CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521622522 - Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity
Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya
Excerpt
More information

CHAPTER 1

Analytical Frameworks: Schooling and Society

The purpose of this brief chapter is to present you with some of the major theoretical frameworks that are currently being, or have been, applied in research on schooling and society, which we hope will enhance your understanding of Japanese schooling. Drawing on developments in the sociology of education, we will appraise the relative merits of such theories in relation to the study of Japanese schooling, while reviewing the major existing studies in English and Japanese. We begin by briefly examining some of the general properties of a theory: what it is and is not, how it can be used to extend our knowledge of a given research topic or subject area, and some of the pitfalls of theoretical analysis.

General Properties of a Sociological Theory

The notion of a theory is not exclusively the property of academic research. A theory is, simply stated, a way of seeing and knowing the world around us. It consists of a set of assumptions and concepts, which together may constitute a grand theory, a medium-range theory or a theory about a specific event. All theories (even grand theories) are, by their nature, tentative, and remain hypotheses to be refuted, modified and refined. That is to say, when a proposed hypothesis is refuted, it is modified to some degree, and the modified version of the hypothesis is presented as a new hypothesis to be tested again. This process of 'knowing' occurs both in academic research and in our daily lives (in particular, when one enters a new environment). Since it is an arbitrary matter to determine at which precise stage of this process a casual interpretation of events or observations becomes a so-called hypothesis, we will refer to 'theories' in their broadest sense (all of which are tentative).

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521622522 - Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity
Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya
Excerpt
More information

The theories that people form about a particular event or situation are often based on assumptions of their own, which they may have taken for granted, or even be completely unaware of. For example, consider the common observation by outsiders that Japanese primary school classroom teachers give relatively few directions to the children in their charge. An observer who is interested in Confucianism may form a theory that Japanese school children do not require their teacher to provide them with constant direction because they have internalised the Confucian ideal of learning. Another observer, who has studied teacher–pupil interactions at a Japanese nursery school, may say that Japanese children are more secure as a result of very intimate relationships with their teachers, who encourage a nurturing environment for learning. Having formed such theories, people often happily leave a situation without actively seeking to further test and refine them through a deliberate process of conjecture and refutation. Consequently some 'theories' are naturally more valid and helpful than others in explaining an aspect of the world or a particular phenomenon. Our understanding of Japanese schooling is subject to change, since further research will bring new insights. The practice of Japanese schooling is also inevitably impacted by change.

Why use sociological theories here? Even without them, you could learn about, and form a particular understanding of, Japanese schooling by reading factual information, life histories, ethnographies, media reports and so forth. Such an understanding would inevitably be influenced by your taken-for-granted assumptions, which might derive from, for example, what you have previously read, experiences with Japanese exchange students or teachers, or from what you may have heard about Japanese children. This is because when you perceive an event or phenomenon, your perception and interpretation (which often occur simultaneously) are bound to be screened by your existing theory (a set of assumptions). Having a knowledge of several representative theories about education and society (sociological theories), which we present below, will keep you conscious of your own theories in relation to other ways of perceiving Japanese schooling, by encouraging you to interpret it from multiple perspectives.

There are downsides to theories as well. The contrastive set of theories about schooling and society (consensus and conflict theories) that we present below is exaggerated and polar. These theories are highly abstract constructs developed in line with Western traditional logic, and present us with a neat depiction of schooling and society. Sceptics would argue that such neat pictures are the creations of academics removed from the microlevel practice of schooling. What we intend to do in this book is not merely to impose a neat (and simplistic) picture onto what is in reality complex and elusive, by drawing on these theories, but to emphasise the complex processes and realities of Japanese schooling and

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521622522 - Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity
Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya
Excerpt
More information

society. The theoretical frameworks presented in this chapter are meant to help our understanding by offering us signposts.

English-language Studies of Japanese Schooling

To date, most studies available in the English language have discussed Japan's modern schooling in terms of its contribution to the country's modernisation and economic development. Among them are seven books that cover Japanese education in general (Beauchamp 1978, 1991; Kobayashi 1976; Leestma et al. 1987; Lynn 1988; Simmons 1990; White 1987). The West has been informed that schooling during the Meiji modernisation and in the post-war period was particularly effective. The education system has raised the population's literacy and numeracy, transmitted modern skills and knowledge, provided equal opportunity of education, conducted meritocratic selection of the nation's young people, and allocated them to appropriate places in the adult society. The popular focus on schooling's role in modernisation and economic development derives, at least partly, from the West's preoccupation with understanding the unprecedented 'success' of Japan's modernisation. Western academics and policy makers have also been interested in Japan's modern schooling because it appears to offer long-awaited 'evidence' that schools have the potential to transform a society, rather than preserve the existing social relations.

The Four Roles

We see four major direct roles in which schools provide for young people. Modern schools perform these roles simultaneously, but each of them receives varying priorities at different points in time, according to the people involved. Different groups of students are affected in different ways, as we shall discuss in the following chapters. At the national policy level, priorities have shifted over the years. Interest groups assert their views on where priorities should lie. Teachers do not always agree on the nationally set priorities. Individual schools may have priorities different from the national ones, in order to meet particular needs of the local student population. Certain educational roles affect the lives of young people from specific backgrounds more than others, as in, for example, the case of girls not obtaining the same benefit as boys from 'merit-based' selection.

Transmission of Knowledge

First, schools transmit 'useful' knowledge to children. Children acquire basic literacy and numeracy, knowledge and skills, which assist them in

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521622522 - Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity
Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya
Excerpt
More information

fulfilling their potential and in becoming adult members of the society. Studies have argued that Japanese schools have been successful in promoting such cognitive development. Literacy and numeracy rates are claimed to be higher in Japan than anywhere else (e.g. Duke 1986:60). High average achievement and low variation in Japanese children's performance in international mathematics and science achievement surveys are often quoted to demonstrate high cognitive development among Japanese children, and the reasons for such 'success' have been sought (Cummings 1980, 1982:17–25; Lynn 1988:121–44; Simmons and Wade 1988; Duke 1986). It has been claimed that a highly educated population has contributed to the high quality of the workforce. Others have argued that vocational preparation is effectively conducted in the schooling system, noting that the breadth of technological overview given to students at vocational high schools provides the flexible foundation upon which to build when they receive specific training from employers; and that Japanese five-year technical colleges (*kōtō senmongakkō*) and vocational high schools produce 10–20 times as many technicians per head of the workforce as the education system in the UK (Prais 1987:50).

Socialisation and Acculturation

Second, schools socialise and acculturate children for the adult Japanese world, both through explicit instructions and by means of a 'hidden curriculum'. The routine process of schooling and the interaction between teachers and students instil particular values and behavioural dispositions that are deemed desirable by the dominant society. A particular view of the way the society operates is also learned. At the most basic level, children learn to follow the set school routine with punctuality, and to maintain cooperative relationships with peers. By the end of schooling, students will have learnt that selection to higher schools is based on 'merit' and is therefore 'fair'; that equal opportunity of education enables everyone who works hard to achieve their goals; and, by implication, that those who fail at school and beyond have only themselves to blame. This message of 'fair' schools for everyone is also present in other advanced societies.

The socialisation of young children in families has been studied in psychological research, which showed how Japanese families socialise infants and young children from birth. Several comparative studies of Japan and the US, based on experimental methods, observations and interviews, revealed differences in the internal dynamics of Japanese and American families, and, in particular, the ways in which young children are reared before their entry into preschool educational institutions (Chen and Miyake 1986; Hess et al. 1986). Of particular note is Azuma's assertion

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521622522 - Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity
Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya
Excerpt
More information

(1986:6–8) that Japanese mothers' indulgent devotion to their children socialises young children into *amae* (dependency) relationships, in which the children internalise their mothers' wishes for them, and consequently are susceptible to being educated in the ways the mothers want.

In regard to socialisation within educational institutions, the authors of studies such as those quoted below have focused on what are considered to be 'uniquely Japanese' features, and have sought explanations of such features in terms of 'Japanese culture and traditions'. There are others who disagree with such culturalist explanations and insist on social–institutional explanations. In this view, the education system 'developed in tandem with the labour market practice', and the school, students and parents respond rationally to the education–labour market link to maximise their own interest (Brinton 1993:221). Both groups argue that schools effectively prepare youth for the adult society, which requires of its members such values and dispositions.

The socialisation of Japanese children has been studied at nursery school and kindergarten levels (Tobin et al. 1987; Hendry 1986; Peak 1991), primary level (Lewis 1988; Cummings 1980; Duke 1986), secondary level (Rohlen 1983; Shimahara 1979; Okano 1993), post-secondary level (Tsukada 1991) and in general (White 1987). Classroom management encourages students to be loyal to groups, and to persevere through hardships to achieve goals (Duke 1986). Emphasis on activities in small heterogeneous ability groups promotes cooperation and understanding (Duke 1986; Tsuneyoshi 1994). The notorious competitive examination for entry into university can be understood as a preparation for the adult world, a 'rite of passage', in that it teaches young people to develop self-discipline and defer gratification (Shimahara 1979). Such dispositions, it is claimed, make Japanese young people desirable employees, and contribute to the high productivity and efficiency of the economy. They also create law-abiding citizens. While many of these studies tend to examine Japanese students as a whole, emphasising common socialisation features, close observation would suggest that students' socialisation experiences are highly influenced by peer groups and/or subcultures that they construct and continuously reconstruct, a point that we will shortly take up.

Selection and Differentiation

Third, schooling selects young people based on their academic achievement, and prepares them for 'appropriate' positions in the workforce and in society generally; for instance, identifying some for leadership positions and others for subordinate positions. The well-publicised competitive nature of the university entrance examination exemplifies

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521622522 - Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity
Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya
Excerpt
More information

this selection function of Japanese schools. Some argue that the selection is based on 'objective' merits (Shimahara 1979; Cummings 1980). More recently, others have argued against such a view, contending that students' academic achievement is significantly related to their family backgrounds, and that family-derived privileges have come to advantage the child to a greater extent in the last two decades (Rohlen 1983; Brinton 1993; Okano 1993).

Legitimation of Knowledge

Fourth, schools legitimate what they teach to students simply by teaching it. By transmitting a certain collection of knowledge to students as the school curriculum, schools legitimate that version of knowledge as 'true' and 'neutral'. The Japanese government's textbook screening system is one of the most overt examples of this process. More subtle forms of knowledge legitimation also exist. By socialising and acculturating students, schools legitimate particular sets of dispositions that are considered to be desirable (such as perseverance), a particular world view, and a system of values, as being universally virtuous, 'correct' and equally valuable for everyone. As will be discussed shortly, disagreement exists as to whether what schools teach is indeed based on consensus and works equally well for everyone.

Multiple Interpretations of Schooling and Society

Modern schools perform the four roles simultaneously: transmitting cognitive knowledge, socialising and acculturating, selecting and differentiating young people, and legitimating what they teach. This simultaneous operation of the four functions can be interpreted in divergent ways. Consensus theories and conflict theories provide a contrastive (and therefore exaggerated, but nonetheless useful) set of assumptions and ways to observe schooling. Let us introduce the two in turn.

Structuralist Interpretations: Consensus and Conflict Theories

Consensus Theories

Consensus theories stress the relative stability and harmonious nature of Japanese society. This stability is explained in terms of 'consensus', that is, shared norms and values in the society. For instance, consensus theorists claim that across diverse social groups, a relative consensus exists that education is necessary for one's adult life; and that schooling offers all children an opportunity to move up the social ladder if they are

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521622522 - Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity
Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya
Excerpt
More information

willing to work hard. These theories originate from a structural–functionalist view of the society. Such a view assumes that society consists of parts, each of which contributes to the overall societal structure; and is interested in each part's function in maintaining the whole. For example, a small suburban community is made up of such parts as retail shops, garbage collectors, church groups, children's play groups, elderly people, meals-on-wheels, an unemployed youth group that does voluntary gardening, and a primary school; and each of them plays a role in maintaining the healthy operation of the community.

Although 'problems' may sometimes occur, because some parts do not function properly, or because individuals fail to accept the social norms and become 'deviant' due to poor socialisation, consensus theories assume that the society can recover its healthy operation through 'appropriate adjustments'. In the case of the small suburban community, imagine that the community's garbage has not recently been cleared because the system simply cannot cope with the increased amounts of rubbish produced by a growing population. The community may solve this problem by employing unemployed youth on a temporary basis until a more permanent arrangement is established by the community council.

Consider also the case where some children develop school phobia. One would explain that these children fail to develop self-esteem and interpersonal skills in an overtly competitive environment. The delinquent behaviour of some children might be attributed to their socialisation in a family headed by an alcoholic father. To resolve these 'problems' the school might try to create a more caring environment. Children from 'problematic' families could be sent to institutional care.

Consensus theories do not rule out the existence of conflict or disagreement. Some members of the society may disagree, but there is a consensus as to the rules and procedures to be applied when such disagreement occurs. For instance, in order to overcome disagreement as to how to manage school phobia, a committee might be set up to investigate the phenomenon and to report its findings to the public. There might also be conflict in the form of competition, but competition increases efficiency and satisfaction, and provides an arena where aggressions can legitimately be displayed.

Seen in this view, schools are performing the four important functions in order to maintain the present state of social relations, or, as in Japan in the late 1940s, to develop a renewed society as agreed on by members of the society. Schools provide children with the knowledge required for membership of adult society and of the workforce. They socialise young people to fit into adult Japanese society, instilling 'appropriate' social values, and assisting in forming 'appropriate' social identities in children from different social backgrounds. Schools identify the talents of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521622522 - Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity
Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya
Excerpt
More information

children, and prepare them to fulfil 'appropriate' roles in adult society and to accept their allocation (e.g. to professional or to subordinate roles). This supposedly leads to a 'match' of talents and positions, with, for instance, the most 'talented' being channelled into the most 'important' positions. There is believed to be a consensus as to what constitutes 'appropriate' social identities, values and roles, and what are the most 'talented' and 'important' positions, a point that conflict theories challenge. The success or otherwise of these educational functions is mainly seen in terms of economic performance (productivity, economic growth, income distribution), and the modernisation process, at both the personal and the societal level.

Conflict Theories

In contrast, conflict theories, which are based on various versions of Marxist approaches, understand Japanese society quite differently. The society is considered to be *temporarily* stable because of a 'consensus' in which many of the society's members accept certain norms and values, although these norms and values operate not in the interest of the majority but only for the benefit of small groups of the powerful. This consensus is called the *ideology*. The presence of this ideology conceals the fact that social relations are based on 'domination' rather than on harmony, and hides from the society's members the real nature of social stability, which exploits, and is contrary to the interests of, the majority. The economic base is seen to play a pivotal role in the maintenance of the social structure: the structure of production in the economy systematically differentiates individuals' access to resources and opportunities. The existing social relations are preserved, it is argued, as a result of the penetration of the dominant ideology through all levels of society. When those who are exploited accept the ideology that marginalises them, they are said to be living in 'false consciousness'. Some conflict theories interpret the entire process as a deliberate control of people by the state (e.g. Horio 1988; Yamazumi 1987; Miliband 1969), while others argue that the control is not a conspiracy but a consequence of overall structural forces inherent in capitalist society (Althusser 1971). The former interpretation has been dominant amongst union teachers and academics in education in Japan.

Conflict theories acknowledge the presence of stability and consensus, but differ radically from the consensus theories in their understanding of the nature of such consensus and social stability. They question whether a prevailing consensus is in fact serving the interests of all members of society, and ask how such a consensus is maintained despite the fact that it brings little benefit to the majority.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521622522 - Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity
Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya
Excerpt
More information

Schooling, in the view of conflict theorists, socialises children to accept the dominant ideology. First, schools teach a version of knowledge, values and world view (often that held by the dominant groups) as if they were 'true' and 'universal'. Consider the controversial school history book that described Japan's actions in Asia during the Second World War as an 'advance' and the 'liberation of Asia from Western colonialism', as opposed to an 'invasion' and the 'exploitation of Asia'. Second, schools recognise and reward certain types of 'ability' in children, conduct differentiation based on what the schools define as 'merits', and prepare some for leadership or professional positions and others for subordinate positions in the adult society. Imagine two girls named Aya and Kimi. Aya, self-assured, outgoing and articulate, has excelled in reading and writing since she was small. The school recognises Aya's high level of language skills, encourages her development by providing extra reading materials and encouragement, and recommends that she pursue a legal career that would utilise her valued abilities. On the other hand, Kimi is a self-effacing and compassionate girl, who loves and is good at making things with her hands, such as craft work, sewing and cooking (which some would call 'soft' options or non-academic subjects). Kimi chooses a domestic science course at a vocational high school, which the school happily endorses. It may not be a coincidence that Aya comes from a family where both parents are tertiary-educated professionals, who have created an environment that promotes Aya's interest in academic subjects. Kimi may have lacked such an influence.

The schools thus make people believe that the selection of young people is 'fair' since it is based on individual achievement and schools provide equal opportunities to everybody. As a result, they legitimate existing inequalities in such a way that the powerful maintain, and even enhance, their resources and power. Their enhanced power is, in return, utilised through various institutions to legitimate the powerful's position. To conflict theorists, schooling is a key process that preserves both the dominant ideology and inequality across generations.

The consensus and conflict theories correspond to the often contrastive interpretations by the Japanese Ministry of Education (MOE) and the major teachers' union of policies and events in post-war education, as Chapter 2 will reveal. The union and intellectuals on the political left interpreted many of the government's initiatives to 'adjust' schooling to the perceived needs of the society, as deliberate measures to 'control' the practice of schooling to satisfy the government's aims, with damaging consequences for the human development of pupils and to what they saw as democratic ideals. Many of the government's reform proposals in the 1980s and 1990s faced similar criticisms from the left (as discussed in Chapter 6). The two contrastive theories attach different

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521622522 - Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity
Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya
Excerpt
More information

significance to the differences in educational experiences of divergent social groups (to be examined in Chapters 3 and 4). A teacher's adoption of either a consensus or a conflict theory approach in relation to educational practice is likely to shape his or her professional career; the balance of the two within a school is likely to affect the culture of teaching, as shown in Chapter 5.

Adding Interactionist Interpretations: Macroscopic and Microscopic Understandings

The consensus and conflict theories are similar in that both focus on social structure and the part that schools play in that structure. Both see structural forces and the needs of the society as directly determining what occurs in schools and, in turn, regard what schools do as contributing to the maintenance of the existing society. That is to say, both see schools as effectively doing what they are meant to: either preparing children for a harmonious adult society through meritocratic selection (consensus theories), or instilling the dominant ideology in children so that they accept a society based on domination (conflict theories). In this regard, both theories adopt a particular version of the structuralist approach.

While these theories present very neat pictures of schooling and society, closer observation would show that schools have not been as successful in implementing their assigned tasks as their proponents would have us believe. Schools have also done other things, which are not expected in either theory. For example, even strict consensus theorists would acknowledge that the most talented are not always in positions where they can make optimal use of their talent for the society's good. In reality, what schools do and the outcomes of schooling are more diverse than either type of theory make us believe. The relations among schools, families and society are more complex, problematic, and even unpredictable.

The process of schooling involves various participants: teachers, school administrators, students and their families. None of them are passive role players who stringently follow what the state (or the powerful) prescribes that they do. The premise of *interactionist* approaches (Woods 1983) is that individual participants make their own sense of a particular event and act on their own accord. Students, teachers, parents and others are active in attaching particular meaning to an event, and in creating their own experience. Participants' actions are naturally constrained by external factors, and the extent of these constraints is not fixed but depends on the circumstances surrounding an event. The significance to be attached to the power of external constraints is open to disagreement, depending on one's theoretical stance.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org