness of certain developmental assets in the personal and social environments of home, school, and community in Yamaguchi, Japan, as viewed by parents of middle school and upper elementary school students. It also reflects previous research that includes the views of the students themselves. The data is further supported by studies from other countries, including research from the United States. Unified conclusions from these broad research findings point to the reality that children (and adults) need caring and consistent connection to community life in order to thrive and make the best use of their academic education.

Educators, in particular English teachers, whether in public school settings or in private conversation schools in Japan, can become part of the solution to the problems of social breakdown. Through the development of learning activities in the "Full-Circle Learning" model described in this paper, the missing elements of community can be rebuilt while the students' commitment and opportunities for

public service can fuel their motivation to enhance and to use their language skills both locally and globally. Students can become the healers, helpers, and heroes of new patterns of community life. Integrated approaches to teaching and learning are emerging, and new and vital potential pathways are open to educators who are able to tie the signals of this research to the directions and methodologies of person- and community-based, community-oriented learning and development.

### Social breakdown syndrome

This section will discuss the symptoms and signs of social breakdown from a global as well as national perspective, and as it has been observed locally (in Yamaguchi, Japan).

Foundations of the curricula found in schools today were laid in the social movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when the pace of change was much slower than it is today. With a social context that is moving at lightning speed, and often 100 years ahead of the current curricula, the world seems to be going a little mad. This is not a problem confined to any specific locality or culture, as WHO Director General Adeoye Lambo has pointed out: "...the world is experiencing a social breakdown syndrome reflected in 'a rising incidence of psycho-somatic diseases, mental disorders, anxiety and neurosis, prostitution, crimes and political corruption, and a variety of sexual diseases including AIDS.'" (as cited in Mustakova-Possardt, 2003, p. 10)

In Japan the signs and symptoms of this social breakdown appear in various ways: Serious incidents of bullying and violence occur in up to 55% of elementary and secondary

schools (Higgins, 2005). Violence in elementary schools has reportedly risen 30% between 2003 and 2005 (The Daily Yomiuri, October 10, 2005). Murders and suicides occur even at elementary school levels. Teachers say that students are less able to control emotions now compared to even 10 years ago. The number of children who refuse to attend school who are in the compulsory education period has now reached 134,000 (10 times more than 25 years ago when the problem first was noticed.) A new group of young people has emerged: NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training). There are currently estimated to be 850,000 of such youth between the ages of 15 to 34 years old (almost 2.5% of that population) who seem to be drifting aimlessly in society. This group is expected to reach over a million within the next year or so (Foreign Press Center Japan, 2005). What is worse, there are somewhere between 50,000 (the official estimate) and one million (estimated by professional people who work with this problem) reclusive young people, mostly males between the ages of 15 to 24, who simply refuse to leave their own rooms. (Wikipedia, 2005) Referred to as “hikikomori,” they may stay in this condition for weeks, months, or sometimes years. They expect their mothers or parents to deliver their food to their door and communicate with the world, if at all, through their computer. If they are disturbed, some have been known to become violent against those who attempt to draw them out.

A recent study on socialization of children conducted by Yamaguchi Prefectural University (Aihara, 2005) has brought some surprising findings to light even in this relatively well-off, semi-rural community in western Japan. The survey of elementary school 5<sup>th</sup> graders and second-

year junior high school students found that 80% of children said they are always tired. Twenty percent say they do not enjoy school. Over twenty percent of them reported doing almost no homework. Parents have noticed a decline in their children’s motivation to learn. In a most recent study (Higgins, 2007; Wilson and Iwano, 2007) 74% of parents reported that their children have little or no engagement in school. Most of them reported that their children had generally positive feelings about their teachers and school staff, yet here seems to be a lack of motivation to learn.

### *Reasons for social breakdown*

A public discussion has arisen about the causes of this “disconnection” between children and their learning environments. Some say the problem lies at home with the parents. Others say the problem is within the schools, with the teachers. Still others say that children themselves as so different, or that the social milieu and community configurations have changed radically from just a decade ago. People debate about whether the answers are to be found in science or religion. According to the best expertise we have, the problems and the solutions are to be found in “all of the above.”

It has been recognized that there are three kinds of education: physical, social, and academic. The three kinds of education take place at the same time in the three main environments in which the child grows: the home, the school, and the community. Each has its own function, but the functions overlap. If the balance and connection between these environments and their educational roles are not well maintained, the child’s motivation and ability to learn is disrupted.

A remarkable report put together by a consortium of 33 top physicians, social scientists, and neuroscience researchers in the U.S. (*Commission for Children at Risk*) has been summed up in these words: “The primary cause of social breakdown is lack of connectedness” (YMCA, 2004). According to the conclusions of combined research of this group of experts from the cellular, biochemical, neural, physical, mental, and social perspective, human beings are biologically primed (or *hardwired*) for connection to other human beings and to moral and spiritual meaning. Their data shows that the main *environmental nutrient* that children are missing for positive development is positive, on-going interaction with people of all ages around them. Parents alone cannot do the job of stimulating and maintaining interactive learning relationships, nor can teachers do so in a *sterile* classroom atmosphere. Children need to experience that what they are learning is connected to their relationships with other people and to a wider community.

Search Institute, another U.S.-based consortium of researchers, has compiled the results of over 1200 studies and identified 40 *developmental assets* that if present are related to the positive social, emotional and academic growth of children and youth. They have identified *external assets* (those in a child’s outer world) such as:

- \***support** from parents, school, and neighborhoods,
- \***empowerment** received from involvement in community tasks,
- \***boundaries and expectations**: clear and consistent guidelines from home, school, and community, and
- \***constructive use of time**: quality and balance in daily routines.

They have also identified *internal assets* (those within the child) such as:

- \***commitment to learning**,
- \***positive values**,
- \***social competencies**, and
- \***positive identity**: self-esteem, sense of purpose, etc.

Extensive research has shown that the absence of these assets is associated with social and psychological problems, risk-taking behavior, and academic failure. It is noteworthy that the average young person in the US is reported to have less than half of the 40 assets listed in the above categories. For complete information on this research see the Search Institute website at <[www.search-institute.org/](http://www.search-institute.org/)>. The above mentioned research groups and other organizations interested in the positive development of youth have advocated for reversing *social breakdown* and its damaging effects on young people through an *assets building* approach to reconnecting the educational environments of young people stressing the need for balance in the home, school, and community.

### Overview of social assets in Yamaguchi city

My colleagues and I have adapted a *developmental assets* approach (identified in the research of Scales, 2003, and Lerner and Benson, 2003) in order to propose a baseline for measuring both academic advancement and enhancement in the educational environments in the elementary and junior high schools in Yamaguchi City. Our findings suggest that about 1/3 of the 40 identified assets are weak or

missing here, particularly ones associated with community connection and children's own commitment to learning.

We found that over 90% of parents felt that family support and in general, school support was adequate. Over 80% also felt that their children were being exposed to positive values. About three-fourths felt that their children's social competencies were basically adequate for their age. However at least one out of three (1/3) parents felt that the following external assets are weak or non-existent for their children:

1. Parent involvement in school (less than 4% indicated that it was adequate).
2. Caring neighborhood (40% judge as low or not at all).
3. Adult role models within the family (45% judge as low or not at all).
4. Adult role models outside the family (71% judge as low or not at all).
5. Positive peer influence (51% judge as low or not at all).
6. Youth seen as resources for the community (58.8% judge as low or not at all).
7. Opportunities for youth to serve others (50.5% judge as low or not at all).
8. School rules fairly and consistently applied (54% judge as low or not at all).
9. Neighborhood rules or boundaries (58.5% judge as low or not at all).

In addition, almost a third of parents indicated that they do not feel that children are safe in their own neighborhoods (perhaps because they know so few of their neighbors). There is also the question of whether family rules or boundaries can be viewed as adequate. (Nearly one-third expressed a sense of inadequacy in this regard, and about 45% of the respondents indicated that they did not feel they or other family members were good role models for their children.) Whether use of time at home is constructive enough is also an element to consider when over half of children spend more than two hours per day absorbed in TV or video games and one-third of children were reported to spend less than 30 minutes talking or playing with parents.

The internal assets that parents indicated most concern about include:

1. School engagement (75% judge as low or not at all).
2. Sense of purpose (51.5% indicated that their children rarely or never think about it).
3. Reading for pleasure (52.5% say their children rarely or never do).
4. Achievement motivation (44.5% judge their children's drive as low or not at all).
5. Cultural competence (35% judge as low or not at all when relating to people of different ages or cultural backgrounds.)

It was noted that children often know no other adults besides their parents and teacher(s). They need (and indeed, parents expressed a wish for) more bonds with role models

in the community, and more opportunities for their children to be involved in service activities in the community. Children need to nourish a better connection to their own learning process and at the same time to gain a sense of purpose that they can connect to other people in their community. It may be that the boredom and disconnection they feel in school come about because they somehow see themselves as being treated as mere drones and consumers. There must be a more compelling identity that children can embrace before being released into the social pool after graduation.

### Reversing social breakdown through Full-Circle Learning

Integrated approaches to learning that include character education, academics, and arts, for example, that tie classroom exercises with social activities related to home and community have shown positive results in building external and internal assets. For example, Teresa Langness (2004) founder of the Full-Circle Learning program has shown how children's vision of themselves can be improved and their academic motivation and scores raised by encouraging them to embrace their identity as *healers, helpers, heroes, and humanitarians* in their own communities. In the Full-Circle Learning model, every learning unit starts with *the heart*, that is, habits of heart that focus on personal character. Students learn to identify the *habits-of-heart* that are associated with the kinds of people that they would like to become. They learn to identify the character traits that are found in people they admire in their community: Healers, such as doctors, nurses,

or other health workers need to combine the qualities of *compassion* and *competence* among others. Humanitarians need *empathy, helpfulness, far-sightedness, and a sense of universal connection*. Helpers of all kinds need the qualities of *cooperation* and *skillfulness*. In a Full-Circle Learning approach, the students would study the meaning of these words and begin to work on these qualities in themselves as they go forward in their learning unit. Parents are asked to help students nurture these qualities as part of their *habits-of-heart* homework. Suggestions on how to practice these qualities would be included in the materials for the learning unit that the students work on at home.

Then community role models who are carrying out work related to the habit-of-heart goals may be asked to meet the students and talk with them about how these qualities were developed in them. They also explain how the math, science, or language skills that they learned in school help them in their work. They begin to plan a joint service project that will involve the students in using these skills to help to solve some particular local problem such as environmental, health, or social issues. They engage the students in a project to enhance the community in some way. The project is usually local but may even involve global partnerships with children studying in similar projects across the globe. As the projects develop, arts are used in various ways (music, visual arts, drama, etc.) to reinforce the learning, and to allow students more avenues for expression. In addition, specific communication skills are taught and practiced so that students gain practice at conflict resolution, consultation, and reflection using their expanding vocabularies of human qualities, human relations, general topics, and community issues.

The first Full-Circle Learning program began as an after-school program in 1993 in an area of Los Angeles, California that had been affected by ethnic disturbances. The model has proven so effective in motivating children and improving their communities that the award-winning program has been incorporated into regular school programs in a number of areas in the U.S. and has spread to 12 countries.

Program evaluations show that 75% – 100% of participants increase their school performance beyond expected grade levels in reading, math, and spelling (even when these skills are not necessarily specifically targeted by the learning units). Data from the 2004 programs shows that motivation to learn increased in 100% of cases from the parents' perspective. Teachers, parents and other adults notice that the students who participate in Full-Circle Learning programs increase in responsibility-taking, empathy, leadership skills, and the ability to interact positively with the world around them. The evaluation data from teachers showed that 100% of students improved in at least 2 of the social domains measured, and 50% of children who had been in the program for 18 months showed improvement in all areas measured. The statistical data is only a sketch of the positive effects described in the rich anecdotal accounts of community change and personal transformation. Further information can be found at <[www.fullcirclelearning.org](http://www.fullcirclelearning.org)> .

## Adapting Full-Circle Learning for Japanese ESL programs

If our goals are to foster “Japanese with English abilities” (MEXT, 2003, p. 1) as well as “sociability and international outlook” (MEXT, 2005, p. 1), we cannot wait until students are fully functional in English before giving them opportunities to make themselves useful and communicative in English. We cannot teach English merely as a dry classroom subject with grammar and vocabulary laboriously memorized for regurgitation on further entrance exams. There are ways we can build communication skills both in Japanese and English (with foundations for other languages to be added as desired) starting with the habits-of-heart of communicators and community developers. Empathy, friendliness, helpfulness, knowledge, and cooperation are skills of communicators that we might introduce to our students as a starting point. We can employ active learning and the arts to build English skills that can be put to use as soon as possible to connect with other English speakers locally and globally.

In the English Speaking Society (ESS) at Yamaguchi Prefectural University, we have begun to make use of the Full-Circle approach. While organizing training materials that can be used in future projects, as a first step at the beginning of this school term, we put the habit-of-heart, *hospitality*, to work and planned a welcome party for the North American exchange students. The students learned to carry out the tasks of inviting, arranging a bilingual program, taking the role of master of ceremonies, interviewing the foreign students, and carrying out games in the bilingual event. The result was a quicker assimilation and connection made between the newly

arrived foreign students and the Japanese students than has occurred in the past. Students were less shy about reaching out and talking to the North American, Chinese, and Korean exchange students

Next, the ESS students decided to put their newfound initiative to work to reach out to the local junior high school and elementary school to connect with those students who are just beginning to learn English. For example, we decided to work on the habit-of-heart, *friendliness*. We discussed the role played by greetings and introductions (the attitudes and emotions needed, beyond the mere mechanics and words) and then practiced some activities that are useful in helping students to work on their mastery of greetings and other courtesies in English. We have begun to reach out to the junior high school and elementary school to carry out a short series of activity-based lessons. After working with the younger students, we introduced them to the North American exchange students in a social activity. We aimed to expand our own community connections while expanding the horizon of the school children in the university neighborhood.

The results, even in our initial steps, were quite positive to the students. In fact, the university students were amazed by how their own motivation for learning English phrases spiked when they were preparing to pass these expressions along to junior high school or elementary school students. For their part, the junior high school and elementary students treated the older students as if they were visiting celebrities. Shyness was soon overcome by active communicative exchanges.

In future cycles we hope to work with the students to teach *helpfulness* and *cooperation* – engaging the junior high school students more directly in planning and carrying out a social event using English. We also have plans to teach students to guide English speakers around our neighborhood, as well as to some of our local historical sites (focusing on the habit of becoming *knowledgeable*.) Another cycle may involve the students in cooperative activities using certain daily conversation patterns (“pick up...” “put down...” “take...” “bring...” and so on) that can be put to use when working together on environmental awareness, clean-up, etc.

The main hurdle we are experiencing is arranging mutually agreeable schedules. Flexibility and patience are needed. However, even these delays can be incorporated into the college students’ (and younger students’) learning processes.

An aspect of these learning cycles includes teaching students to reflect on and share the positive qualities that they see in others and others may see in them. Habits-of-heart reflections may be something so simple as “Taro is very friendly. I see his smile when he greets people.” “Etsuko is very helpful. She brought a chair for the person who came late.” “We need patience and flexibility to adjust and carry out our program.” Simple processes and expressions needed for solving conflicts, for making suggestions, for inviting, agreeing or refusing, asking for help, and for expressing their opinions and ideas are taught. These are communication skills that go beyond learning mere words and grammar forms. Even with a minimal vocabulary the students can become able communicators and builders of positive relationships, whether the projects follow original plans and times lines or not.



## Conclusion

The ESS project is but a small initial step in applying a Full-Circle Learning approach to English language learning in order to improve our community's socialization assets while improving the outlook and skills of students. Full-Circle projects build assets by their very nature: community support and involvement, added family support, and better peer relations, while building in higher purposes for students in the learning process. By expanding the avenues of learning and adding social connections, the motivation to learn increases. Positive values are strengthened from within and students feel a stronger sense of efficacy and purpose as they nurture their pro-social identity. This learning model can be used in regular classes, after-school clubs, *juku* or *eikaiwa* settings if the teachers are willing to work imaginatively to rethink, re-vision, expand, and reorganize the purposes and approaches to their learning programs.

The aims of Japan's education plans for the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are global in scope, and humane in outlook. They are highly commendable. But the educational methods used in the past are not adequate vehicles for the goals we now seek to achieve. English teachers in Japan who merely follow the worn and habitual simply academic learning paths of the past can find themselves marginalized into ever less inspiring, tighter and less productive spaces. Neither teachers nor students need to be stuck within the limitations and deficits they find in their learning environments. They can become the co-creators of new, more satisfying, and enriching circumstances when they see themselves as the helpers, healers, humanitarians, and heroes of a new community dynamic. Isn't that, after all, what we are educating for?

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