
Book Review

Reimagining Japanese Education: Borders, Transfers, Circulations, and the Comparative

Edited by David Blake Willis and Jeremy Rappleye

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Reimagining Japanese Education is a fascinating and challenging book for any teacher in Japan who has an interest in understanding the meaning and context of their work. Lecturers in English in Japan are of necessity engaged in work on a linguistic/cultural border. The Japanese education scene is changing fast and impacting us, particularly non-Japanese teachers, in ways that we may not understand.

For example, in 2012 the number of Japanese students studying abroad in the USA was less than half that in 2004 (Institute of International Education, 2012). Meanwhile, millions have been spent attempting to attract overseas students to Japanese universities. The number of foreign students has increased, but at 137,000 it is still less than half the projected target.

The Fundamental Law on Education, unchanged since 1947, was re-written in 2006 to include instruction in moral education and patriotic values.

In addition, a policy of “relaxed education” pursued since the late 1990s was abandoned recently in favor of stricter curriculum guidelines. “Relaxed education” failed to reduce the pressure on students and alleviate bullying. The policy failed, but is it really likely that a return to a more traditional curriculum and holding school classes on Saturdays will help?

Reimagining Japanese Education is not an easy read, but it is a thought-provoking book for those who want to gain insight into education in Japan today. The book consists of 11 chapters structured around the questions “Why has Japanese education changed?” and “How should we now reimagine Japanese education to better understand future educational and social change there and elsewhere in the world?” (p. 27). The two opening chapters set the agenda for the whole book, which was created by the editors inviting various authors to contribute their thoughts on these two questions.

In the first chapter, entitled “Reimagining Japanese education in the global conversation: borders, transfers, circulations and the comparative”, Willis and Rappleye argue that there is an urgent need for a paradigm shift not only in Japanese education studies but in comparative education as a whole. They explain that they invited all the contributors to the volume to draw on the work of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, whose model of globalization uses metaphors such as “flow” and “landscape” to express the fluidity of change (Appadurai, 2001). This gives the volume a certain unity, since each writer tries to engage with the idea of globalization and explore the relevance of Appadurai’s thinking to Japan in the global context. The merit of this approach is to highlight ways in which Japan is interconnected.

Criticizing the “methodological nationalism” in much comparative education discourse, the editors analyze how Japan has come to be passed over in recent comparative studies. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Benedict, 1946), written to brief the American administration then, established an exotic image of Japan. Subsequently, the idea of Japanese uniqueness gained popularity within Japan due to Japanese writers like psychologist Takeo Doi (1973) and anthropologist Chie Nakane (1970). From the 1960s through early 1980s, the speed with which Japan implemented industrialization and universal education

seemed miraculous. Many comparative studies of the 80s and 90s (Duke, 1986; Rholen & LeTendre, 1998) were motivated by the need to justify political change in the United States and Britain by projecting the image of Japanese efficiency. Willis and Rappleye allege in chapter 1 that since then, comparative education has lost interest in Japan, and Japan has turned inward.

It seemed that a 'lost wandering' in search of the Self had absorbed Japanese Society at precisely the moment ...global forces began to reshape the country. Just as a new vision was needed the most, Japan appeared to be closing in (p. 15).

It might seem that Japan is returning to the period when it was a "closed country" (*sakoku*) and is unique in doing so. However, Willis and Rappleye argue that Japan is one of many countries which are reacting to globalization, having "experienced similar global flows as a host of other nations worldwide, and that has undergone similar educational change as they have" (p. 24). They identify features like decentralization of control over education, reduction in central budgeting, pressure on universities to move in the direction of private funding, and calls for a more patriotic curriculum as trends not only in Japan but in many other countries. This analysis is developed in more detail in later chapters, particularly chapter 2 by Kariya and Rappleye on education reform, chapter 3 by Marie Roesgaard on moral education and chapter 10 by Keita Takayama on comparative education.

One of the strengths of the book is the contribution by three Japanese educationalists, Takehiko Kariya (formerly professor at the Graduate School of Education at Tokyo University and now at Oxford University), Manabu Sato (Professor of the Graduate School of Education at Tokyo University) and Keita Takayama from the Graduate School of Education at the University of New England, Australia. They combine deep understanding and razor-sharp analyses. Kariya co-authors a historical overview of Japanese education with Rappleye in chapter 2, and also provides an afterword. I found the middle section of the book less exciting but still worthwhile. In chapter 3, Roesgaard argues that the 2006 reforms of the Fundamental Law on Education in relation to moral education can be understood as a reaction to the "threat" of globalization. "The

moral education revision is an attempt to have one's cake and eat it as well: to retain Japanese national identity and values while integrating with the world" (p. 104). The next paper by Ryoko Tsuneyoshi highlights the paradox that although the Japanese government has talked a lot about "internationalization" in education, programs focus narrowly on English and English-speaking cultures, largely ignoring the larger Chinese, Brazilian and Philippine ethnic minorities. After that, Robert Aspinall's paper highlights a contradiction between the government's protective attitude to Japanese identity and the rhetoric of globalization. As he has written elsewhere (Aspinall, 2003), this is as a major impediment to progress in English language education.

The next two chapters analyze the gap between rhetoric and reality in policies relating to junior and senior high schools. Christopher Bjork observes the gap in relation to the practice of "relaxed" education, and Aaron Miller to the effects of introducing Western ideas about sports education.

Mayumi Ishikawa's chapter on the "Global 30" initiative explains how the government has offered grants to selected universities which create courses in English aimed at attracting outstanding foreign students. She notes there is no guarantee that the presence of foreign brains on Japanese campuses will reinvigorate the whole, particularly since only 13 of the planned 30 Global campuses have been established. In her words, "Without appreciation of multicultural interactions and learning experiences, there may even be a danger of new nationalism emerging as scholarship opportunities and jobs seem to be going to foreign students or graduates" (p. 214).

In chapters 9 and 10 Takayama and Sato pick up the challenge of looking for continuities between Japan and other East Asian countries. First, Sato's paper helps to make sense of many contradictions in educational change since 2006. He defines an "East Asian Style of Education" (p. 234), developed in response to economic needs, valuing economic efficiency, competitiveness, centrally controlled bureaucracy, nationalism and what he calls "an immature public mind" (p. 234). He continues, "Nationalism in pursuit of state interests and the egotism of individualism have been the two wheels driving modernization." He suggests this East Asian style is prone to binary oppositions (knowledge/experience, self/

other) which block the way to alternative educational discourses (p. 235).

On the other hand, Sato reveals the permeability that has come from decentralization. As Professor of the Graduate School of Education at Tokyo University, Sato has used his authority to stimulate and support grassroots reform at school level. He explains in his chapter that a group of professors at Tokyo University were able to stimulate a movement of three thousand schools to sign up to a system of self-improvement, which centralized policies would never have allowed. After doing a survey in 2005, he found that “the number one complaint of teachers is too many reforms coming from outside” (p. 236). He called for schools to establish learning communities independently. In these schools reflective teaching and collaborative learning are encouraged by a system of open classes and discussion, focusing not on evaluating the skill of teachers but instead on observing the learning and collaboration experienced by children (p. 238). Three thousand schools (about 10% of public schools, according to Sato) have signed up or developed their own versions of his code of practice. The fact of decentralization allowed this to happen:

The imagined idea is that schools are becoming neo-liberal, but the reality is different, with a different set of results revealing the permeability and immunology of outside ideas at grassroots level to be entirely different from what is expected by elite policy makers and often by outside observers (p. 237).

Sato’s influence extended beyond Japan to Korea and China, where organizations have voluntarily adopted his model of a learning community. Sato explains this “hidden reality” has an uncertain future: “The more progress this learning-community-based school reform... makes, the more it comes face to face with the harsh reality which surrounds education in Japan” (p. 243).

In the final chapter, Takayama presents the 2006 reforms of the Fundamental Law on Education as the culmination of a process started in the 1980s by the then prime minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone. Takayama offers a corrective to other views, in particular highlighting the extent of disagreement within the right among proponents of education reform. He highlights how decentralization has increased the possibilities at local level, which has allowed Sato’s “learning

school” movement to take place. He explains how “Both progressive and conservative organizations have quickly recognized the lowering of the scale of education politics and intensified their advocacy work at the regional and local levels” (p. 261).

He also points out how decisions which appear to be taken at national level are permeable to outside influence from agencies which he calls “global elites” such as PISA and OECD. The use of such a phrase reminds us that PISA and OECD are not neutral but stakeholders in an evolving global order.

The effects [of OECD recommendations] were real because the system is no longer premised upon the post war political settlements guided by the state’s formal commitment to egalitarianism and liberal democracy, and because the “real” consequences are already witnessed in the widening disparity in academic outcomes and incentives... (p. 266).

Finally, Takayama criticizes the lack of dialogue between education scholars around the world for not reading work produced in other languages than their own. He calls for them to pay more attention to each other’s work, in order to make use of sorely needed insights from different perspectives.

Reimagining Japanese Education is a complex book, difficult to do justice to in a short review. I have lived in Japan since 2000 and followed movements such as the demise of “relaxed education” and the 2006 education law revision as well as I can through TV news and translated sources with fascination, at times accompanied by alarm, skepticism, and confusion. The book gave me new insight into how professional development is carried out within schools and how the big picture of educational change in Japan relates to other countries in Asia. I found the metaphors related to landscape and circulation fresh and enlightening, the perspectives and analysis of the situation of teachers and students in Japan clear-eyed and sobering but also inspiring in the way that it reveals grassroots movements for positive change.

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