

Is Japanese education the “exception”? examining the situated articulation of neo-liberalism through the analysis of policy keywords

Keita Takayama*

School of Education, University of New England, New South Wales, Australia

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This article builds on the author's earlier work, published in Vol. 28 No. 1 of this journal, that critiqued the Orientalist legacy in Anglo-American discussions of Japanese education. One of the manifestations of this legacy is the prevailing view among the Anglo-American observers of Japanese education that Japanese education is the “exception” to the recent global restructuring movement. This article problematizes this view by exposing a similar but differently articulated structural change in Japanese education over the past three decades. Drawing on cultural studies and critical discourse analysis, the author focuses on the two policy keywords that the Ministry of Education has consistently used by for the past three decades: *kosei* (individuality) and *yutori* (low pressure). Tracing the complex histories of articulation and rearticulation of these policy keywords, the author demonstrates how the keywords, which had been associated with progressive political struggles against the Ministry's central control of public education, were mobilized to reconstitute people's common sense about education and thus to naturalize the radical systemic change towards the neo-liberal, post-welfare settlement. In conclusion, the author discusses the implication of the study to the field of comparative and international education, calling for a more critical, reflexive engagement with the field's preoccupation with “national differences”.

Keywords: neo-liberalism; Orientalism; policy keywords; cultural politics; critical discourse analysis; Japanese education reform

Is Japanese education the exception?

Neo-liberalism has become the dominant ideology in the educational restructuring of many advanced capitalist nations. Under economic pressure to subordinate social policies to capital's needs for global economic competition, advanced industrial nations adopted public choice theory, or the New Public Management, as the guiding principle of state restructuring (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Harvey, 2005; Jessop, 2002). Reflecting this larger state reconfiguration of which education “reform” is a part, educational discussions have been dominated by the neo-liberal language of choice, devolution, competition and accountability, regardless of the differences in the types of welfare state regimes (Aro, Rinne, & Kivirauma, 2002; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). In Britain and the United States, where neo-liberalism appeared as early as the 1980s, critics reported that these changes had eroded democratic local school control and culture as well as teachers' professional autonomy over curriculum and pedagogy, and further exacerbated existing achievement gaps based on social class and “race” (Apple, 2001; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Tomlinson, 2005; Valenzuela, 2005).

*Email: ktakayam@une.edu.au

While there is consensus that the restructuring of public education driven by economic rationalism is a global phenomenon (Ball, 1998; Dale, 2005; Whitty et al., 1998), Anglo-American observers of Japanese education have consistently downplayed the similar, systemic reorganization of Japanese education. In the late 1990s, Andy Green (1997), while discussing the increasing shift towards market solutions in Anglo-American nations, argued that neo-liberalism did not have much appeal in East Asian nations (like Japan), which had effective centrally controlled education systems. In his words, “It is only governments in the grip of blind dogma who will ignore this and opt for the undiluted free-market policies of countries like the USA, whose school standards are among the lowest in the OECD” (p. 25). Green featured the “exceptional” Japanese case to critique globalization theorists who uncritically endorsed the global dissemination of a market approach to education and post-modernists who saw choice and market in education as “an inevitable concomitant of the changing cultural configurations of modern societies” (p. 22). While the critique is important, his discussion of Japanese education is problematic because, as I will show in this paper, a market approach to education reform was proposed by Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone’s Ad-hoc Council of Education Reform in the mid-1980s and thereafter gained increasing popular and government support.

The view of Japanese education as the “exception” to the global trend continues to permeate recent writings by other leading Anglo-American observers of Japanese education. Peter Cave argues:

It is certainly tempting to see Japanese educational reform in the 1990s as a belated imitation of neoliberal/neoconservative reforms elsewhere, an example of systemic convergence driven by common ideologies and economic imperatives . . . In Japan, on the other hand, there has so far been no systematic move towards the introduction of a quasi-market system, while assessment has if anything been moving away from standardisation. Not institutional reform but curricular reform has been central . . . Japan’s leading politicians and bureaucrats seem reluctant to embark on reforms which might seem to violate the post-war profession of equal educational opportunity for all. (2001, p. 187)

Hence, Cave concludes elsewhere that “the worries of some on the Japanese Left about burgeoning neo-liberalism and a move away from egalitarianism in education seems somehow exaggerated” (2003, p. 96). Other experts of Japanese education (e.g., Aspinall, 2001; Cummings, 2003; Hood, 2001, 2003; Shimahara, 1997) also echo Cave’s generally optimistic assessment of the ongoing education reform, which began in the mid-1980s, perceiving it as moving “in opposite directions” from their Anglo-American counterparts (e.g., Shimahara, 1997, p. 99; see also Takayama, 2008). These observers either entirely ignore or dismiss as “exaggerated” the serious concerns expressed by Japanese scholars about the remarkably similar structural “reform” of Japanese education (see Fujita, 1997; Gotō & Watanabe, 1997; Komikawa, 2000; Ninomiya, 1999; Sanuki, 2003; Satō, 1999; Watanabe, 1988; see also Nitta, 2008). In the mind of these Anglo-American observers, therefore, Japanese education remains the exception to the global phenomenon because, as Joseph Tobin (1986) aptly put it, they presume that “there is something strange going on in Japan that needs explaining, something perhaps good, perhaps bad, but definitely strange” (p. 265).

This omission reflects the problematic approaches that have been dominant in the Western scholarship of Japanese education. First, the field has been dominated by the depoliticized analysis of teaching, learning, curriculum and policy that often uncritically accepts the “official” narrative (Horio, 1988, p. vii; Nozaki, Openshaw, & Luke, 2005; Platzer, 1988). Drawing on the holistic, consensus-oriented view of Japanese society that dominates Anglo-American scholarly writings (Mouer & Sugimoto, 1986),

the field has likewise overemphasized the “consensus” and “harmony” in Japanese education. In so doing, it has long dismissed the voices of Japanese progressive activists and critical scholars who seem too “biased” to these observers, many of whom claim to be politically “neutral” (see, e.g., Aspinall, 2001; Hood, 2001). Second, closely related to the first point, few Anglo-American observers of Japanese education use the critical theoretical paradigm that addresses social conflict and issues of power relations in educational studies. Compromised by institutional parochialism – “making existing education systems, institutions and practices in isolation the dominant focus of their analyses” (Dale, 2005, p. 134) – their studies often fail to situate the discussion of education reform within the general projects and ideologies of contemporary social policy and the changing mode of state governance (see Ball, 1997; Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997). Third, Western scholarship of Japanese education is plagued by the Orientalist legacy: the prevailing perception of Japanese education as the exotic and exceptional “other” (Nozaki, Openshaw, & Luke, 2005; Tobin, 1986, 1999). In my earlier work (Takayama, 2008), I demonstrated how the Orientalist dichotomy has long shaped the Anglo-American discussion of Japanese education, constructing “Japanese education” as the quintessential “other” upon which Anglo-American observers displaced their fears, hopes and contradictions about their own education systems.

Building on my earlier critique of the Anglo-American scholarship of Japanese education, this paper continues to problematize the dominant discourse of Japanese education sustained by these problematic approaches. I argue that these approaches have blinded many Anglo-American observers of Japanese education about the particular articulation of neo-liberalism in the Japanese education context from the 1990s onwards. I conceptualize neo-liberalism as part of what Antonio Nôvoa calls “planet-speak” – “international discourses that seem to exist without structural roots or social locations” (as cited in Lindblad & Popkewtiz, 2004, p. xvii). It floats as a sliding signifier above particular locations and structural roots and is inserted into different localized discourses, to come to assume varied connotations that reflect the specific cultural tradition, state-civil society-economy relationship, and political struggle in the locality. As Thomas Popkewitz rightly points out, “neoliberalism may appear the same in name, but its cultural points of reference involve a hybridity as new assemblages and connections are made in educational policies of reform” (2004, p. x). This attention to the situated articulation of neo-liberalism – how the global discourse becomes rearticulated in a specific national context and infiltrates into its educational system (Anderson-Levitt, 2003) – is conspicuously absent in the current scholarly debate on Japanese education reform both inside and outside Japan.

To this aim, I draw on critical studies of education that examined the role of conservative cultural politics in the reconstitution of people’s commonsense about public education (e.g., Apple, 2001; Ball, 1990; Dale, 1989; Kenway, 1990). Stephen Ball’s (1990) and Jane Kenway’s (1990) discussions of “discourse of derision”, for instance, capture how the British and Australian New Right forged the dominant discursive condition where issues of democracy and equality, the primary concerns of the post-war social-democratic educational settlement, were rendered no longer legitimate educational policy concerns. Likewise, Michael Apple (2001) demonstrates how the powerful conservative political alliances among neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, authoritarian populists and middle-class technocrats drove the ongoing “reform” of US public education. Just as in the UK context, argues Apple, conservative cultural politics played a central role in the series of drastic structural changes of US education since the 1983 *A nation at risk* report (see also Smith, 2004). These critical scholars illuminate

the centrality of cultural politics in disarticulating and rearticulating people's concerns, fears and aspirations in times of social and economic instability to bring them under the rightist leadership.

To expose the similar conservative cultural politics in Japanese education's neo-liberal turn, I trace the shifting articulation and rearticulation of two education policy keywords that the Ministry of Education (MOE) has consistently used for the past three decades: *kosei* (individuality) and *yutori* (low pressure, more room for growth). The MOE mobilized these keywords to legitimize a plethora of curricular and systemic changes throughout the 1990s, including constructivist curricular reform, streamlining of curricular contents and schooling, administrative decentralization, and quasi-market measures such as school choice and market competition. The aforementioned Anglo-American observers of Japanese education positively assessed these changes (e.g., Aspinall, 2001; Cave, 2001, 2003; Cummings, 2003; Hood, 2001, 2003), failing to recognize how the economic rationalist ideology infiltrated many of these proposed changes, just as in their respective nations' education systems. Drawing on cultural and critical discourse studies, I demonstrate how the Ministry disarticulated these keywords, both of which had reflected the people's genuine concerns about the state of the nation's education at one point in history, from the original discourses, and then rearticulated them to naturalize the radical neo-liberal institutional change in Japanese education. In particular, I examine these policy keywords in three policy documents: (1) a series of reports from Prime Minister Nakasone's Ad-hoc Council for Education Reform in the mid-1980s (Rinkyōshin, 1988); (2) the 1997 Central Council of Education's report, *Education for the 21st century* (hereafter, the 1997 CCE report); and (3) the 1998 Curriculum Council's report on proposed changes to the 2002 national Study Course (hereafter, the 1998 CC report).¹

I chose these reports for critical analysis because, as the subsequent discussions shall show, they were issued at crucial moments of change that had significant implications for the course of Japanese education policy. Thus, they are best suited for this paper's purpose, to demonstrate the MOE's creative strategies in rearticulating *kosei* and *yutori* in order to naturalize the radical systemic change towards the post-welfare educational settlement. The findings cast in serious question the Anglo-American experts' "commonsense" observation that Japanese education is the exception to the global structural shift in education. In conclusion, I discuss the implication of the study for the field of comparative and international education, calling for a more critical, reflexive engagement with the colonial preoccupation with "national differences" (Ninnes & Burnett, 2004).

Keyword politics

In examining the ideological and discursive roles of *kosei* and *yutori* over the past 30 years of Japanese education reform discourse, I take a critical discourse approach to the analysis of education policy. This approach situates the analysis of policy keywords within a broader structural analysis, examining the dialectically and mutually constituted relationship between policy text, language, and larger social relations of power (Taylor, 1997; Taylor et al., 1997). Drawing on Michel Foucault's works on the knowledge/power nexus, this approach perceives policies as part of the discursive strategy to produce truth, setting limits on "what can be said and thought . . . [and] who can speak, when, and where and with what authority" (Ball, 1994, p. 21). Keywords in particular play powerful discursive roles in the cultural struggles over truth. Building upon Raymond Williams's (1985) cultural-materialist analysis of keywords, Fraser and Gordon's (1994) genealogical analysis of "dependency" in the US welfare policy shows that particular words and expressions can become the focal point of cultural struggles

and crucial sites at which the meaning of social experience is constantly negotiated and contested (p. 310). Multiple social groups struggle to articulate, disarticulate and rearticulate policy keywords to limit their meanings to those that suit their interests and to naturalize such meanings (Hall, 1985).

When appropriated in official policy, keywords become “multi-accentual” (Hall, 1981), meaning that they encompass multiple and sometimes contradictory aims for different discursive communities. Official policy represents the settlement among competing political interests, including the state’s own (Taylor et al., 1997). As neo-Marxist analysis of the state has demonstrated, the state has to perform two insoluble functions: capital accumulation and political legitimacy (Offe & Keane, 1985); and, as part of the state ideological apparatus, education is central to the state’s project of addressing these contradictory demands (Dale, 1989). On one hand, the state relies heavily on education systems to assist in the process of capital accumulation. The state reforms school systems to respond to capital’s shifting labour, technical and fiscal needs. On the other hand, the state uses education to address its political legitimacy issue. The state relies on education to naturalize the inevitable consequence of capitalism, the unequal distribution of wealth, by rendering existing disparities a consequence of individual merits (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In so doing, education legitimizes the state’s complicity in the perpetuation of the capitalist regime. Furthermore, education needs to legitimize itself to win the people’s continued support for its existence (Apple & Weis, 1983; Steiner-Khamsi, 2000). Representing the state’s official discourse, wherein the state sutures together these often-contradictory demands to generate “the collective will”, keywords in education policy become multi-accentual, serving to speak to divergent values and interests of multiple publics.

Furthermore, keywords are inherently historical, meaning that they carry with them a set of historically constituted meanings and cultural assumptions that are born out of power dynamics over different time periods (Apple, 2001; Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Williams, 1985). In the present time, meanings and assumptions of a given keyword are deeply embedded in the hopes, despairs and idealism of those who participated in past struggles and movements. Powerful social groups have a long history of utilizing the residual meanings of keywords historically associated with counter-hegemonic movements, by disarticulating them from the original political discourses and rearticulating them in a hegemonic discourse (Pedroni & Apple, 2005). Only by tracing their shifting meanings, therefore, can one identify a set of historically situated residual meanings of keywords, through which dominant groups invite people to assume particular subject positions from which the dominant groups’ worldviews seems “natural”.

Lastly, a theoretical discussion on the cultural politics of keywords is incomplete without due consideration of the material conditions that make certain discursive practices ideologically effective. This insight comes from Michael Apple’s (1989, 2000, 2001) consistent plea that “people are not duped”. Keywords become ideologically effective only when they are carefully employed to speak to people’s genuine feelings of anxiety, despair, hope and aspiration. People are not simply manipulated to consent to policies that are likely to benefit those in power. They consent to a policy only when they see an element of good sense in the proposal. Hence, critical education policy studies such as the present study must situate their discursive analysis within the specific material conditions that generate people’s hopes, dreams and frustrations about the state of schools. Then they must explain how dominant groups work on people’s genuine feelings and appropriate discursive practices to channel their feelings into support for the dominant groups’ proposed policies. As will be discussed in further detail, in the case of Japanese

education's shift towards the quasi-market, post-welfare settlement, the legitimacy crisis of post-war education and the rise of "educational" problems from the late 1970s onwards have made the discursive practices around *kosei* and *yutori* ideologically effective thereafter. Hence, before presenting the critical discourse analysis of *kosei* and *yutori*, I analyze the material conditions of the late 1970s surrounding the state education, in which the subsequent analysis of the keywords shall be situated.

Legitimacy crisis of post-war Japanese schooling

Kosei and *yutori* emerged from the legitimacy crisis of Japanese schooling and the people's rising frustration with the state of education in the late 1970s and the 1980s. This was when many "school-related pathological" problems (*gakkō byōri/kyōiku byōri*) such as youth violence, high school drop-outs, bullying, and suicide as a result of bullying appeared in the domestic discussion on education. Critics of divergent ideologies singled out the central causes of these problems: rote memorization, knowledge-cramming of curricular content, intense academic competition, and *hensachi kyōiku* or teaching practices that judge students by test-score standard deviation curves. They criticized teachers, schools, and the education system as a whole for failing to develop students' intrinsic learning motivation as well as for making school life extremely stressful (Ichikawa, 2002, p. 38; Iwaki, 2005, p. 96).

The emergence of these "educational" problems indicated the legitimacy crisis of post-war schooling (Satō, 1999, 2000).² Following the devastation of World War II, Japan achieved rapid economic growth in a "compressed" manner through the central state's directive to closely align the education system with industries' shifting labour needs. Underlying this national project was an extremely instrumental view of schooling that subordinated education to the nation's economic needs. By guaranteeing equal educational access and upward social mobility through rapid expansion of the school system, argues Satō, Japan succeeded in linking people's desire for upward social mobility to the nations' modernization and industrialization projects. This mechanism, maintains Satō, succeeded in producing a highly educated and skilled labour pool, and thus enabled these nations to quickly catch up with Western advanced industrial nations.³

This "developmentalist" (Castells, 1992) approach to education continued to enjoy political legitimacy as long as the high economic growth allowed people upward economic mobility. In fact, during this compressed modernization period of the 1960s, academic competition was intense and stressful, but students perceived it with a sense of optimism because success in this "meritocratic" competition promised them upward social mobility and future security (Hirota, 1999). The Japanese state expanded its public school system to accommodate the increasing demands for higher educational credentials, thus making post-compulsory learning accessible to the general population.⁴ Furthermore, the state expanded secondary and post-secondary education in response to the industries' demands for an increasing well-educated and well-trained labour force. The percentage of youngsters advancing to high school rapidly increased from 58% in 1960 to 90% in 1974, and to colleges from 10% to 38% (Kudomi, 1993, p. 22). These drastic expansions of secondary and post-secondary education helped keep the level of academic competition less intense. Hence, the rapid economic growth, along with the increased accessibility to secondary and post-secondary educational institutions, enabled people to experience upward mobility, despite the fact that the relational advantage and disadvantage remained largely determined by social class (Kariya, 1995, p. 193). Up until the Oil Crisis in the mid-1970s, the public shared the general optimism that anybody could become middle

class through hard work and diligence in school, and the developmentalist approach to education enjoyed the consent of the governed.

In the mid-1970s, schools gradually started losing their legitimacy as the key mechanism for upward social mobility and as the enlightening agency. Satō (1999, 2000) argues that public support for this modernist vision of schools remained strong till the mid- or late 1970s, by which time school systems had reached enrolment capacity.⁵ After this point, social class stratification had been firmly established, and school systems no longer served as a mechanism for individual upward mobilization. The legitimacy crisis of modernist schooling was further exacerbated by the mid-1970s economic stagnation triggered by the Oil Crisis. Competition for employment in large, established corporations intensified as the payment disparity between large corporations and small businesses widened in the post-Oil-Crisis period. This created intense academic competition to enter prestigious universities, the graduation from which would guarantee one's access to positions in corporate conglomerates (Kudomi, 1993). Furthermore, the MOE prevented further expansion of post-compulsory education during the economic recession and ensured that the advancement rates to high schools would stay at around mid-90% and to colleges at around 30%. These factors, along with a large number of baby boomers entering into post-compulsory education at the time, made academic competition extremely fierce (Kudomi, 1993, p. 38). This adversely affected the rate of advancement for college students of lower socio-economic status (Kariya, 2001), shattering public confidence in schooling as a passage for upward mobility. At the same time, the public started criticizing post-war schooling, which was premised upon the MOE's central directives and its institutional uniformity, for being repressive, inflexible, and unable to cater to students' specific needs and interests (Hirota, 1999).

Language of humanizing salvation: *kosei* and *yutori*

Against this declining legitimacy of the post-war schooling, *kosei* and *yutori* became the features of the MOE's education policy. The term *yutori* was used for the first time in official documents in the 1976 Curriculum Council (CC) report. The report proposed: 1) the development of rich humanity in children; 2) school life with more fulfilment and *yutori*; 3) solid academic foundations as a citizen and individualized education that responds to individual differences (*kosei*) and abilities (Iwaki, 2005, p. 96). The 1976 CC report resulted in the 1977 revision of the elementary and junior high school national Study Course, wherein the total annual class hours were reduced for many grades, from 1,190 to 1,050 hours for grades 7, 8 and 9, and from 1,085 to 1,015 hours for grades 5 and 6. The 1978 revision to the high school national Study Course also reduced the graduate requirement from 85 to 80 credits and introduced flexible course requirements such as integrated learning hours for 10th graders and ability grouping (Iwaki, 2005, p. 98). The MOE claimed that it introduced these measures to create more *yutori* in students' lives and to individualize instruction (thus developing and responding to students' *kosei*). With these changes, the MOE attempted to re-establish schools' legitimacy by making schooling more humane and more responsive to children's diverse needs (Kikuchi, 1998, p. 191).

Not only did the MOE emphasize *kosei* and *yutori*, it also appropriated these terms from progressive camps. The Japan Teachers Union (JTU), the long-time political adversary of the MOE, featured *yutori* in its 1977 Curriculum Reform Proposal, and *kosei* was a common keyword that they had used to articulate their progressive pedagogical beliefs and to challenge the Ministry's subordination of education to the nation's

economic and nationalistic interests.⁶ Hence, by the late 1970s, both the MOE and its political adversary came to share a similar diagnosis of the problems with Japanese schooling, both proposing the “humanizing” approach to education reform, as epitomized in their unanimous call for *kosei* and *yutori*.

Neo-liberal rearticulation of *kosei* in the 1980s

To disarticulate a keyword that is more or less associated with progressive movements and rearticulate it into a hegemonic discourse necessitates a great deal of creative ideological and discursive work (Gandin & Apple, 2003). The creative work on *kosei* occurred when Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone (1983–1987), a well-known nationalist and economic liberalist, set up the Ad-hoc Council for Education Reform (*Rinkyōshin*).⁷ Often compared to Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in his aggressive privatization of public services and his nationalistic ideology, Nakasone handpicked the council members, mostly made up of conservative, nationalistic intellectuals and economic liberalists (Ōuchi, 2003). Nakasone’s Ad-hoc Council was rather unique because, unlike other councils on education, it was set up outside the jurisdiction of the MOE, which was wary of his motive to reduce the Ministry’s size and influence (Hood, 2001; Schoppa, 1991). By creating his private education council independent of the MOE, Nakasone attempted to circumvent the Ministry’s opposition to the proposed privatization and liberalization.

Nakasone’s private council issued four reports during the period 1984–1987. These reports constructed a particular policy context that legitimized their proposed reform proposals. The four reports marked a clear break from the past governmental reports in their diagnosis of the problems with Japanese education. The reports claimed that Japan had completed the period of rapid modernization and its catching-up stage vis-à-vis Western advanced industrial nations. Now that Japan had achieved material wealth as an economic powerhouse, continued the reports, it was about to enter the “maturity stage” where “people would pursue spiritual over material wellness, quality over quantity, software over hardware, and diversity and more freedom of choice over uniformity and homogeneity” (Rinkyōshin, 1988, p. 271). The reports also emphasized the dehumanizing consequences of scientific and industrial developments and their underlying philosophy of modern rationalism, which dehumanized life, depleted the natural environment and rich human interaction, and eroded human compassion (pp. 272–273). Hence, these reports called for humanizing schooling and for moving beyond the modernist pursuit of economic growth and an instrumentalist vision of schooling.

In addition, the reports presented a particularly dismal depiction of youths, which served as the crucial policy context for the proposed “humanizing” reforms in education. They discussed typical symptoms of a mature society, which they called “pathological problems in education”, such as bullying, suicide, school refusal, delinquency, and youth violence both at home and at school. As a result of living in a technologically advanced and materially fulfilling society, maintained the reports, children were experiencing deterioration of abilities inherent to human survival, immaturity, and extended periods of moratorium. The reports cited other mental and psychological problems of youths such as “declines in independent spirit, self-control, patience, responsibility, human connection, compassion, appreciation, respect for ancestors, debt to nature and supernatural beings, and religiosity” (Rinkyōshin, 1988, p. 51). This pathologizing description of youths continues to manifest itself in all the governmental reports to this day. Hence, Nakasone’s council set out a particular discursive context that effectively gave political legitimacy to *kosei* and *yutori* as policy keywords thereafter.

The Ad-hoc Council's reform recommendations demonstrated the ideological tensions among the members of Nakasone's private council and within the dominant power bloc at the time. While emphasizing choice, diversification and responsibility (self-reliance), they also used the neo-nationalist language of Japaneseness, morality and patriotism (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999). Economic liberalists such as Kenichi Kayama, one of Nakasone's economists and a member of the Ad-hoc Council, proposed a theory of liberalization, criticizing the uniformity and egalitarianism of post-war Japanese education (Ōuchi, 2003). His theory pit consumers (students and parents) against service providers (the JTU and the MOE), which he criticized for turning education into an ideological battleground and consequently for neglecting to respond to students' needs. To return education to parents (the consumers), Kayama called for expanded parental choice, deregulation, and privatization of public schools. His liberalization theory was not immediately put into policy due to opposition from the MOE and traditional conservative politicians closely aligned with the Ministry, who instead proposed strengthening the Ministry's central control over the teachers and curriculum and of moral-based education (Ōuchi, 2003; Schoppa, 1991). Nonetheless, Kayama's liberalization theory opened up a discursive space, hitherto unexplored in Japanese politics of education, from which a new vision of education could be articulated. Destabilizing the conventional political gridlock between the MOE and the ruling conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) politicians on one hand and the JTU and the Japan Socialist Party on the other, Kayama's liberalization theory, framed in the humanizing language of *kosei* and *yutori*, appealed to the public, including progressive camps who had struggled for professional autonomy from the Ministry's bureaucratic control.

The series of reports from Nakasone's private council initiated the disarticulation of *kosei* from the traditional progressive discourse and its rearticulation into the neo-liberal discourse (Fujita, 2005, pp. 188–189). The term is literally abused in these reports, extolled as the solution to “the deeply-rooted deficiencies of our nation's education” (Rinkyōshin, 1988, p. 12). The reports explained that post-war Japanese education had long failed to promote freedom, individual dignity and individuality (*kosei*), and had created a system afflicted with uniformity, excessive formal equality, inability to identify and develop individual ability and aptitude, intense entrance exam competition, and *hensachi kyōiku* (education that judges children by test score standard deviation and that prioritizes memorization of facts over creativity, independent thinking, and self-expression) (pp. 274–275). The reports claimed that post-war education's excessive emphasis on equality had resulted in uniformity in Japanese education and in its failure to provide differentiated education to students of different abilities (p. 61). Here, *kosei* was equated with abilities and aptitudes and appropriated to legitimize pedagogical practices (ability grouping) and institutional changes (elimination of school zonings) that would erode the egalitarian principle of post-war Japanese education. This rearticulation of *kosei* marked a clear break from its earlier progressive articulation, where the term was used to refer to individual students' differences in interests (rather than abilities) and to criticize the MOE's uniform imposition of rules and regulations on schools and the test-driven pedagogical practices (Fujita, 2005).

Furthermore, the Ad-hoc Council's reports used *kosei* to denote a moralistic notion of the individual that reflected the political rationale of neo-liberalism. After scandalizing post-war Japanese education for its inability to promote “individuality, and principles of freedom, self-help, and responsibility” (p.12), the reports provided the following discussion on freedom and responsibility:

Freedom differs from self-indulgence, disorder, irresponsibility, and non-discipline. Freedom comes with self-responsibility. Those in society with increased freedom of choice enjoy freedom, while they have to be capable of bearing the weight of freedom, the increased responsibility. (p. 12)

The reports went on to say that “only those who fully understand one’s own *kosei*, who are willing to develop it, and who assume full responsibility for oneself, can respect and advance others’ *kosei*” (p. 12). Such a discourse on freedom and responsibility reflects the new political rationale of the neo-liberal state, where risk is no longer socially managed through the state social securities, where individuals are to calculate and manage potential future risks in their own education, employment and welfare, and where the acceptance of personal responsibility has become a practice of “freedom” from state intervention. In the move towards the neo-liberal vision of the “small” and efficient state where anything social is diminished, the production of self-governing individuals is the focus of intense state intervention (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999). *Kosei* came to embody what it means to be a self-governing individual who accepts educational and social responsibilities that are no longer performed by the state.

While *kosei* was increasingly rearticulated within the neo-liberal discourse of choice, freedom and responsibility, the term still maintained its original progressive connotations. The Nakasone council’s insistence on quality over quantity and individuality, creativity and independent thinking over uniformity, rote memorization and cramming echoed the real concerns of the people and progressive teachers who had long opposed the MOE’s bureaucratic control of and paternalistic intervention in education. Hence, it is not that the new neo-liberal discourse *replaced* the old progressive discourse, but that *kosei* became multi-accentual. While *kosei* continued to speak of the intrinsic value of children’s individuality and their inalienable right to education as defined in the original progressive discourse, the MOE increasingly used the term to rearticulate people’s genuine concerns about public education in support of the neo-liberal rationales for the state withdrawing and for ability-based, multi-track provision of education that prioritizes educating select elites over education for all.

Underlying this unusual suturing of neo-liberal and traditional progressive discourses is the particular history of political struggles in Japanese education. The Japanese progressives’ struggle has centred on defending and substantiating the liberal-democratic values of the 1947 Fundamental Law of Education (FLE), which conservative LDP politicians viewed as a “US imposition” and thus as a symbol of Japan’s war defeat and emasculation (Horio & Yamazumi, 1976; Schoppa, 1991). Progressives fought to protect the law, drawing heavily on the liberal, constitutional notion of individual rights to education as defined in clear opposition to the state’s subordination of education to its economic and nationalistic needs. This progressive tradition resulted from critical reflection on the wartime state abuse of education (Horio, 1988). The imperial state used schooling as its primary ideological apparatus to inculcate in children ultra-nationalism, leading to the destruction and massacre both inside and outside Japan. Building on their resolution not to repeat history, post-war progressives relied on the constitutional base of the FLE to protect children’s individuality, their right to education, and teachers’ professional autonomy from the state’s abuse of power, as seen in landmark court battles between the MOE and progressive activists over national teacher assessment (1958), national achievement testing (1976), and state textbook censorship (1965, 1967, 1984, and 1997) (see Horio, 1988; Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999).

This history of political struggles created the binary opposition between the state and individuals in the legal and constitutional articulations of progressive values

(Saito & Imai, 2004). This binary, along with the progressives' inability to advance the notion of a "public" that integrates the private and the state spheres (Ichikawa, 2006), provided the discursive condition for the unusual fusion of progressive and neo-liberal discourses, as seen in the Nakasone council's reports. The council's insistence on a more "liberating" and "humane" education addressed the real concerns of the people and progressive activists who had challenged the MOE's assault on teachers' professionalism and schools' democratic possibilities. Nakasone's council tapped into the existing despairs and frustrations of the progressives and the common people about the rigidity and uniformity of the state-controlled education. This ability to "work on popular sentiments, to reorganize genuine feelings, and in the process to win adherents" (Apple, 1989, p. 5) enabled the shift from the social democratic, welfarist settlement towards the quasi-market, post-welfare settlement of education.

Neo-liberal rearticulation of *yutori* in the 1990s

While the humanizing language of *kosei* and *yutori* continued to be featured in a series of MOE policy documents in the 1990s, the latter term became the keyword of the decade. The 1997 Central Council of Education (CCE) report (*Education for the 21st Century*) proposed education reform that would give children *yutori* and "zest for living" (*ikiru chikara*), a new addition to the ongoing humanizing theme (CCE, 1997).⁸ In the following year, the Curriculum Council issued a report based on the 1997 CCE report and detailed proposed changes to the national Study Course to be implemented in 2002, known as "*yutori* education reform". Featuring *yutori* much more prominently than in the Nakasone council's reports, these reports continued to perpetuate the kind of dismal descriptions of youths' physical, mental and scholastic states that Nakasone's council had begun. The 1997 CCE report claimed that children were devoid of *yutori*: "Today children spend too much time for school, homework, and cram schools [*juku*] that they chronically lack sleep" (CCE, 1997). The report also highlighted declines in the social experience, morality, discipline and physical abilities of today's youths. Once again, the supposed pathological state of youths provided the policy context that made "humanizing" interventions seem natural. Based on the 1997 CCE report, the 1998 CC report proposed the introduction of the following changes to the national Study Course: 1) 30% curricular content reduction and greater concentration on minimum essentials; 2) comprehensive 5-day schooling;⁹ 3) Integrated Learning Hours (*sōgō gakushū no jikan*);¹⁰ and 4) 6-year integrated middle schools (CC, 1998). The report extensively used *kosei* and *yutori* either to describe or to justify these new changes, thus framing them as "humanizing" interventions to develop children's intrinsic learning motivation and creativity and to foster their sound emotional and physical developments.

Like *kosei*, *yutori* became a multi-accentual signifier. While the proposed changes to the national Study Course reflected progressive pedagogic demands for child-centred teaching and more humane schooling (Cave, 2001; Shiomi & Iwakawa, 2001), they simultaneously addressed the neo-liberal demands for institutional changes in education. Situating these proposed changes in the larger transformation of the state restructuring at that time further clarifies the increasing rearticulation of *yutori* into the neo-liberal discourse.

In the mid-1990s, the Japanese economy was still deeply mired in the prolonged economic recession triggered by the "bubble burst" in the early 1990s. Faced with a domestic recession as well as the intensification of global economic competition, corporate sectors started pressuring the state to reduce public spending, deregulate state-controlled public

services, and “reform” tax systems to give tax breaks to corporations and the rich (Gotō, 2002; Gotō & Watanabe, 1997). Corporate sectors became increasingly vocal about the nation’s education reform as well. In 1995, the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (*Nihon keizai dōyūkai*) proposed a new concept of schools called “*gakkō*”, literally translated as “combined schools”, consisting of three kinds of classrooms: “basic classroom”, “free classroom” and “experience classroom”. In this new concept, the MOE was responsible for running the “basic classrooms”, where students were to learn three basic subjects: language, logical thinking, and Japanese identity. The other two classrooms, “free classroom” and “experience classroom”, were to be privatized. “Free classrooms” referred to the private provision of integrated learning opportunities for natural sciences, social sciences and the arts. “Experience classrooms” were to provide students with learning opportunities in local communities through volunteer activities.

According to this proposal, the over-involvement of schools in children’s education had stifled their creativity and individuality. Hence, argued the report, enriching children’s growth and learning would necessitate streamlining public schools through the devolution of educational authority to parents and local communities (Japan Association of Corporate Executives, 1995). The report extensively used humanizing language such as “individualized”, “freedom”, “enriching” and “relaxing” in discussing the positive changes that were to be generated by the proposed changes. They effectively masked the political aims behind the proposal, the fact that it embodied the neo-liberal vision of ideal schooling, where the state’s financial and administrative withdrawal from public education is compensated for by the active involvement of private educational industries, parents and local communities. The full implementation of 5-day schooling and streamlining curricular contents, proposed in the 1998 CC report under the banner of *yutori* reform, clearly reflected this corporate sectors’ streamlining initiative (Fujita, 2005; Komikawa, 2000; Ōuchi, 2003). Hence, while *yutori* continued to echo with the progressive demands for a humane learning environment and a child-centred pedagogy, the MOE increasingly used *yutori* to rearticulate people’s genuine concerns about children’s emotional, physical and scholastic well-being in support of the neo-liberal privatization of the social reproduction cost, a centrepiece of neo-liberal cultural politics (Duggan, 2003).

Lastly, the 1998 CC report introduced the controversial 6-year integrated middle schools, which critics argued would turn the egalitarian single-track education system into a multi-track one more suited to producing select elites at the expense of quality education for all (Fujita, 1997, 2005; Komikawa, 2000; Sanuki, 2003; Satō, 1999, 2000). According to the 1997 CCE and 1998 CC reports, students who attend 6-year integrated middle schools are relieved of the pressure from high school entrance examinations, thus enjoying more *yutori* in their school life. In addition, the extended period of time that students and teachers spend together allows teachers to individualize instruction and thus nurture students’ *kosei*. The humanizing salvation theme was amply evoked by the use of *kosei* and *yutori* to legitimize this radical institutional change.

Once again, the other face of this policy change appears when situated in what Stephen Ball (1997) calls “the generic quality of reform” (p. 27) – the general projects and ideologies of social policy and the shift in the mode of state governance at that time. In 1995, the Japan Business Association (*Nikkeiren*) issued a report entitled *Japanese management style in the new era*, which marked a radical shift in corporate human resource strategies (Komikawa, 2000). The report categorized employees into three groups differentiated in terms of contract term, job description, salary scale and benefits. Extensive corporate welfare provisions (e.g., lifetime employment, incremental salary scale, and housing and health care), the cornerstone of the Japanese post-war social integration system (Watanabe, 1991), were now

preserved only for the first group, the “long-term core group”, which constitutes about 30% of the labour force. The other two groups, the “highly technical group” and “flexible employment group”, are limited term contract labourers: the former refers to those with highly technical expertise and professional knowledge, whose salary follows the performance-based annual salary scale; the latter refers to general part-time workers whose salary is provided on an hourly basis. Under this new human resource strategy, the large pool of the highly educated labour force, which had been the backbone of Japan’s post-war economy, came to be perceived as inflating domestic labour costs (Ōuchi, 2003). Hence, in addition to demanding for the reduction of public spending on education, corporate sectors intensified their political pressure on the state to implement a multi-track education system, wherein more resources would be invested in educating select elites. The introduction of the controversial 6-year integrated middle schools partly reflected this larger shift in the corporate human resource strategy.

Throughout the 1990s, therefore, corporate sectors and the MOE extensively used *kosei* and, more prominently, *yutori* to justify the new education reform initiatives, framing them as strategies to “liberate” children from the bureaucratic rigidity and uniformity that had long deprived children of more humane and individualized learning experiences. In so doing, they redirected people’s genuine feelings about the state of education into the political drive towards the quasi-market, post-welfare settlement where equality and democracy were no longer legitimate educational concerns; and education, parents and schools were redefined as a private commodity, consumers and service providers, respectively. Multi-accentual *kosei* and *yutori* helped the MOE address the insoluble demands for capital accumulation and democratic legitimacy, an increasingly challenging task under the neo-liberal doctrine that subordinated social policies to corporate economic needs (Harvey, 2005). These multi-accentual keywords enabled the Ministry to speak simultaneously to the concerns of radically different social and political groups, and thus sustain the consent of the governed for its educational leadership. Hence, while the MOE’s consistent emphasis on *kosei* and *yutori* for the last two decades makes recent Japanese education reform seemingly contrastive to its Anglo-American counterparts, the deconstruction of *kosei* and *yutori* has exposed how Japan’s education system has recently invested deeply in similar neo-liberal ideologies. This challenges the prevailing perception that Japanese education is moving opposite of the trends in Anglo-American education among the aforementioned Anglo-American observers, and is thus the “exception” to the global restructuring movement (see also Takayama, 2008).

Towards critical, reflexive comparative and international education

Drawing on critical discourse analysis and cultural studies, I have traced the shifting meanings of *kosei* and *yutori* in the MOE’s official policy documents over the past three decades. These keywords, which emerged out of the legitimacy crisis of public education and were connected with the history of progressive social movements in education, were increasingly appropriated in official policy documents from the 1980s onwards. In the 1980s and 1990s, progressive movements challenging the MOE’s subordination of public education to its nationalistic and economic needs were noticeably intermingled with the neo-liberal language of individuality, choice, diversification, and freedom from state control. In the mid-1990s, the MOE faced increasing neo-liberal pressures to reduce its bureaucratic operations and, in response, gradually started endorsing some elements of the neo-liberal reforms, which it had vehemently opposed when Nakasone’s Ad-hoc Council made the same liberalization

proposal a decade before. The MOE mobilized *kosei* and *yutori* as the primary policy keywords to address the conflicting demands of responding to the private sectors' mounting pressure for reducing public spending and creating differentiated educational access and outcomes on one hand, and of maintaining its own political legitimacy to the public on the other. The state withdrawal from public education was presented as "humanizing children's learning experience" and as their "liberation" from the bureaucratic inflexibility and uniformity that had by then been rendered the sole villain causing all the "educational" problems. This creative rearticulation of *kosei* and *yutori* effectively narrowed the discursive space from which progressives could forge alternative oppositional discourses that challenged both the state's abuse of power in education and the neo-liberal rhetoric of freedom, choice and individuality.

Paralleling findings from scholars in other Anglo-American nations (e.g., Apple, 2001; Ball, 1990; Dale, 1989; Kenway, 1990), this study has demonstrated how cultural politics serves to prepare the discursive ground for radical neo-liberal structural changes in public education. Particularly salient in the specific rearticulation of neo-liberalism in Japanese education was its history of political struggles. Japanese progressive forces have traditionally drawn upon the liberal, constitutional notion of individual rights to education, defined in clear opposition to the state's subordination of education to its economic and nationalistic needs. This historically constituted binary politics created a discursive space for the creative suturing of neo-liberal and progressive discourses, embodied in the multi-accentual signifiers *kosei* and *yutori*. This study has shown how the global discourse of neo-liberalism has become rearticulated and re-contextualized in a manner that reflects the particular history of political contestations in Japanese education.

Finally, the study has showcased a critically oriented approach to comparative and international studies of education that challenges the Orientalist legacy in the field. The "commonsense" perception that Japanese education is "exceptional" compared to the global restructuring movement derives from the uncritical acceptance of the official use of humanizing keywords as solely representing shifts towards more local control and a progressive pedagogic ethos. The critical deconstruction of these keywords problematized this observation, illuminating the MOE's strategic rearticulation of these keywords to pursue a remarkably similar neo-liberal restructuring – albeit differentially articulated – as witnessed in many other advanced capitalist nations. Unfortunately, this perspective has been excluded from the discussion of Japanese education due to the field's preoccupation with the exceptionality and uniqueness of Japanese education against which particular conceptions of "our education" have been tacitly asserted and naturalized.

The implication of this study goes far beyond the study of Japanese education, given that the Orientalist paradigm is deeply embedded in the field of comparative and international education (Dale, 2005; Ninnis & Burnett, 2004; Nozaki, Openshaw, & Luke, 2005). When a similar economic rationalist discourse not only travels around the world but also creates similar structural changes that have deteriorating consequences on educational equities and democratic potentials of public education, we must move beyond the unreflexive discussion of national differences. Instead, we must shift our focus to what is "similar and yet different" (Carlgren & Klette, 2008, p. 121): the nationally and locally specific articulations of the common neo-liberal structural changes, their consequences on egalitarian and democratic foundations of public education, and strategies to protect and further strengthen them. The comparative discussions of these matters should provide much-needed knowledge for progressive counter-strategies in different nations, opening up possibilities for international collaborations among those who struggle towards more equitable educational systems.

Notes

1. Both the CCE and the CC are deliberative bodies established within the MOE. Their members are handpicked by the Ministry, and thus these councils tend to reflect the Ministry's general interests.
2. I place quotation marks around "educational" problems because this expression, common in Japanese media, tends to erase the social and structural origins of the problems.
3. This point must be understood along with the US and Japanese governments' massive economic investments in the latter's private industries throughout Japan's post-war rebuilding processes (Johnson, 2004, p. 177).
4. In Japan, compulsory education ends with junior high school, up to Grade 9.
5. In the late 1970s, Japan achieved a high school enrolment rate of over 90% among children aged between 16 and 18 (Satō, 2000).
6. *Kosei* is one of the most overused terms in the history of Japanese education. Though it has been used by Japanese progressives to challenge the MOE's abuse of power in education, it has also been appropriated by human capitalists who use the term as a euphemism for ability differences. They called for fostering students' *kosei* to justify differentiated provision of education on the basis of students' abilities (e.g., multi-tracked school system and ability grouping).
7. The council was disbanded in 1987 after compiling four reports. The council was "an extension of Nakasone" that "put forward proposals that were consistent with his own ideologies" (Hood, 2001, p. 1).
8. In this report, *yutori* appeared 52 times, while *kosei* appeared 53 times.
9. The implementation of 5-day schooling was incremental. It was partially introduced in 1992 when schooling was reduced from 6 days per week to 5 days once a month. Then, in 1995, it was reduced to 5-day schooling every other week.
10. Integrated Learning Hours is designed to cross subject boundaries in order to encourage child-initiated, inquiry-based and discovery-based learning (Curriculum Council, 1998).

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