At first glance, my research on Japanese education over the past decade looks eclectic. It does not fit neatly into the sociology of education. Nor can it be wholly contained within the cognate fields of comparative education or educational studies. It seems to lack a consistent methodology, theoretical stance, or even easily identifiable empirical ‘object’, e.g. middle school mathematics instructional techniques or patterns of socialization at a particular stage of the system. For some scholars of Japanese education, this might suggest a lack of depth or analytical discipline. But for me, it represents the inevitable result of an evolving and open research career: as my language capacities improved, my interactions with Japanese scholar increased and my knowledge of context(s) deepened, established ways of ‘seeing’ Japan I was taught in my graduate training fell away, leading to shifts in emphasis, methods, and objects, and thus shifts in my approach to Japanese education. Put simply, the more I learned, the more my way of perceiving education – not just schooling practices in Japan – itself changed.

Normally, discussions of how personal transformations relate to one’s research are disbarred from academic journals under the high modern pretense that we, as serious scholars, deliver objective accounts. In this sense, this more informal venue – one afforded by the forward-looking Editors of the Japan Sociology of Education – becomes an excellent opportunity to briefly outline my personal trajectory. I relate this account in terms of four stages of my still-evolving, open research career. I emphasize ‘my’ to highlight that there is a singularity to my experience, but leave open the question of whether all foreign scholars who engage

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Japan in a deep sense experience a similar arc. I suspect that most would identify with the broad contours of ‘my’ account, but also that many would stop short of the full transformation I outline, for reasons that I will return to discuss below. My practical aim in relating my research in this way is to show readers the multiple entry-point for potential collaboration that I am open to, while at the same time hinting at how my research – as a relatively junior and minor member in this field – diverges from the previous generation of ‘big name’ foreign scholars of Japanese education, i.e. those active in the 1980s–1990s.

The first stage of my research – Stage 1 (2005–2007) – focused on cross-national attraction in education policymaking, in particular the potential and perils of the cross-national transfer of educational forms. From time to time, certain countries (or sub-groups within countries) become interested in the education systems (or sub-systems) of certain other countries. Recent examples include: the interest in Chinese (Shanghai) mathematics instruction by UK policymakers, the great fascination in Finnish teacher recruitment by many European–American scholars, and the growing attraction to Singaporean classroom practices in the Gulf and Southeast Asia regions. Why drives this attraction? What are the conditions and consequences? To address this question empirically, my first book entitled Exploring Cross-national Attraction in Education (2007) examined American and Chinese attraction to Japanese education over a long historical span (roughly the 20th century). In constructing the account, I examined education policy papers, media coverage, think tank reports, and scholarly studies from American and Chinese sources. I detailed when coverage of Japanese education peaked, what the foci of attraction became, and how much these representations fed into education policy reforms in America and China. Perhaps the most interesting finding of the study was showing how the intense ‘American’ attraction to Japanese education in the 1980s was framed and driven, for the most part, by then President Ronald Reagan’s attempts to propagate a crisis discourse known as A Nation at Risk (1983) that sought to redefine American education as a prime engine of economic growth. This was my earliest foray into ‘Japanese education’ and, looking back, I realize that I felt continually dogged by the difficulty of the language at this opening stage. This is why I opted to detail perceptions of Japan by outsid-
ers: these somehow seemed easier to grasp then to understand ‘Japanese education’ from within. ‘Japanese education’ thus was placed in brackets and I instead focused on how people projected a particular image of ‘Japan’ onto the complex realities of the Japanese context.

As I gained greater facility with the Japanese language and began to recognize the sheer complexity of educational policy formulation processes (not just talked about), my research interests inevitably shifted. In Stage II (2007–2011), I sought to understand to what degree recent policies in Japanese education originated outside of Japan’s domestic context. From the 1990s forward several major policies seemed to be mirroring policies advocated in a host of other countries worldwide, most prominently: relaxed education (yutori kyoiku), fiscal decentralization (sanmi ittai under Koizumi), the national achievement test (zenkoku gakuryoku tesuto), and the internationalization of higher education (kokusaika). What explained this apparent congruence? To what degree were these policies a reflection of a changing domestic policy landscape in Japan? To what degree were these policies a reflection of an increasing role for ‘global’ forces in Japan’s educational policy formation process? To answer this broad question empirically, I narrowed the focus to two representative stories: a high profile attempt by the Liberal Democratic Party to ‘borrow’ the Thatcher-era reforms of the UK and progressive erosion of MEXT power by the Ministry of Finance.

The wider backdrop to the research was two-fold. First, it worked to update the earlier work by Leonard Schoppa (1991) who had meticulously detailed how Japanese education reform was stymied by ‘immobilist politics’. Obviously something had changed with all the reforms unfolding from 1990–2006, but this was not reflected anywhere in the English language literature. Second, my work at this time attempted to speak to debates prominent in the Western academy about the nature of globalization vis-à-vis education: did similar policies represent substantive convergence around a shared worldview (neo-institutional or World Culture Theory) or was it only nominal convergence, with the continuation of multiple logics and worldviews in educational policy formulation (historical institutionalism, multiple modernities, or systems-theory, etc). With Japan positioned as an empirical ‘case’ utilized to comment on these wider debates, the
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study was published under the title *Educational Policy Transfer in an Era of Globalization: Theory – History – Comparison* (2012). By virtue of my increasing competence with the language and contacts facilitated by leading scholars (centered around Tokyo University), I began to feel increasingly confident I was understanding the ways that Japanese policymaking and educational patterns were similar and different from other countries worldwide.

However – and quite frankly – I was already dissatisfied with that project before I even finished it. Embracing this dissatisfaction, rather than continuing to avoid it, inaugurated *Stage III* (2011–2014). The source of the dissatisfaction was my inability to connect with Japanese scholars. An unintended outcome of my increasing language capabilities and dialogue with Japanese scholars was that I became increasingly aware how differently I approached research: the themes of policy transfer, globalization, and – most significantly – the theoretical lenses I utilized to interpret my findings had little resonance in Japanese discussions at that time. I remember vividly my frustration that I could not even translate the key terms of my research into Japanese without confusing my audience and sending them off into a different communicative–cum–thought universe. Prodded along by sometimes harsh critiques by scholars inside and outside Japan (e.g. Keita Takayama), it began to slowly dawn on me that my images of ‘Japanese Education’ were perhaps less a reflection of empirical realities, more a consequence of the (unexamined) epistemic presumptions implicit in my conceptual-analytical frames. I began to wonder if this same story might have been repeating itself all along: outside observers coming to Japan to collect data for use in their apparently ‘universal’ epistemic projects, retreating to the comforting claims of objectivity to avoid experiencing new epistemic possibilities. My earlier critiques of the Reagan-era pretense to be ‘learning from Japan’ as simply a form of re-inscribing what was already known came back to haunt me: I began to worry that I myself might be simply acting out the same drama at the epistemic–theoretical level.

So how then to ensure that ‘Japan’ was not reduced to a case study and that Japanese scholars had some voice in the overall framing of research that purported to portray ‘Japan’? In *Reimagining Japanese Education* (2011) my co-editor David Willis and I attempted to put together leading scholars of Japanese education
to jointly contemplate what globalization meant for ‘Japanese education’. But the key points were (i) we created a rough balance between Japanese and non-Japanese scholars, and (ii) the overarching terms – ‘Japan’, ‘education’, ‘globalization’ – were left open and contestable. The volume was punctuated by a rousing Afterword by Professor Takehiko Kariya who had just resigned from Tokyo University to take up a post at Oxford. I suspect his words emerged from personal experience with the same sort of disconnect I had felt, albeit experienced in a reverse direction. He lamented that: “From a mainstream Japanese educational research perspective, academic works written in non-Japanese languages are valuable only if Japanese scholars recognize them as either re-confirming what they already have identified as problems or justifying pre-determined reforms or policies…”. The two academic communities remain at a distance” (Kariya, 2011, 282). I am still not sure whether that edited volume was successful, but perhaps it will be recognized as a first modest step towards placing Japanese and non-Japanese scholars on equal footing on the empirical and epistemic levels. Another way I attempted to close this distance at this time was through translating key works by leading Japanese scholars into English, most prominently Takehiko Kariya’s Education Reform and Social Class in Japan (2012, originally 階層化日本と教育危機 (2001)) and Education and Inequality (Forthcoming, originally 教育と平等 (2009)). The whole act of translation itself took on a more profound significance for me at this time.

Stage IV (2014 – present) has been marked by an attempt to go even further in understanding how perspectives found in Japanese scholarship might help enrich or enlarge the global conversation on education. It is here that I fear some readers will think that I have stepped beyond the bounds of the sociology of education, as commonly conceived. But I believe that this is precisely what is at stake in the current phase: the parameters of the field. Rather than limit myself to works in the sociology of education, comparative education, or educational studies, I have tried to read widely beyond those fields most recently, paying particularly attention to philosophical and theoretical ideas that are not found in the Euro-American sphere (at least to my knowledge). For example, in my most recent paper entitled Living on Borrowed Time: rethinking temporality, nihilism, schooling and
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Rappleye & Komatsu, 2016) I have attempted to utilize philosophical ideas from Keiji Nishitani and sociological ideas from Maki Yusuke to construct an alternative lens through which to view schools, textbook content, and even school architecture in the modern era: all worked together to rewrite fundamental epistemic-ontological categories in the modern transition, most prominently time and self. That paper elaborates in considerable empirical detail how a particular concept of time was ‘borrowed’ through the technology of the clock and came to structure social life after being delivered through modern schools, until by the 1980s competing notions of temporality had been erased and self-hood also took a new turn.

To the eyes of mainstream educational sociologists, this work can only look like a departure from the field into the realm of philosophy. But I see it differently. I see the move as fundamental for resuscitating substantive educational debates, both worldwide and in Japan itself. That is, the sociology of education implicitly relies on social theory that derived from the Western cultural experience, most prominently capitalism and dynamics of class (Marx), modernity and rationalization (Weber), and collective action and social cohesion (Durkheim). These sociological theories, in turn, derive from the philosophies of Hegel, Nietzsche, Saint-Simon, and Rousseau. These projects were responding to the historical realities of the French Revolution and The Age of Enlightenment but in a way that re-inscribed the basic grammar of the Christian thought – in secularized form, of course – onto portrayals of social realities. In the course of achieving greater mastery of Japanese and spending extended time in Japan, it became increasingly clear to me that the Western categories and logic of thought are not universal. There seems to be great potential to utilize ideas found in Japan to provide a new epistemic-ontological lens on our diverse social and educational worlds. I feel strongly that opening a discussion of this sort would not only enrich understandings of educational worldwide, but restore Japanese thought to its rightful place as an equal. I have outlined this argument more fully in a recent article entitled Borrowings, Modernity, and De-Axialization: rethinking the educational research agenda on Japan for a Global Age (Rappleye, 2017).

I am acutely aware that Stage IV may be unintelligible to many readers. Even
for those who understand, it might still be unattractive. But if we recall anthropo-
logical studies such as Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited (Tobin et. al 2009)
and the current American interest in Lesson Study (jyugyo kenkyuu, see Lewis,
2002) it may make more sense. Showing European and American readers funda-
mental differences in how Japanese classrooms are managed and Japanese in-
service teacher training, respectively, has greatly enlarged and enriched the re-
search, policy, and practice agenda of the United States (and many other
countries as well). What I am attempting to do is analogous but at the theoretical,
epistemic, and even ontological levels: demonstrate that peculiar ideas and prac-
tices found in Japan can enlarge, enrich, and perhaps even overturn the entire so-
ciological and educational research imagination. I am not clear whether research-
ers in the previous generation (1980s–1990s) failed to take this further step
because they was constrained by the methods of anthropology, because they did
not read Japanese sources, or because they gave little thought to the epistemic–
ontological dimension of their work (a particular problem with the brutally empir-
ical pretense of UK scholars). Whatever the case, it is apparent to me there have
been no serious attempts to date in the English language to move beyond detail-
ing differences in practice and engage with the underlying ideas and theories that
make those practices possible. If studies of Japanese education are to become in-
teresting again as something more than a political weapon for Western govern-
ments or mere exotica for a small coterie of Japan specialists, I think this move is
necessary.

Currently, the dominant sociological theory of the Anglo–American academy is
arguably World Culture Theory (neo–institutionalism) which argues that now Ja-
pan, like other cultures worldwide, are fundamentally the same as the West. For
me, having experienced this much, this can only appear to be an obvious case
where Western sociology has failed to recognize its implicit assumptions (for a
concise critique see Open the Social Sciences (1996), in particular pages 48–66, 76–
77). Interestingly, the more that Japanese sociologists of education unwittingly uti-
lize Western theory and ‘read’ complex empirical realities through Western socio-
logical lenses such as these, the more it reinforces the notion that there is no
differences between Japan and the West. Have we really reached the End of His-
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tory? My personal experience suggests we have not but I hope that a new generation of Japanese education scholars – be them Japanese or non-Japanese – will support me in making that case in the global arena (see critiques of World Culture Theory: Carney et. al. 2012; Rappleye, 2015). Without attention to differences, I wonder where the possibility for future learning will come from?

In this piece I have attempted to sketch how all of my work fits together, not in terms consistently tracking a particular theme but instead following the unfolding of experience. I should emphasize that nothing is ever lost; I am still interested in the Stage I dynamics of cross-cultural learning, Stage II analyses of recent policy developments, Stage III discussions of what globalization means for Japanese education and the intricacies of translation. All of my past interests combine to constitute my present research agenda. As such, I would welcome future collaborations around any of these general themes. But what undoubtedly interests me most right now is the question of how to rethink the research agenda for Japan in a global age; how to open sociology as a discipline. Without much self-reflection and work along these lines, I am afraid Japanese scholarship will continue to be a non-entity in global discussions. The previous raison d’être for understanding Japanese education – it will lead to improved practice in the home system – no longer works. Nor does it seem all that fecund when viewed from the more profound terrain of Stage IV.

References


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