Opinion and Perspective

Neoliberalism's Influence and Teacher Agency

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In the Edo Period, the Tokugawa clan kept order through a centralized feudal structure. The social system was a strict hierarchy of four classes commonly known as "*shi-no-ko-sho*" which means "samurai-farmer-artisan-merchant". Merchants sat at the bottom of the hierarchy. Today, in contrast, economic values are instilled into most aspects of social life. Values based on consumerism and market ideology have replaced ethics drawn from religious texts guiding peoples' lives. What I see as constituting a value connects to social action; that is, values guide conduct and choices. Because values are learned and schools are central to that process, "Capturing the educational arena was judged to be of particular significance for neoliberal thinking, since schooling was both a green field for corporate designs and also an important means of inculcating market values in future generations" (Block et al., 2012, p. 7). This extends to the field of second/foreign language teaching, which has seen a shift from educational to market values.

This article surveys how the dominant values undergirding the wider socioeconomic system influence the agency of English language teaching (ELT) professionals, particularly those working at universities in Japan. This theme aligns with work by scholars exploring how neoliberalism affects teachers' classroom practice, curriculum development, employment security, and professional development (e.g., Block et al., 2012; Duchêne & Heller, 2012; Holborow, 2006). With the aid of several brief narrative vignettes, I examine these issues after first defining neoliberalism and teacher agency.

Neoliberalism and Teacher Agency

A widely-cited definition of neoliberalism is “a theory of political and economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). This theory, according to Bourdieu (2005), became so widely accepted that it morphed into “a moral view of the world” (p. 10) focused solely on the rights of the individual. In other words, neoliberal ideas that percolated out of elite halls of commerce have become the default way of organizing social life with a peculiar internal logic. According to this ideology, the principal agent in modern society is the market. The internal logic of the system is that nothing can exist outside of the self-regulating market. This includes education, with the effect that the ideology influences how teachers and learners think, and what they do.

When deciding to do something, individuals exercise agency. Agency can be defined as having the capacity to make informed choices in a particular situation. The interplay between social context and agentive factors serve as filters that help people determine actions (Priestley et al., 2015). Work environments can either be supportive of agency or not. Able and well-intentioned teachers working in school environments that value administrative control above collegiality are unlikely to achieve their professional potential. Another way to frame this is that if options are restricted by management structures, then agency is too.

Haneda and Sherman (2016) usefully employed a *job-crafting perspective* to describe teacher agency. They believe that while teachers have prescribed job descriptions, they typically

> go beyond these roles by actively construing their own purpose and meaning for their work. … However, the extent to which they are actually able to realize their vision depends not only on how they position themselves as agents but also on how they are positioned by (more powerful) others. (pp. 747–748)

The powerful others in higher education administration today tend to discount faculty input, instead relying on market ideology when making decisions. As Giannoni (2018) discovered, there is “a set of organizational

values common to both academia and the corporate world" (p. 328) that delimit the systemic or structural environment of the workplace. The primary neoliberal values that determine acceptable options for exercising agency within academia are efficiency and accountability. Corporate values were first accepted by university managers in the U.S. and U.K., and were later welcomed by administrators at Japanese universities. Next are some examples of how this acceptance of corporate values has influenced teacher agency.

Testing ELT Agency

Vignette 1

Consider first, two EFL teachers pre-pandemic at universities in Japan who did not actually teach their courses. They merely posted and accept assignments with no meaningful interaction. Their stance was they followed the rules as stipulated. In another case from several years earlier, a teacher met with his students in the classroom every other week until one day a student complained to the office. This led to the discovery by administrators that he was contracted to teach at two universities during the same periods on the same day.

What values are evident in these examples? The latter example can be rationalized as an enterprising individual maximizing his income. In short, these examples appear to reflect values displayed daily by the big "winners" in today's society: Wall Street and City of London financiers, and Silicon Valley technocrats. While the neoliberal ideology stresses accountability for teachers, upholding this value is downplayed for corporations and wealthy individuals. The term "too big to fail" captures the reality of our economic system that normalizes the privatization of gains and the offloading of risk to the public. Simply put, heads they win, tails taxpayers lose (see "Pandora Papers," 2021). Considering how elites have rigged the economy and the legal system in their favor, it is hard to blame the teachers in Vignette 1 for their actions.

Another possible reading of this vignette is that these teachers were engaged in a type of "bad agency" (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 146). Their focus on personal gain very likely damaged the interests of their students, and negatively impacted their colleagues. Many of their non-Japanese colleagues were upset by their

obvious lack of integrity, partly out of concern that their actions would be projected onto all foreign teachers. In the neoliberal system, the basic integrity of doing business honestly is not revered; only consumerism, greed, and personal gain are valued. When the powerful break the law, they are seldom held to account. Accountability is required only when it applies to people outside of powerful circles (Giridharadas, 2018).

In Japan, many full-time faculty teach part-time at other universities. For some, this is due to the fact that teacher salaries here have remained stagnant for 25 years. Furthermore, cuts in the number of tenured positions led to the creation of an academic underclass. Universities now depend on the labor of low-paid graduate students and part-time contract teachers (Bousquet, 2008; "The Tragedy," 2021). While Japan has the third largest GDP, wealth distribution since the 1990s has followed the neoliberal pattern of flowing to the top as worker salaries have stagnated (OECD, 2021).

Vignette 2

One of my former colleagues managed to move from a contract position to a tenured post at a well-known private university in Japan. This was certainly a prized post for a non-Japanese national. Several years later, his wealthy uncle passed away and left him everything. As soon as he learned of his good fortune, he packed up his possessions and moved back to the United States, without informing his colleagues or the administration. He later informed the dean of his departure by email. His colleagues in the department were left to deal with the chaos his sudden departure created.

From my former colleague's perspective, he chose the most efficient course of action to realize his desired end. He perceived his personal responsibility to be to himself alone. Because he had done his job up to that point, he saw no problem with his action. In other words, he felt no debt of gratitude toward his colleagues. Westerners generally have a self-image of a "free agent" independent of circumstances or personal relationships. Thus, his understanding of responsibility did not extend to a sense of responsibility for the future of his department or institution. For Japanese colleagues in his department, agency was understood as collective and dependent on context and relationships. They had the expectation that a senior professor would exercise more personal

responsibility and collegiality. The institution responded by imposing a five-year contract on future replacements. Thus, his action caused a coveted tenured post for non-Japanese academics to be reduced to a limited-term contract. This vignette is an example of the type of one-sided (win/lose) gain encouraged by the neoliberal value of competition. Loyalty to an institution, to employees, and collegiality are not values inherent in the neoliberal ideology. In sum, Vignette 2 illustrates the cultural gap between the Western idea of agency as personal agency and the Japanese view of collective agency.

Vignette 3

A number of years ago at a national university where I was employed, the administration decided that the English curriculum needed radical reform. Numerous meetings were held as faculty members across the campus with an interest in English education voiced their ideas. The institution had a reputation for being stodgy and unchanging. I saw evidence supporting this perspective when I first arrived. Many syllabi were comprised of no more than a few general sentences and this remained the status quo for years. My impression was that the administration was fed up with obstructionism by the old guard after asking numerous times for changes to be made. The meetings called by administration were aimed at forcing reluctant faculty members to institute change. The reformed English curriculum was implemented the following year.

One impetus for this change was inconsistent coverage and uneven grading standards. First-year students taking the same English course with a different instructor had varied content and assessment. Some professors graded very strictly, others quite leniently. This vignette highlights the difference between autonomy and agency. The old guard of tenured Japanese professors (many of whom had graduated from the institution) resisted pressure from administrators to reform English curricula. For them, "autonomy" meant an absence of regulation that would maintain the traditions of teaching with which they were familiar. However, having autonomy of action does not necessarily ensure that agency is achieved if teachers "habitually reproduce past patterns of behaviour" (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 142). In contrast, it is possible for external policy to provide a helpful frame for future agentive action. As it turned out, the top-

down reform of the curriculum described in Vignette 3 inspired many English teachers at the institution to become more innovative and collaborative.

Across the educational landscape, agency has been stripped from teachers and usurped by administrators who value productivity, efficiency, and control. In fact, professors are now positioned as service providers who must work to satisfy their customers (no longer students). The disempowerment of faculty was framed by the dominant corporate ideology as a necessary response to the "crisis" in education. Berg and Seeber (2016) explain how the "discourse of crisis" (p. 10) has created a sense of urgency amongst faculty members that hampers their agentive influence. Once "power is transferred from faculty to managers, economic justifications dominate, and the familiar 'bottom line' eclipses pedagogical and intellectual concerns" (Berg & Seeber, p. x). Thus, the traditional models of collegial governance and academic freedom are sidelined. This observation was affirmed in the field of TESOL by Barnawi (2020) who claims that corporate practices hamper the agency of TESOL university faculty by speeding up the pace of work so much that teachers now only have time for action and reaction, not reflection. This situation has arisen because teachers are required to perform more tasks in less time. The busyness of teachers not only reflects the pace of the workplace and technological change, but also the increasing demands for customer satisfaction in response to the needs of students which are largely determined by the market (Litzenberg, 2020). In other words, teacher agency is muted at some schools by a series of top-down regulations and scripts.

Administrators seek to create systems to monitor and control practice with a preference for standardization. In Japan, centralized control by university presidents has been the norm at private institutions. The disempowering of faculty at the national schools was a direct result of the government's absorption of neoliberal values; budgets were cut and decision-making power was concentrated in the office of the president. The gathering of data for decision-making accelerated together with the pace of change. The popularity of spreadsheets and quantification serves the neoliberal agenda in higher education which is preoccupied with measuring concrete outcomes (Bousquet, 2008).

But good teaching needs a foundation deeper than spreadsheet calculations. The exercise of teacher agency is not simply a matter of effective and efficient implementation of policy. Agentive educators have strong educational beliefs and are able to question the purpose of learning.

Vignette 4

To encourage students' study of English, new courses were added as part of the curriculum reform outlined in Vignette 3. Inevitably, some of the elective courses had low enrollment. The administration reacted to this situation by yet again recommending the revision of syllabi and the creation of new courses. The result was the same. Administrators who expected that many students would take more English classes were perplexed.

The curriculum reform narrowed the practice options somewhat for teachers. The introduction of common commercial textbooks used across disciplines was welcomed by those busy part-time teachers who preferred to follow the internal syllabus of the books. While this saves time preparing for lessons, when teachers closely follow prescribed routines, they are opting not to exercise their agency. That being said, there was still a wide range of options available to teachers with creative capacity.

To graduate, Japanese university students must successfully complete many courses. Complicating matters, the grade point average (GPA) system was introduced a few years ago. The mystery is that administrators seem surprised when students exercise their agency by enrolling in less challenging courses to raise their GPA. While administrators regularly cite teacher responsibility for low enrollments in electives, the question of administrative accountability for program requirements is more fundamental in a system that values centralized control.

Vignette 5

I have been on both sides of the hiring process many times over 25 years, as an applicant and as a search committee member. My personal experience leaves no doubt in my mind that the system values publication and academic credentials above teaching experience and pedagogical expertise. A PhD credential is now expected even for teaching positions. Furthermore, Japanese universities typically instruct candidates

to number their publications. During search committee meetings, the groups' focus is inevitably drawn to the total number, rather than quality of content, clarity of writing, or publication venue.

Vignette 5 tells us that for ELT positions in Japan today, publication and academic credentials have a higher value than pedagogical experience. The corporatization of universities has accelerated this trend. "The corporate jargon focuses on research 'output' above other parts of our work, such as teaching" (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 56). Hence, teachers are encouraged to constantly check their research production. The result is that faculty who dedicate themselves to teaching excellence, instead of generating published manuscripts, still find the ultimate symbols of recognition and reward—tenure and promotion—elusive (Chalmers, 2011). Propelling the increased push of credentialism is the global market for higher education and the fixation on university rankings. Because Japanese institutions accept these so-called global standards, ELT educators in Japan are pressured to follow the trend. The potential rewards granted by the system to a select few of salary, status, and security, are enticing.

Final Thoughts

While readers might not identify with all of the vignettes presented here, educators who work in Japan will appreciate Collini's (2012, p. 108) insight about the "fallacy of accountability" as "the belief that the process of reporting on an activity in the approved form provides some guarantee that something worthwhile has been properly done". After all, correctly filling in the constant flow of forms is what keeps us and many office staff members exceedingly busy. While this is a pet peeve of many long-term residents of Japan, having good relations with office staff members is important for achieving agency at Japanese universities. It necessitates sensitivity to the Japanese preference for interdependence which requires one to conform to the expectations of the community by valuing responsibility to the whole above individual rights (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). While it is possible to stretch the boundaries of professional roles, an individual's agency to contest the system has limits.

A sweeping response by the Japanese government to the globalized higher

education market was to reform the national universities. In 2004, these elite institutions became national university corporations with the aims of improving financial accountability, teaching, and research quality. This dramatic change in the management of the national universities is a clear indication of the transmission of neoliberal ideology. National university faculty lost their status as public servants, however, more non-Japanese teachers can now be hired. In theory, the national institutions were deregulated from central state governance; however, indirect coercion by MEXT has simply replaced direct control. In fact, the balance of power and internal workings of the universities have been reconfigured to favor administrative priorities over academic objectives (Shin, 2012).

Even after this shift in governance, teachers with the capacity to achieve agency certainly have opportunities to actively engage in curriculum development in Japan. However, the cultural and structural environments must nurture agency for it to flourish (Priestley et al., 2015). Creating this supportive framework requires distinctive and explicitly crafted policy. Adopting neoliberal ideology for this task presents a dilemma because it only offers a bland monoculture of technocratic language that disregards local contexts. In practice, neoliberalism is merely a system of centralized administrative control under the guise of personal freedom and choice. It restricts the range of possibilities to standardized market-driven pedagogies and, therefore, blunts imagination of alternative professional futures. For university-based ELT faculty, achieving agency requires staying abreast of policy and research in the field so they can "articulate concepts ... to enact practice critically in response to policy" (Priestley et al., p. 145). Surveying the damage done to societies by 40 years of neoliberalism, it is clear that the articulation of imaginative responses is long overdue.

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