

An Inclusive Learning Environment

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The paper published by NILOA entitled, *Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment* began with a telling observation by Dr. Geneva Gay, (2011), who remarked that solely modifying teaching and assessment practices cannot solve the challenges faced by “minoritized” students. Such students are found across systemic levels and scenarios, ranging from elementary to postsecondary contexts. For younger learners, we connect our work with extant studies on student transitions (as found in the work of Bostock and Wood, 2015), and more generally to studies on outcome-equity and resilience among students from economically and culturally disadvantaged students (Clark, 2014). More specifically, we respond to the paper with a concise discussion about the key process of creative-integration in the Japanese context, and how such processes may drive outcome equity for all learners. Creative-integration entails the selection and adaptation of concepts “borrowed” from global cultures, and their adoption into local systems in order to drive improvements. In this case, new classroom methods may foster equitable and stable inter-relationships that sustain on-task assessment-interactions towards mutually agreed (or socially constructed) task completion.

This kind of creative process is seen in the work of the world renowned ‘Kyoto School’ - “a genuine school of mutually related yet independent thinkers” (Stanford University, 2014, s.2.2, para.3) - based in Japan’s ancient capital of Kyoto city. The purpose of the Kyoto School (1913-) is to integrate creatively those selected elements of global-policy into Japanese systems by authoring philosophies, “far too original to be straightforwardly equated with pre-existing thought” (Stanford University, 2014, s.1, para.3). The case for reciprocal policy-borrowing is made (implicitly) by the Paris-based, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development ([OECD], 2005; 2010; 2016). The OECD reported that Japan’s cultural traditions problematize social-relationships, and therefore, learning-interactions in helpful ways: cultivate consensus; make student-learning visible to teachers and peers; motivate emotionally vulnerable children to participate in interactive-assessment dialogue; and raise performance generally, particularly in STEM disciplines. It is in this regard that the Japanese school-system may provide some useful information for those at the policy level, for teachers engaged in school-system level CoPs (e.g., lesson-study groups), and at the individual level, Donald Schön’s (1987) much idealised “reflective practitioner”. There are lessons to be learned from the work of teachers in school-systems that are applicable to postsecondary education.

Equity Response

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The central and distinguishing thesis of social and cultural perspectives on outcome equity is that public-school classrooms are culturally biased environments, and may reinforce outcome inequalities which create a widening achievement gap (Collins, 2009; see, Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Such environments disaffect children who arrive at school from the economic or cultural margin. In comparison, Japanese cultural-values establish and sustain legitimate partnerships (*kankei*) for the purpose of supporting learning and minimizing the outcome inequities experienced by students from conditions of social adversity. To integrate new methods into ‘western’ contexts may require a very challenging process of cultural transformation (Black, 2005; Black & Wiliam, 2006; Inoue, 2010; Inoue et al., 2016). For example, in the UK, Cambridge University’s Neil Mercer (2000) suggests that classrooms should be organized for inclusive-assessment and -learning based on the understanding that children develop when they participate actively in a community, or network of *interthinkers* (see Vygotsky, 1978). However, it is also important to see inter-subjectivity as more than an exclusively “intellectual” version of events. Rather than a purely cognitive process, the notion of inter-subjectivity also includes motivational and inter-affective states (Clark & Dumas, 2015), experienced as a range of feelings from anxiety to excitement, depending on the quality of the interaction. This nexus of reason and emotion (in ancient Pali language: ‘*citta*’) is fundamental to Japanese Buddhism. It is therefore, the basic integration that should take place in ‘western’ classrooms in order to realize learning-cultures that facilitate outcome equity (OECD, 2016).

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The transformation of Japanese classroom methods into an overall ‘westernized’ model for inclusive learning becomes a more realizable objective when it is considered as a three-part model, with each ‘environment’ containing some aspect of the other: 1) a dialogic environment; 2) a process-goal environment; 3) a culturally responsive environment.

A dialogic environment

Equitable learning environments provide support for marginalized children by inviting them to participate in thoughtful and respectful dialogue. At the school and classroom level, it is the neglected potential of whole-group interaction (the Japanese idea of the ‘collective student’) that provides the most obvious opportunity for participation. In ‘western’ contexts, the typical public school classroom presents numerous constraints in the form of large class sizes, and limited time allocated to the delivery of prescribed topics. The consequence is to favour the use of ‘time-efficient’ teacher-fronted methods of instruction. However, in the United States, Waxman, Gray, and Padrón (2003) found that teacher-fronted practices disengaged low-achievers from the process of learning. This suggests that undifferentiated, teacher-centered methods of instruction create a false sense of efficacy in the minds of ‘western’ teachers. In contrast, the basis for Japanese whole-group teaching is culturally removed from individualistic agency (cf. Bandura), and instead emphasises consensual meaning making (Arimoto & Clark, in 2018; Cave, 2016). This means that teachers and students engage in a “dynamic” and “collaborative” (Shimizu, 1999) process known as *neriage*.

Neriage is an ancient term borrowed from the traditional pottery-crafting industry. It offers a rich cultural metaphor that deconstructs classroom dialogue as the “kneading”, “layering” and “polishing” of students’ ideas. Inoue et al., (2016) describe it as “inter-subjective pedagogy for cultural mind-storming.” Inoue (2010) emphasised whole-class consensus-building dialogic interaction as the *sine qua non* of successful learning because it assists, “students [to] build consensus on the best mathematical strategy and think deeply about problem-solving.” For Japanese teachers, *neriage* is a collective or whole-group interaction. It is therefore a specific opportunity to collect and use evidence of student learning by engaging with the

‘collective-student’. As a Japanese participant in a Japan-America workshop on professional development convened by the National Research Council ([NRC], 2002) remarked, “So, we have to have group discussion in class in order to have *neriage*, OK?” (p. 230).

A process-goal environment

For Buddhist scholars and practitioners, Buddhism is a framework for self-improvement (see, Voss, 2009) directed towards the development of children’s learning autonomy (Arimoto & Clark, 2018). The extent of learning-autonomy, if high, permits children to direct and focus resources toward the process of self-improvement and away from a performance-goal orientation. Such children are in process of becoming *zenjin* - the Japanese ideal of the ‘complete-person’. Classrooms are therefore places where teachers are required to model Buddhist/socio-cultural processes as enshrined in the Brahma Viharas—the four ‘divine abiding’ or mental states. This ancient text discusses the four virtues of: ‘*metta*’ (loving and kindness), ‘*karuna*’ (compassion), ‘*mudita*’ (sympathetic joy), and ‘*upekka*’ (equanimity). It is a teacher’s responsibility to model the four virtues, so students may learn interactive feedback strategies at first through observation, and then by sincere collaboration. Success is when young learners internalise nascent forms of the virtues, and practise them as participants in a collective process of ‘becoming’ inter-subjective and autonomous learners. The ‘western’ literature on academic resilience consistently identifies such model teachers as particularly helpful for students who arrive at school from conditions of social adversity (CASEL, 2006; Masten & Reed, 2002). In all cultural contexts, children are more likely to adopt a process-goal orientation when they perceive teachers as role-models for mutual respect and social justice. The cultural context found in Japanese classrooms shapes goal orientations by emphasizing knowledge acquisition and self-improvement with respect to effort (*gambaru*) (Cave, 2016; Lewis, 1995). In Japanese classrooms, children are oriented towards process because a child’s efforts are the cornerstone of achievement. To do one’s best is to achieve one’s potential, and this is outcome equity. The emphasis on the quality of effort or persistence is confirmed in an OECD (2010) report entitled, *Japan: A Story of Sustained Excellence*, “aided by the belief that effort and not ability is what primarily explains student achievement. If a student falls behind, it is not because he is not good at school work; it is because he is not working hard enough and the system has a solution to change this” (p. 144).

A culturally-responsive environment

When critiquing ‘western’ schools, Collins (1993) contends that pedagogies that tacitly select the culturally privileged, and exclude the “underprepared”, are not regrettable lapses. They are, he argues, systemic aspects of public schooling systems serving culturally diverse communities. “Public schools are not neutral settings?learning, whether in or out of school, occurs in a cultural context. Built into this context are subtle and invisible expectations regarding the manner in which individuals are to go about learning” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 43). Various studies draw attention to the inequities of “conventional classrooms” which fail to recognize that students bring to the learning situation a diversity of cultural and language backgrounds (Rogoff & Gutiérrez, 2003).

‘Western’ classrooms should therefore *problematize* the notion of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) because it is the reproduction of symbols and meanings created and controlled by the dominant social class. ‘Western’ schools should be aware of these environmental biases, taking care to reproduce learning communities founded upon a respect for all forms of cultural expression. Japanese classrooms establish cultural equity by adherence to cultural-values that reproduce stable inter-relationships (*kankei*), and sanction equitable feedback interactions (Arimoto & Clark, 2018). These culturally-sanctioned

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interactions create legitimate social ‘structures’? the norms of reciprocity and mutual assistance, which act as resources for individuals and facilitate collective learning.

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