What Can We Learn by Studying School Curricular Reform in Japan?

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First, I would like to congratulate the Japanese Society for Educational Sociology on the publication of issue 100 of its journal, which is an essential forum for research in this field. I am honoured to be invited to contribute.

My main research focus has been on school education in Japan. I have tended to situate my research in the field of social anthropology, in which discipline I took my doctorate. However, I agree with Ernest Gellner that there is no significant intellectual distinction between social anthropology and sociology. Moreover, I believe in using conceptual and methodological tools depending on their value, not their disciplinary origin. I have written ethnographic studies of elementary and junior high education in contemporary Japan (Cave 2007, 2016), as well as shorter studies about club activities (Cave 2004) and history education (Cave 2003, 2005, 2013), among others. In the last few years, I have been conducting research about childhood and education before and during the Asia-Pacific War, including oral history interviews. The results are starting to be published, and we are developing a bilingual website in English and Japanese, which we hope will be a useful resource for school and university students who are studying this period (http://www.japanese-childhood.manchester.ac.uk/ja/home-jp/).

In my two books about elementary and junior high school education in Japan, one central focus was the educational reforms that took place between about 1989 and 2007, centred on the revisions of the elementary and junior high school curricula in 1989 and 1998. As I understand them, a central aim of these reforms was to encourage children to think and learn for themselves. This aim was made

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particularly clear in the curriculum for Integrated Studies (sōgō-teki na gakushū) when it was published in 1998. Related ideas were expressed over the two decades from 1989, using various terms, such as “the new view of academic attainment” (atarashii gakuryokukan) centred on children’s interests and motivation, and “increased individuality” (kosei jūshi).

I was interested in these reforms for several reasons. One was because of how they might relate to debates about selfhood in Japan. During the postwar period, many scholars had written about what they saw as the inclination of people in Japan to be group-oriented or mutually dependent. Many had also seen these inclinations as being developed in part through the Japanese education system, with its many group activities. There had also been major debates about autonomy or its lack in Japan. Given this context, I wondered how the reforms would affect school practices. Would they result in major changes? Would they indicate that Japanese society as a whole was changing significantly?

I was also interested in the reforms because I thought they presented exciting opportunities for schools. To be frank, I think that it is good for children to think and learn for themselves. I wondered whether teachers might help them to do so, and if so, how.

Through my ethnographic research, I found that the reforms only resulted in limited changes at the schools I studied. There were several reasons for this. One was that the reforms themselves had multiple aims. Although the promotion of children’s autonomous thinking and learning was a central aim, a second important aim was to strengthen children’s ability to relate to others, socially and emotionally. This second aim was closely related to existing goals and practices that had developed over several decades at Japanese elementary and junior high schools. Effectively, it was encouraging schools to do more of what they were already doing. In contrast, promoting autonomous thinking and learning required much more innovation by schools, especially junior high schools. Therefore, this goal was not only harder to achieve, but was also potentially more threatening to existing practices. It was not so surprising that schools tended to be more enthusiastic about reform goals that fitted with their existing practices and preoccupations, and were also easier to achieve.
This led to a second reason why the reforms only resulted in limited changes. Schools tended to adapt the reforms to serve their own goals. The aim of strengthening children's social and emotional relationships was enthusiastically embraced, and curricular innovations such as Integrated Studies were adapted to serve this aim. On the other hand, much less effort was put into encouraging children to think and learn for themselves.

However, this was not the whole story of the reforms. I also found that the elementary schools I studied were much more welcoming of the reforms than were the junior high schools. Why was this? The evidence suggested several reasons. Perhaps most importantly, the reforms were in tune with many existing ideas and practices at the elementary schools. Many elementary teachers were keen not only to strengthen children's social and emotional relationships, but also to encourage them to think and learn for themselves. Some junior high school teachers were also keen on this second goal. However, as a whole, junior high schools as institutions were very strongly oriented to the promotion of strong social relationships and good order. Order was a central preoccupation of junior high teachers, much more than of elementary teachers. This was easy to understand, because order was much more likely to be threatened by children at junior high schools. For junior high teachers, good social relationships among students were not only beneficial in themselves, they also helped to ensure order. In contrast, it was hard to see how encouraging autonomous thinking and learning could contribute to order, but easy to see how it might result in disagreement, fragmentation, and ultimately disorder.

Furthermore, junior high teachers' time and energies were absorbed by established activities, such as club activities (bukatsudō), class activities, and various kinds of student guidance (seito shidō, seikatsu shidō, shinro shidō). Most of these were very important for students' social relationships and for integrating them into the school. They left teachers with relatively little of the time and energy they needed if they were to make a success of reforms such as Integrated Studies. It also seemed to me that teachers were much more enthusiastic about such established activities than about the innovations demanded by reforms such as Integrated Studies. Although teachers were short of time, they seemed to prefer...
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to spend their limited time in supervising club activities – even at weekends – than in developing innovative learning activities.

I found the concept of institutionalization useful for explaining how educational reform was received and dealt with in schools. The power of institutionalized structures, practices and beliefs to impede or shape change has been widely recognised in recent years (see, for example, Powell and DiMaggio 1991). In studies of Japan, it has been used to explain persistence in areas such as politics (Krauss and Pekkanen 2010) and business (Keizer 2010). By using the concept of institutionalization, I was able to explain how educational reforms could result in different degrees of change at different institutions (elementary and junior high schools) within Japan. The concept also helps to explain how change can take place more readily in newly formed institutions, or in more weakly institutionalized settings. It avoids many problems that occur if the concept of “culture” is used. “Culture” is all too easily reified and thought of as a monolithic “thing” separate from other “cultures”. Though anthropologists generally argue that “culture” should not be used to think in this way, in practice this is very hard to avoid. In contrast, “institutionalization” is much more likely to be understood as a stage in a process; nor does the concept imply the kind of bounded entity implicit in the notion of “culture”.

Another key term that I found useful was “discourse”, by which I mean coherent ways of talking and thinking about a subject. I have used this to discuss what I understand as a variety of discourses of selfhood in Japan – ways of talking and thinking about the self. These include a discourse of the interdependent self (dependent on and caught up in obligations to others), as well as other discourses, including self-reliance, individual desire, personal integrity, individuality, and autonomy. Like the concept of institutionalization, the concept of discourse makes it easier to analyze and recognize diversity within a society. It also makes it easier to understand how conflict and change can occur. I argue that in Japan there is a variety of discourses of the self, not just one notion of the self. These various discourses can to some extent be combined and reconciled in different ways, but they also leave plenty of room for disagreement and conflict. In turn, this diversi-
ty and disagreement enables change. Looking at things in this way frees us from unhelpful notions that Japanese “culture” is a holistic entity, highly resistant to change. Instead, we can see that societies always have institutionalizing forces that impede change, but they also always possess internal diversity and thus the potential for change.

In *Schooling Selves*, I made a distinction between autonomy and individualization. I used “individualization” in the manner of Ulrich Beck, to mean decreasing dependence on others; this could either be out of choice, or else willy-nilly, due to weakening social structures and social support. I argued that increased individualization did not necessarily mean more autonomy (self-determination); in fact, it could well mean less autonomy, since autonomy could only be realised with the help and support of others. I suggested that although “groupism” in Japanese schools and society had often been considered hostile to autonomy, this need not be the case. What was important was the kind of group that was developed. The main purposes of some types of groups and group activities were to control individuals and maintain order; I referred to this kind of group by the term *shūdan*. These groups were less likely to encourage individual autonomy. However, the main purpose of other types of groups was the mutual support of the individuals who composed the groups; I referred to this kind of group by the term *nakama*. The kind of supportive environment that such groups provided was important in helping individuals develop autonomy. In contrast, stripping away social support (individualization) made it harder for individual autonomy to develop. Thus, Japanese schools do not need to abandon group activities in order to help children develop autonomy. What matters is what kind of groups and group activities they put in place.

Since the 2008 revision of the school curriculum to increase hours for conventional academic subjects, debates about what and how children should learn in school seem to have become much less widespread and intense. However, I believe that we can learn a lot from studying how the curricular reforms of the 1990s and 2000s were received and transformed in schools. In particular, we see
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the power of institutions to transform and blunt policy initiatives. I hope that in future, we can see more research about the conditions that enable successful and beneficial reform.

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