



Laws Promoting Healthy Aging: A Comparison of Japan and the United States Lesson Plan

Introduction

This activity compares legislation passed in the 1960s in both Japan and the United States. Students will consider examples of government attempts to improve the health and happiness of its older citizens. Underlying these laws are culturally different values and attitudes about older adults. This activity is appropriate for units on aging, health, government and human development. It can be used as an interdisciplinary unit for health, language arts and social studies.

Objectives

Students will:

- recognize that government has a role in promoting the general health and welfare of its citizens;
- compare attitudes about older adults in Japan and the United States;
- know the intent of the Older Americans Act; and
- evaluate legislative attempts to improve the quality of life for older citizens.

Key Terms

attitudes, cultural norms, health care, Older Americans Act

Materials

Handout, "Japan and the United States: A Comparison of Laws for Older Citizens"

Procedures

1. Ask students what they already know about Japanese culture and attitudes. Briefly discuss possible differences in attitudes in Japan and the United States, such as Japan's emphasis on the group rather than the individual, and on age rather than youth.
2. Introduce the handout (page 69) and read aloud the introduction to Japan's National Law for the Welfare of the Elders (1963) and the United States' Older Americans Act of 1965.
3. Discuss the differences in the choices of words in the introductions to the Japanese and American laws. Students probably will note the terminology in the Japanese law: "wholesome" and "peaceful." In contrast, the United States law refers to the "inherent dignity of the individual." The United States law suggests that older people are entitled to "equal opportunity" as citizens, not additional opportunity because of age.

4. Additional information which reflects Japanese attitudes toward older adults follows. Read each statement and ask the class to draw comparisons with attitudes in the United States.
 - Japanese law requires the Japanese National Railways to reserve seats for the aged and the handicapped. The seats are a silver-grey color and are called the "Silver Seats."
 - Older adults in Japan usually do not try to hide their age. In Japan, it is proper etiquette to ask older persons their ages and to extend congratulations to them for their old age.
 - Most Japanese over 70 receive all of their medical care free, including physician-prescribed medicines. All older Japanese receive free yearly medical examinations.
 - Traditionally, the first son's wife (the daughter-in-law) assumes most of the responsibility for taking care of older parents.
 - In 1963, the Japanese made "Respect for Elders Day" a national holiday. Octogenarians (80 year olds) and centenarians (100 year olds) are awarded medals for reaching old age.
5. Although differences between Japan and the United States are noticeable, problems are similar. In order for students to have a balanced view, review the following points and invite student comments.
 - As in the United States, the ability to provide family care for older parents in Japan is changing as the older population increases and more Japanese women are employed.
 - The current youth generation in Japan does not have the same reverential treatment of older people as their parents or grandparents did when they were young.
 - Attitudes toward older people in Japan are changing. Respectful behavior (such as giving one's seat to an older person) once was maintained by the traditional culture. The fact that Japanese laws are being passed to promote fundamental values which once were maintained by cultural norms suggests changes in attitudes. As the Japanese become more westernized, so are attitudes about aging.

Extension Activities

Ask students to rate - on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high) - the extent to which they believe the United States is meeting each of the 10 objectives of the Older Americans Act. Discuss ratings with the class.

Have students write a Younger Americans Act which would address the psychological, social and physical needs of young people. The proposed law should present general objectives, such as those shown in the handout on the Older Americans Act, and specific laws which would address those objectives. Compare students' proposed objectives for younger Americans and the existing law for older Americans.

Students can research topics that relate to any of the objectives of the Older Americans Act of 1965. Examples of contemporary political issues related to health include the following:

1. quality health care regardless of economic status;

2. affordable and safe housing without fear of crime;
3. quality institutional (nursing home) care;
4. meaningful social, recreational and educational community activities;
5. ethical issues related to living wills and euthanasia; and
6. elder abuse.

Invite local persons who are natives of Japan or other countries to discuss how younger and older persons are treated in their countries of origin.

Japan and the United States: A Comparison of Laws for Older Citizens

Below are the prefaces to laws passed in Japan and the United States. What are the laws trying to promote? In what ways are the laws different? In what ways are cultural attitudes and values revealed in the wording of the laws?

National Law for the Welfare of the Elders: Japan, 1963

The elders shall be loved and respected as those who have for many years contributed toward the development of society, and a wholesome and peaceful life shall be guaranteed to them. In accordance with their desire and ability, the elders shall be given opportunities to engage in suitable work or to participate in social activities.

Older Americans Act of 1965: Declaration of Objectives for Older Americans

The Congress hereby finds and declares that, in keeping with the traditional American concepts of the inherent dignity of the individual in our democratic society, the older people of our Nation are entitled to . . . equal opportunity to the full and free enjoyment of the following objectives:

1. An adequate income in retirement, in accordance with the American standard of living.
2. The best possible physical and mental health which science can make available and without regard to economic status.
3. Obtaining and maintaining suitable housing, independently selected, designed and located, with reference to special needs and available at costs which older citizens can afford.
4. Full restorative services for those who require institutional care, and a comprehensive array of community-based, long-term care services adequate to appropriately sustain older people in their communities and in their homes.
5. Opportunity for employment, with no discriminatory personnel practices because of age.
6. Retirement in health, honor and dignity - after years of contribution to the economy.
7. Participating in and contributing to meaningful activity within the widest range of civic, cultural, educational, training and recreational opportunities.
8. Efficient community services, including access to low-cost transportation, which provide a choice of supported living arrangements and social assistance in a coordinated manner and which are readily available when needed, with emphasis on maintaining a continuum of care for the vulnerable elderly.
9. Immediate benefit from proven research knowledge, which can sustain and improve health and happiness.

10. Freedom, independence, and the free exercise of individual initiative in planning and managing their own lives; full participation in the planning operation of community-based services and programs provided for their benefit; and protection against abuse, neglect and exploitation.