As a Japanese who has lived abroad and as a comparative education researcher currently working in a teacher training institution, it has always piqued my curiosity to understand the Japanese school system from a foreigner’s viewpoint. Peter Cave’s book offers detailed insights on how Japanese schooling is managed and the responses of junior high schools to the continuous reforms occurring from the late 1990s through 2007. It draws on over a dozen years of ethnographic fieldwork and curricular research to analyze how reform discourses and policy measures played out within lower secondary education and why reforms were so radically reshaped when implemented in schools. Cave’s ethnographic study is a longitudinal and multi-sited approach, studying schools purposively chosen to enable better theoretical understanding of key issues and to explore the effects of the various reforms within Japan’s complex society. Cave’s careful analysis is evident beginning in his introduction, where he talks about the use of the term ‘culture’, a term he rarely uses in this book because of his belief that the term does not explain the ideas and practices that have become firmly established within institutions (such as junior high schools). This (and of course Cave’s other detailed, careful consideration of cultural and contextual nuances and complexities) makes this book highly reliable and enhances this study’s validity.

Cave begins by reviewing the continuous political and social debates in Japanese education. From the 1970s on, there was a high and broad consensus around meritocratic credentialism, meaning that better educational qualifications led to success and security. This led to increasing the education market, in the sense of high competition and pressure to cram as much knowledge as possible. However, this social myth started to collapse at the end of the 1990s. The discourse of ‘power to live’ (*ikiru chikara*) began, a discourse which emphasized the concept of individuality, creativity and autonomous thinking and, at the same time, social connectedness, empathy and cooperation. This shows the two sides of Japanese educational reform. One is a model of education designed to help Japan “catch up” with the West, while

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the other is an emphasis on traditional Japanese values such as omoiyari (feeling for others, compassion) and sociality. The latter in particular is now becoming inadequate in contemporary Japanese education, largely because of changing family structures. This reform is driven by factors both internal (traditional Japanese values) and external (international competition/globally-required competencies). The balance of these two tensions is a challenge for schools. As a result, one significant change was the reduction of the number of hours allocated for traditional subjects/curricular content and the introduction of a new curricular area, ‘Integrated Studies’ (sogo-teki na gakushu).

How did schools in Japan respond to this reform? How did teachers balance individuality, autonomous thinking and traditional Japanese values? Cave focuses on the concept of shudan (small groups) formulated in classrooms. Within these small groups, children feel a sense of belonging together (nakama) and teachers emphasize growing together, implying that the class should share mutual responsibility. By the time Cave conducted his fieldwork in 2007, however, this emphasis on group discipline had shifted to autonomous thinking. Teachers adapted autonomy-centered approaches for their own purposes in their integrated studies. For example, at Tachibana Junior High School, the integrated studies field trip focused largely on human development (student thinking and acting without teacher guidance) and not the intended academic aim of the integrated studies (authentic inquiry-based learning). This shows how easily teachers can reshape integrated studies, moving away from its core purpose (p.58).

Cave then focuses on the institutionalized practices that integrated students into groups within the school, such as class groups (gakkyu) and extracurricular clubs (bukatsu). These institutionalized practices sought to promote interdependence. Some teachers explicitly used these activities to develop students’ autonomy and individuality. However, Cave notes that these activities created tensions between students’ desires for individualization and teachers’ fears of losing control. Nonetheless, the fundamental approach of formulating groups to promote interdependence and responsibility remains dominant.

Cave discussed changes in the role of students and real opportunities for students to be creative. For example, between 1996 and 2007 more girls began taking leading roles in activities, showing girls’ increasing desire for independence, a response to changing family structures and social roles for women. However, these opportunities were limited by the teachers’ belief that students need educational guidance to nurture skills such as empathy and good social behavior.

Cave makes clear that even though the educational reforms and introduction of integrated studies promoted autonomy, individuality, and creativity, in practice, schools and teachers were given more curricular freedom, thus reshaping the original purpose of the reform. The main reshaping and ‘appropriating’ of the reform was formulating groups (e.g. class groups, field trips, sports day, cultural festival and choral contests) and giving students space to show their creative or decision-making abilities. Fundamentally, these groups were controlled by teachers. Cave asserts that there is no monolithic concept of “group” across the schools studied, and that teachers emphasized discipline of students as individuals living in a shudan (group) or preparation for a happy shudan seikatsu (group life). The individualization in learning and assessment at junior high school, culminating in high school entrance exams, led only to a limited kind of autonomy for children.

Overall, this book shows that individuality and autonomy is stressed and nurtured within
the sphere (or structure) of group activities in school controlled by teachers. This book is essential for educators researching or seeking to understand contemporary Japanese education and society, and for all those seeking to deeply understand the educational, social and cultural ‘complexity’ in Japan.

Now, more than 10 years after 2007, Japanese schools are facing another major reform, the ‘university entrance examination reform’. Calling for new 21st century skills, this is also affecting the next curriculum guidelines (gakushu shido yoryo), which will be introduced from 2020. The focus is ‘Autonomous, Communicative and Deep Learning’ (shutai teki, taiwateki de fukai manabi), which simultaneously stresses greater autonomy in students and co-operative learning in groups. Will schools and teachers change their practice, or will they re-shape the reform again as this book indicates? How will Japanese education progress in the next 10 years? These are questions that interest scholars, and I am looking forward to reading how Cave will continue this investigation.