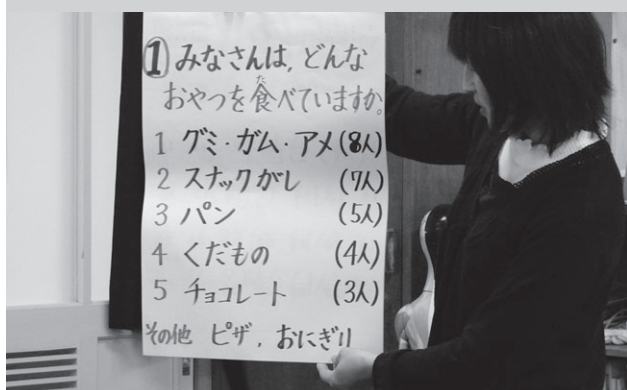


# Tackling the overweight problem: healthy Japan was no exception

Researchers announced in May 2012 that 42% of Americans will be obese by 2030. This rekindled the national concerns for children's health in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the prevalence of obesity among American children has tripled since 1980, partly because American society has promoted increased consumption of less healthy food.<sup>1</sup> The problem lies in excessive use of sugary drinks and high caloric foods for purchase in schools, advertising toward children, and lack of regulations. Japan, on the other hand, has always been known as one of the healthiest countries in the world in terms of its diet, which is low in fat and high in protein. And so it was a surprise to find that even Japan could not escape the threats of obesity, and was no exception to the global rule.

Kaori Takano



Left: "What kind of snacks do you eat?" At the top of the list we find candy and chips.

Right: "How much is too much?" Children measure appropriate amounts of potato chips during the snack lesson.



AT ONE POINT, Japanese people started to realize they were losing their traditional food culture due to the influence and prevalence of western food, and started to see that the country was facing a problem of overweight children and the associated health implications. According to a report released in 2003 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT), only 6.7% of 6th grade boys were overweight in the late 1970s, but the number almost doubled to 11.7% by 2002.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, children's hyperactivity and misbehavior in school was becoming a social problem.<sup>3</sup> Gradually the entire Japanese society was becoming convinced that food education should be provided in schools to effectively improve children's diets.<sup>4</sup> The national government made this health issue a national priority and created a new law called *Shokuiku Kihon Ho* (The Basic Law of Food Education).

The term *Shokuiku*, or food education, was originally created more than a century ago, but emerged again through repeated warnings from food studies scholars in the late 1980s, and again in the early 21st century.<sup>5</sup> Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi was a strong advocate for food education and supported the creation of the law. According to the *Shokuiku White Paper*, the law aims to improve the diet of Japanese nationals of all ages and encourages parents, educators, and the community to collaborate in providing food education, especially for young children.<sup>6</sup> It raises awareness through various educational events, such as nationwide cooking seminars about food choice, nutritional issues, food safety, local food consumption, and preserving the traditional Japanese food culture.

When the food education law was enacted in 2005 the government invited the business community to educate children directly, instead of attempting to regulate food makers' marketing techniques toward children, so that children can build up abilities to make good food choices or *shokusenryoku*. This officially opened the door for the private sector into the public domain, including the field of compulsory public education. The commercial food makers started designing lessons for children at schools, examples of which are provided below.

## Snack lessons

A leading potato chip maker, Calbee Foods, developed a program to teach schoolchildren about responsible snacking. In 2008, their website explained that the snack lessons were free, and their target audience was 3rd-6th graders. Lessons lasted between 45-90 minutes, during which time the children would be asked to measure out the suitable amounts of potato chips as a snack, learn how to read ingredient labels on packages, and watch a video regarding appropriate snack times. In 2004, fewer than thirty schools participated in this snack lesson, but the number of participating schools rapidly grew to more than two hundred a year later, when *Shokuiku Kihon Ho* (the Basic Law of Food Education) was enacted.

Considering the fact that one of the major goals of the new law was to preserve traditional Japanese food culture, the McDonald's Japan campaign raised more than a few eyebrows.

I was curious about how teachers felt about this emerging trend created by this potato chip maker. Fortunately I had the opportunity to interview several public elementary school teachers, who were regularly carrying out the snack lessons by 2008, which was still before corporate food lessons had become the norm in public schools. There had been mixed feelings about the lessons; some believing it gave a wonderful insight into the snacking habits of children, and the chance to teach them about healthy food choices, whilst others worried that the lessons could be misused (by the companies providing the lessons) as promotional activities. Another concern was that children would simply start to see potato chips as healthy foods because the makers had been invited into the school; i.e., the school's endorsement of the lessons could be mistaken for an approval of potato chips as a healthy snack. Interestingly, the companies were able to quench all concerns of school leaders, and Calbee Foods is now the most successful company producing, what many believe, an unhealthy product, and yet providing food education lessons in public schools in Japan. The company's snack lesson continued to expand and reached more than five hundred schools nationwide by 2008.

## Fast food maker's food education

A (predictably) highly controversial, yet successful example of commercial food makers in school education is McDonald's Japan, a leading fast food maker. Unlike Calbee, which sends instructors into schools to provide free snack lessons, McDonald's Japan just provides free educational materials, produced in close collaboration with educational experts. The company created a free food education program on DVD, including sample lessons for educators, in 2005, immediately after the Basic Law of Food Education was enacted. Considering the fact that one of the major goals of the new law was to preserve traditional Japanese food culture, the McDonald's Japan campaign raised more than a few eyebrows. A reputable food expert, Makuuchi, criticized scholars and dietitians who had participated in the project, calling them "opportunists" for partnering with "junk food makers".<sup>7</sup>

As a parent and educator, I too felt troubled by this new phenomenon of the private sector involvement within schools. Therefore, in 2008, I contacted more than 50 public schools that were using the McDonald's food education program and spoke to some of the teachers who started giving the lessons in the early phases of the program. They had indeed had many disagreements with colleagues about their choice to work with McDonald's. I continued my dialogue with public school teachers until 2010, and surprisingly, these conflicts appeared to dissipate over time. The use of corporate curriculum was slowly becoming the norm for public school teachers. Teachers did, however, learn how to pick and mix what was on offer, thereby excluding promotional elements and taking full advantage of the potentially educational aspects of the lessons.

There are of course more commercial companies who participate. Kikkoman provides a soy sauce lesson; Meiji Corporation (known formerly as Meiji Dairies) provides a lesson about calcium; House Foods talks about the use of spices in food; a chewing gum maker provides a lesson that addresses the importance of chewing your foods properly; and a chocolate maker looks at the beneficial aspects of cacao. All these companies address the positive sides of their signature products, plugging the information into food education lessons, using their expertise and experience-based activities in very creative ways. The national government recognizes these sophisticated strategies. According to the *Shokuiku Hakusho* [Food Education White Paper] published by the Cabinet Office Government of Japan in 2007, the government is fully aware that some companies that provide lessons to schoolchildren do so in the form of corporate social responsibility, managing to keep their promotional activities out of the classrooms, yet others partake in the project as part of their marketing strategy.

## Implications

I must point out that this national movement of food education has made a significant positive impact on Japanese society. Over the past several years, more Japanese have become educated about food choices and many have become 'food police' to promote healthy diets. Due to the overall improved diets in the nation, the trend of overweight children was finally reversed at every grade level, after more than two decades,<sup>8</sup> and the Ministry of Education reported in December 2011 that the percentage of overweight children had continued to decline after 2009.<sup>9</sup>

Japanese society has a collectivist orientation, which undoubtedly contributed to the success of this national movement of food education. Although different countries have different political and cultural systems, and must take them into account when dealing with an issue such as food education, I strongly believe that food education is becoming a global movement – even in America where people are more individualistic and not entirely appreciative of government interference. Many advanced and developing countries are struggling to tackle children's health issues, so let's hope that the successes of the food education law in Japan can be transferred to other regions or nations.

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