Reflections on Education Reform in Japan and the U.S.

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When I first moved to Japan in 1990, the economy was booming and the school system was attracting attention around the world. Eager to learn about the conditions that had created the “Japanese Education Miracle,” I spent a year teaching English in Ibaraki Prefecture. At the end of my year teaching in Ibaraki, I was not ready to return to the U.S. Instead, I moved to Tokyo. My initial plan to spend a year abroad stretched out into a twenty-seven year career studying the Japanese education system. Trained as an anthropologist, I have been especially interested in the connections between schools and the communities that surround them. I am particularly interested in the process of policy design, translation, and implementation.

In attempt to develop a more thorough understanding of the Japanese education system, I have conducted research that examines the schools from several different perspectives. All of my work connects stated goals for educational reform with their implementation at the school level. According to Stritikus and Wiese (2006), “Ethnographic examination of the policy-to-practice connection shows the actual constraints and contradictions faced by ground-level practitioners and thus allows us to move beyond seeing practice in simplistic terms” (1109). Walford (2001) underscores this idea, noting that “looking at the positive results of policy change in isolation may lead to totally incorrect evaluations of its overall efficacy, but ethnography ensures that the wider context is examined and the effects of any change are observed within the whole culture of the school or classroom” (3). The research I conduct aims to capture the richness of daily life...
in schools and the manner in which members of those learning communities respond to policy guidelines.

The first paper I published compared the role that collaboration plays in the professional lives of teachers in Japan and the U.S. (Bjork 2000a). In the article, I analyze the core values that anchor teaching cultures in the two countries. American teachers, I note, often work in isolation and are rewarded for individual achievements. Japanese educators, on the other hand, tend to collaborate with their colleagues to plan and evaluate instructional activities. Next, I studied the role of the Japanese principal, which is framed quite differently from that of school administrators in the U.S. (Bjork 2000b). School administrators in the U.S. are expected to play a more active role in curriculum and instruction, whereas Japanese principals tend to assume responsibility for more ceremonial and community outreach activities.

For the last ten years, I have been studying the goals and effects of policies designed to make learning more relevant and relevant for Japanese students. My two most recent books analyze changes adopted by the Ministry of Education after that collapse of the economic bubble. A book I co-edited with Gary DeCoker, *Japanese Education in an Era of Globalization: Enduring Issues in New Contexts* (2013), includes eleven essays that place the contemporary Japanese school system in global context, paying particular attention to how the system has responded to shifting expectations for education. The book is based on the premise that certain fundamental issues have endured through the years of Japan’s economic boom and economic downturn, and into the current era of globalization. Contributions to this volume analyze contemporary youth culture, links between families and schools, and how recent efforts to reform the education system are influencing the learning experiences provided to Japanese children.

*High Stakes Schooling: What We Can Learn from Japan’s Experiences with Testing, Accountability, and Education Reform* (2015) draws from eight years I spent studying the impact of yutori kyōiku reforms. This ethnographic study looks closely at how teachers, parents, and students responded to the more relaxed curriculum. The data presented indicate that *yutori kyoku* forced education stakeholders at all levels of the system to re-examine their core beliefs about the
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purpose of schooling, the attitudes and skills that students need to succeed in contemporary society, and the primary responsibilities of teachers.

The data I collected indicate that the relaxed education initiatives pressed educators to move in one direction, but the foundation on which they operated remained stationary. Education officials maintained that children needed more “room to grow,” but education in Japan is organized around a single focal point: the entrance examination. That unity of purpose provides a clear sense of order to everyone involved in education. School employees and members of the society organize their behavior to fit a clearly defined set of demands associated with entrance examinations. Even those who are highly critical of the exams have difficulty resisting their influence.

High Stakes Schooling also compares the forces that have been driving calls for educational reform in Japan and the United States over the past twenty-five years. My analysis indicates that politicians in both countries have relied on a rhetoric of crisis to support their education reform agendas. At the same time the US Department of Education was promoting expanded testing and accountability in schools, MEXT was decrying those very factors as responsible for the “crisis” the education system was experiencing. Recently, education policies enacted in the U.S. have attempted to hold educators accountable by attaching rewards and sanctions to student performance on high stakes tests. But the evidence I collected indicates that this reform approach does not appear to have increased academic achievement. It has, however, exacerbated the stress experienced by students, and led many teachers to focus on test preparation. Both Japan and the U.S. have struggled to find an appropriate balance between academic rigor and student engagement in school.

These two books, as well as other articles I have published that explore the trajectory of education reform in Japan (Bjork 2011, 2010, 2009, 2004; Bjork & Fukuzawa 2013; Bjork & Tsuneyoshi 2005), indicate that the Japanese school system is currently in a state of flux. One notable aspect of the school system—and Japanese society—has been the deep respect traditionally assigned to education. Undergirding the entire enterprise was pervasive respect for the role that education plays in individual and collective growth. In the 1980s, White observed that, “the
entire nation is mobilized behind children and their education” (White 1987: 11). Lewis echoed that sentiment: “Japanese families tend to place great importance on education and imbue teachers with an almost sacred status” (Lewis 1995: 199). But the collapse of the economic bubble in the 1990s induced a series of swift and destabilizing changes to the social landscape that complicated the work of educators.

My research indicates that the united front that characterized home-school relationships in Japan began to fragment as education stakeholders began to focus on their individual needs rather than those of the larger community. Parents who were unhappy with the education provided to their children began to question the benefits their sons and daughters derived from school. Through their actions and words they expressed doubts about the demands placed on their children. In the communities I studied, teachers reported that the percentage of parents who did not provide what they considered appropriate support to their children was rapidly growing; educators could no longer assume that adults were closely monitoring their children’s homework or providing supplementary instruction to those who fell behind. Adults also expressed their concerns about contemporary schools more overtly. When I spoke with parents, they frequently voiced criticism of the new curriculum, instructional practices, and more lenient approaches to student guidance. Teachers were quite sensitive to perceived displeasure with their children’s education. They frequently complained to me about the stress that “monster parents” (monsuta parento) created for them. There was a clear consensus among educators that public support and respect for their work was eroding.

Although I have spent most of my time working in Japan, I have also studied education reform in other locations. Recent efforts to reform schools in other Asian nations suggest that Japan’s experiences with high stakes testing are not unique. Responding to criticism that the heavy emphasis on testing has undermined children’s intellectual and social development, education planners in China, South Korea, Singapore, and many other countries in the region have enacted policies that attempt to mitigate the influence of examinations. Similar to yutori kyoiku, these initiatives use a variety of strategies (reduced instructional time, curricular revisions, student-centered pedagogy, community involvement, etc.) in
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to make learning more meaningful and stimulating for students. Confronted with evidence that students who earn high scores on standardized tests may lack the skills necessary to succeed after graduation, reformers across Asia are encouraging schools to enhance children’s critical thinking skills, creativity, and ability to communicate original ideas. Yet in all of those settings, educators have struggled to implement the policies according to plan; the power of the high-stakes test is proving remarkably difficult to conquer.

Another interesting component of this issue is the connections between family income and investment in education. Reports that compare the performance of students in different countries on international achievement tests such as PISA and TIMSS usually produce league tables based on aggregate test data. But mean achievement scores obscure wide disparities in the resources that families invest in their children’s education as a result of test-related pressures. This is true in most of the Asian education systems I have studied. I have found that in Japan, parents who attach great value to education go to great lengths to ensure that their sons and daughters would excel on entrance examinations. For example, thirty-seven percent of the students I surveyed indicated that they enrolled in supplementary courses (juku) after school and/or on weekends.

Anchoring my research is an interest in how conditions in schools and the communities that surround them respond to education reform policies. I work to gain an understanding of the historical, political, social, economic, and religious factors that shape the actions of teachers and students. I believe that this local perspective on school reform is critical—yet is often missing from reports on education initiatives. All of my work highlights the critical role that school-based actors play in the education reform process. Carefully studying the actions of local responses to education initiatives can lead to more effective policy planning and analysis.

This is a fascinating time to be studying Japanese and American schools. I am eager to learn more about the research produced by contributors to this journal. Collaborative inquiry conducted by scholars working in different countries and disciplines can produce fresh insights into the ways that schools operate. I look forward to partnering with scholars interested in education reform in Japan, the United States, and other locations.
References


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