

IKIGAI AND HIGHER EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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Abstract: *Ikigai is a Japanese life philosophy that has slowly begun to gain more attention on the world stage. One's own Ikigai can be used as a barometer to gauge hopes, dreams, and aspirations relevant to all aspects of life. In this paper, the author reviews the effects of Ikigai on the Japanese education system through a review of the current literature. This narrative review aims to put together a cohesive and thorough structure to the literature, so that future studies can be done to explore life philosophy and how it can affect educational attainment and success, and technology's impact on educational Ikigai as well.*

Keywords: *Education, Ikigai, Literature, Japan, Technology*

1. INTRODUCTION

Following a massive systematic reform of the Japanese education system following World War II, Japan has been known for its vast educational advancements. However, Japan's openness to educational reform is steeped in the country's history. During the Meiji era, Emperor Meiji petitioned for western educators to teach and improve their school system, while also adopting a Christian calendar for their academic school year. (Jeynes, 2008; Shimuzu, 1992) As time passed, multiple reforms (sparked from outside and from within the country) educational reform swept through the country in 1995 and 2002. (Cummings, 2003; Jeynes, 2008; Hood, 2003) These reforms had a marked effect on how Higher Education is funded and teacher training programs that have been in decline, due to the declining rate of students in primary and secondary institutions (Wong, 2003).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

Even though the Japanese education system is in a constant state of change, certain educational goals have stayed relatively similar over the years. Jeynes (2008), states multiple key educational system factors and cultural factors that are core in the educational environment present in Japan. Firstly, the Japanese education system celebrates teacher and parent collaboration and interaction. Parents are viewed as partners, instead of adversaries or barriers to the overall educational process (Jeynes, 2008; Shimihara, 1992). Secondly, the Japanese culture emphasizes focus on individual efforts, instead of emphasis on results. (Jeynes, 2008; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992)

Jeynes second point, while true in a cultural sense, lacks to mention the entrance examinations that are used to determine university admissions in Japan. In short, Japanese high school students take two entrance exams. The first is a national test for all high school students, followed by an exam for the specific school/s that the student is seeking entrance into. (Osaki, 2013) Colleges ultimately use both exams to make their final admissions decisions. (Osaki, 2013) The entrance exams in Japan are exceptionally competitive and are a source of stress for many Japanese students. It is not uncommon for students to go to cram schools, to study for the test over time. (Kusuyanagi, 2013; Jeynes, 2008) Consequently, it can be argued that even though culturally, individual effort is championed, results are a necessity for success.

Lastly, Jeynes argues that moral education is a primary focus of the Japanese education system. (2008) Moral education, informed from western ideology and Confucius and Buddhist theology, was a central aspect of the educational system up until the 1960s. (Jeynes, 2008; Benjamin 1997) However, Jeynes has found that as time has passed, a restitution of moral education is being championed in Japan with the hopes that it will reduce juvenile crime rates in the country. (2008; Fitzpatrick, 1997)

From this historical founding, the Japanese education system is an amalgam of western educational practices, traditional cultural values, and intensive individual effort. Due to the direct impact that culture has on the educational obtainment of Japanese students, Ikigai, a life philosophy that focuses on “that which makes life worth living” (Mathews, 1996, p. 7), is beginning to surface as an important piece of the educational puzzle.

Ikigai is prevalent within the Japanese culture and is an important aspect of many peoples’ lives. Consequently, Ikigai has been explored by many scholars, but many have focused their research on its effect on psychological and physical well-being. Mathews, examines that Ikigai is a key aspect of the Japanese self, going so far to describe it as the reasoning behind living in the first place. (1996) Many Japanese self-describe their careers and education as their primary motivator, but an Ikigai can just as easily change over time. (Mathews, 1996)

In Table-1 below, the researcher has outline the way age affects the stages of the educational Ikigai formation process.

Table-1: Ikiagi Age & Educational Process

Ikigai Formation and Characteristics	Age	Student Academic Level
Childhood (Early Education - Primary School)	<1-17	Ikigai is routinely informed by one’s parents, communities, schools, and community leaders. In short, Ikigai is in a formative stage of creation and thought.
Early Adulthood (higher education students)	18-30+	An Ikigai has been formed, yet is still being fully structured. Through their education, students will further define their professional practices, goals, and achievement plans.
Mid-Adulthood	30-50+	Adults, while their Ikigai may change, are most likely formed fully. Their Ikigai will inform their career, family, education, and other life choices.
Seniors	50+	When careers end, children age, many Japanese will go back to gain further professional or personal education.

Naturally, the educational landscape is changing as well. Japan, known around the world as a leader in technological developments, is seeing its own shift in educational technology usage. In the early 1990s, it was found that Japan had a relatively above average amount of “technophobes” in their higher educational system (Weill and Rosen, 1995). Even further, 80% of Japanese students cited fear of using computers in their educational pursuits (Weill and Rosen, 1995). As the years have progressed, compared to the United States, the Japanese tend to use the internet at home and work less and also tend to own less electronic devices, especially women (Ono, 2005). In fact, the *Japan Times* reported that younger Japanese are no more tech-savvy than others their age around the world and have even fallen out of the top ten internet users, by usage rate, in the world. (2013)

However, Japanese universities are leaders in using mobile learning to enhance their students’ educational pursuits. With a combination of cheaper cell phone plans and a strong and secure cellular network across the country, Japanese students have little issues with connecting and learning in a mobile environment. (Mccontha et. al, 2008) Even further, more students in Japan use their mobile devices for academic emails and prefer mobile learning environments, versus having to use a traditional computer. (Thornton & Houser, 2005)

As the educational landscape of Japan changes, naturally one’s Ikigai might as well. More importantly, those with an Ikigai tend to have a higher level of education, versus those who do not find they subscribe to any particular Ikigai (Sone et al., 2008). So, while one’s Ikigai might very well be to succeed in education, one might never find it without being educated in the first place. However, with mobile learning finding itself as a key piece of the educational puzzle in Japan, more students could arguably be educated. This can be taken a step further with the proliferation of MOOCs in the educational world.

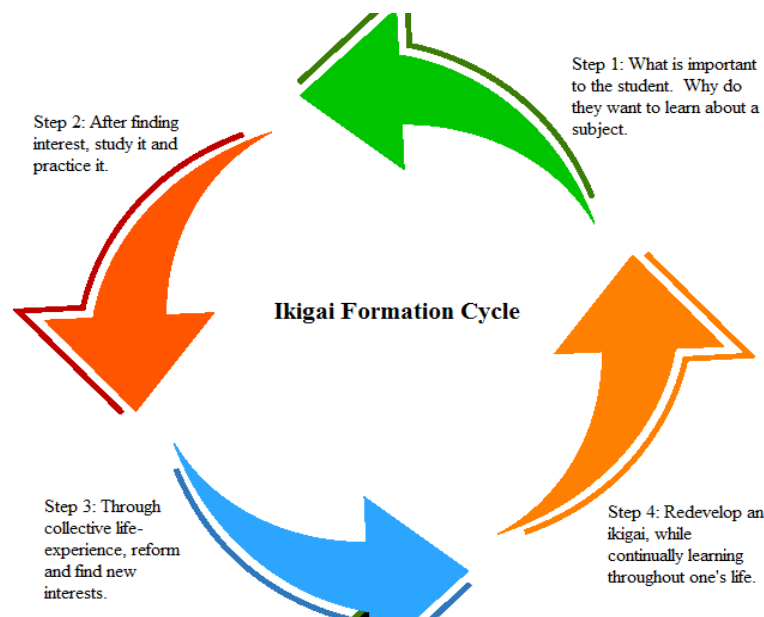


Figure-2: Ikigai Formation Cycle

For example, The University of Tokyo has four courses on Coursera, an online massively online open course platform (MOOC). However, the University of Tokyo is far from the only university providing these free courses. The Open University of Japan, a primarily distance focused institution of higher education, is supported by the National Ministry of Education and

started creating more MOOCs for educational use in 2013 (Li & Kim, 2013). From 2013 on, MOOCs are only growing in number and being offered by a variety of Japanese Universities. In short, with Ikigai and education's important reliance on one another, a university's ability to reach more students is critical in helping to create the holistic student self.

However, Ikigai is also not just critical for the younger college-going student. Returning students, and senior students, also have educational goals that have been impacted by, or will impact, one's Ikigai. Some universities, within their own given municipalities, have systems in place where returning students can receive education at a reduced or free of cost (Nojima, 1994). Some institutions even have specific two year advanced studies degrees, offered either in a formal setting or through distance education, for seniors only. Many elderly find to have a stronger outlook on life, or a better Ikigai, if they feel well-educated or are pursuing self-improvement (Sone et. al, 2008).

3. CONCLUSION

In short, Ikigai and education will be forever linked in Japan. Students, and their self-perception, are improved by completing their education, as it is inexorably connected to one's own career path and social standing. As higher education changes and accepts new technology into the learning and teaching fold, naturally more students will have access to courses that will enhance and change their Ikigai. With free MOOCs being widely available to students around the country, Japanese students do not need to be formally enrolled in an institution, to continue their own personal and professional development. This should have a profound impact on the development of many student Ikigais.

In Figure 2 above, the formative process of developing an Ikigai is shown. Higher education has a massive impact on this development. It is where students find their interest, study it, and eventually work within it. As life changes, one's Ikigai follows suit, and informs new needs of formal education pathways. As such, an Ikigai can be reformed and redesigned to best suit one's need in every stage of their life, education, and career.

It could be argued that having an Ikigai is beneficial for many reasons. It gives a student a purpose to work towards, something greater than fleeting success in the moment to be focused on. Or it could even just be used as a way to guide oneself towards completion of a degree or as a sort of checklist of what education a student wants to obtain. As such, while it may not be necessary for one to explore their own Ikigai, or even create their own, it could be of use to students around the world to look introspectively into why their education matters and what they are obtaining it for.

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