

Comparative, Diachronic, Ethnographic Research on Education

Joseph Tobin
University of Georgia

Locating Educational Practices in Space and Time

Most qualitative studies in international education take place in a single site in a single nation. When studies are of more than one country, they most often use more quantitative than qualitative approaches. There was a time when studies conducted in multiple cultures were more common in anthropology. Margaret Mead (1935; 1960) and Ruth Benedict (1934) did comparative studies of two or more cultures. Beatrice and John Whiting conducted the most systematic of comparative cross-cultural studies of child rearing in their *Six Cultures* (1975) study. One of the six ethnographies that served as the foundation of that study was conducted by Robert A. LeVine (1966), who was my doctoral mentor. I have attempted to carry this comparative project forward, and to do so in a way that systematically deals with variation within, as well as among cultures, while also taking into account how cultures stay the same and change over time.

In *Time and the Other* (1983), Johannes Fabian criticizes ethnography, as a discipline, for its failure to locate cultures in time. He argues that ethnographers see cultures (other than our own) as existing outside of history, in a timeless ethnographic present (e.g. "the Japanese believe. . ."). The epistemological and methodological challenge is to add a sense of time to our comparative ethnographies. As anthropologists, we tend to be much better at thinking cross-culturally than cross-generationally, better at thinking about differences of place than of time. The trick is to think simultaneously about space and time, in a sort of ethnographic version of physics' unified field theory.

Over the past twenty years or so comparative education meetings and journals have been sites for intense debate about the merits of world system theories that emphasize the inexorable homogenization of educational practices across the globe versus theories that suggest the potential for local settings (whether defined as nations, regions, communities, schools, or even teachers in individual classrooms) to resist the power of the global. I posit that this should be primarily not a conceptual or ideological battle, but instead an empirical question: clearly global forces are powerful and they unmistakably impact local educational practices. But it is equally clear that globally circulating ideas are sometimes or even often resisted, and even when adapted in local settings, always undergo modification. I view the interplay of the global and local as an ongoing engagement and negotiation, with different outcomes in different settings at different times. I see our job as educational anthropologists and comparative educators as getting smarter at designing studies that, rather than setting out to support one side or the other of the world system/local resistance debate, instead help us understand how and why globally circulating ideas sometimes carry the day, while at other times local concerns and local cultural practices come out on top. To understand the interplay of globally circulating ideas and pressures on local communities, we need careful empirical studies.

A Video-Cued Ethnographic Method to Comparative Education

For the past thirty years in my studies of preschools in Japan, China, the US and other countries, the approach I have employed is a method I call "video cued multivocal ethnography," but which is better known as the "Preschool in Three Cultures method." The core idea of this method is that videos function in these studies not as data but as interviewing cues. This

method has several steps. We videotape a day in a preschool in each country. We then edit the eight or more hours of video down to make a 20-minute video, which we then use as an interviewing cue for a widening circle of informants. We begin by showing the video to the teacher in whose classroom we filmed, asking her to comment on the typicality of the events in the video and to explain the thinking behind the practices captured in the video. We then use the video as a cue for interviews with her fellow teachers and director, then with staff at preschools in at least four other sites in the country, and then to educators at preschools in the other countries in the study.

The first *Preschool in Three Cultures* study (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) emphasized differences in Chinese, Japanese, and US approaches to early childhood education, and argued for the importance of thinking about the role of what we call “implicit cultural beliefs and practices.” But this is not to say that the original study saw the preschools of each country as homogeneous or only reflective of cultural factors. Our video-cued method, in which we showed a video shot in a single preschool in a single city to 300 or more educators at five or more sites across each country allowed us to show which practices are largely shared, which are variable within each country, and the areas of agreement and disagreement within each nation’s educational discourse (Tobin, 1992).

Our method also allowed us to think about the impact of globalization and other social, economic, and political forces on local settings by asking our informants to tell us about the pressures and influences they are experiencing in their daily practice. In the first study, key themes included how in the 1980s, preschool practice in China was being impacted by the single child family policy, in Japan by a falling birth rate, and in the US by political, academic, and ideological battles over whether young children are more helped or harmed by being enrolled in preschools as opposed to being cared for at home. While “implicit cultural beliefs and practices” was the construct that was foregrounded in the study, cultural beliefs and practices were shown to be interacting with forces of globalization, demographic shifts, economic change, and political pressures.

In the second study, conducted twenty years later, we more explicitly explored the power of globalization and other social, economic, and political forces on preschools by adding a diachronic dimension. The central question of the new study was how and why approaches to early childhood education stay the same and change over the course of a generation. The new study compared three countries’ approaches to early childhood education across two points in time: 1983 and 2003. To facilitate a diachronic analysis, we added some new steps to our video-cued interviewing method. We showed directors and teachers in each country the video shot in their preschool twenty years earlier and asked them to reflect on what had changed, what had stayed the same, and why. We also shot new videos in each of these preschools, and repeated the steps of the video-cued interviewing we had done for the first study. We videotaped in a second focal preschool in each country. These second preschools were selected as examples of a new direction in each country’s early childhood education. Asking viewers in sites across each country to comment on the videos shot in these progressive schools worked to introduce more explicit discussion about where educators see their systems of early childhood education going, and how they feel about these changes.

If I had to summarize the key findings of the new book in a single sentence, I would say that between the mid-1980s and the first decade of the new millennia, early childhood education in China changed a lot and Japanese preschools stayed much the same. But this does not mean that China was more interesting than Japan during this period. Our focus on understanding change in systems of early childhood education should not blind us to the importance of also understanding and appreciating the complexity of continuity. Understanding why a day at Komatsudani Day Care Center in Kyoto looks much the same in 2005 as it did twenty years

earlier is as compelling a question as understanding why Dagan Preschool in Kunming China changed. Maintaining continuity in a program of early childhood education from one era to the next requires as much effort and creativity as it does to change. If we think of change as being caused by external forces, like the movement of a small boat in a rushing stream, we can argue that it takes more energy to stay in place than to move with the flow. Absence of change over time in a preschool can reflect the inertia, stubbornness, or even laziness of the staff. But it can also reflect the courage of teachers and directors to stand up to political pressures to distort their practice in reaction to each educational fad and demand from grandstanding politicians. Our job as educational anthropologists and comparative educators is to account as much for continuity as for change, as much for local variations as worldwide similarities. In the sections that follow I provide examples of the kind of change of preschool beliefs and practices we found in China and the kind of continuity we found in Japan, and why.

China

Returning in 2003 to Dagan Kindergarten in Kunming, the preschool we had videotaped in 1983 we found the school housed in a brand new six-story building, with high tech equipment, an indoor gym, dance studio, and music room. We also were told by the directors that they had recently radically revised their curriculum and pedagogy, based on the government's 2001 Guidelines for Kindergartens, which called for more emphasis on children's creativity and self-initiative, and for less teacher-led, didactic instruction. The directors at Kunming told us that while they endorsed the idea of this paradigm shift, it was proving challenging to implement, especially for their older teachers, who had been trained in a very different approach.

In our second Chinese focal school, Sinan Road Kindergarten in Shanghai, we found the paradigm shift much further along. Educators in Shanghai played a role in developing the 2001 Kindergarten Guidelines and Sinan Road is one of the preschools that is widely recognized as pioneering the implementation of the new child-centered, constructivist approach. The Chinese educators we interviewed consistently provided the same explanation for the logic behind this paradigm shift: The Chinese economy is in the process of radical change. For China to successfully compete in global capitalism schools there is a need for a new generation of creative citizens. To produce these new creative citizens who can lead the new economy, there needs to be a new curriculum, starting with the preschool curriculum, a curriculum that supports the development of creative thinkers and entrepreneurship.

Early on in our study, we intended to tell a linear story about Chinese early childhood education in the new millennia: preschools in Shanghai, Beijing, and Nanjing had already largely completed a shift from teacher-directed to child-initiated activities. In provincial capital cities, such as Kunming, the shift was in process, but implementation was more difficult, due to less access to expert training in the new paradigm. Directors of preschools in rural areas were aware of the new Guidelines and in general supportive of the new direction, but frustrated by a lack of access to training opportunities that would allow them to better understand and implement the new approach.

Over the four years we conducted research for the new study in China, we gradually came to see that we would need to tell a less linear, more complicated story. In our video of a day at Sinan Road Kindergarten we see many examples of the kinds of child-centered, constructivist activities that would be considered progressive and even cutting edge at the best preschools in Europe and North America. But we also see examples of activities that are hybrid, combining recently embraced ideas from the West with traditional Chinese approaches. This is most clear in a segment from our Sinan Road Kindergarten video we call "The Storytelling King."

In the Sinan Road video we see the whole class gathered on the rug and one boy, Ziyu, standing in front of them to tell a story. Ziyu announces that his story is called, "Goodong," an

onomatopoeic sound made by something heavy that drops in the pond. Here's the gist of Ziyu's story: "In a forest lived many animals. One day an owl heard a strange noise in the pond, that scared him. He went to tell others. Those who went to check thought that there was a monster in the pond. In the end, a lion went to the pond to check only to find that a ripe papaya falling from the tree to make the noise. Everyone was relieved.

Ziyu finished his story, said "thank you," and took a seat on the floor with his classmates. Ms. Wang, one of the two teachers, asked the children what they had heard in the story. Some children said that there was an owl and the teacher asked what the owl was doing before it heard the noise. This exchange went on for a few turns before Ms. Wang asked the group whether Ziyu could be named Story King. Some said "Yes" and some said "No." The children then voted. Ziyu was invited to count the votes. He won the honor by a majority, with 18 of 24 children voting "Yes." He then wrote his name on the red Story King poster.

Then Ms. Wang said, "Some children didn't raise their hands. Shall we listen to their arguments? Children commented: "That story was like one we heard before." "He was not loud enough." "He did not say things clearly sometimes." Ms. Wang teacher turned to Ziyu and asked if he agreed. He thanked his classmates for their comments and selected a story-teller for the next day.

Teacher Cheng explained how the Story King activity get started:

In the beginning, children just wanted to listen to a story that the teacher would tell. Later, a couple of children who were interested in telling stories asked if they could come to the front to tell a story. We encouraged them to give it a try. Soon, many children began to prepare their own stories and asked for their turns.

Straightforward criticism has long been a common feature of Chinese daily life, not only in the first thirty years of the People's Republic, when the Cultural Revolution and other social movements required people to be self-critical as well as critical of others, but also in the pre-revolutionary periods, when Confucianism encouraged criticism as a means towards cultivating learning and promoting social values. As a familiar component of Chinese everyday life in families, neighborhoods, schools, business dealings and social life, criticizing others does not carry as harsh a feel in China as it does in the US, Japan, and many other cultures. Constructive feedback from both experts and peers can be found in Chinese education not just in the early childhood classroom, but also in the preparation and ongoing professional development of teachers, in reciprocal critique and discussion sessions called *qiecuo* (learning from each other by exchanging ideas). In both activities we find a belief not just in the value of constructively giving and humbly accepting critical feedback but also in the value of oral performance, "virtuosity," and of learning as a process of "self-perfection." Both the critical feedback and the pursuit of virtuosity seen in this activity are examples of what we are calling culturally implicit practices and of what Jerome Bruner (1990; 1996) calls "folk pedagogy," in that although these practices are not encouraged or even mentioned in the new curriculum guidelines, they are common features of contemporary Chinese early childhood educational practice that survive from one social upheaval and pedagogical paradigm shift to the next and which Chinese teachers feel no need to explain, justify, or reflect on until they are prompted to do by outsiders.

We see in the Storytelling King activity an example of the emergence in China of a hybrid pedagogy that combines Chinese and Western pedagogical notions. The Story Telling King activity combines progressive beliefs in child-initiated curricula, a Deweyian notion of the democratic classroom, self-expression, and an emphasis on creativity with Chinese traditions of verbal performance and virtuosity (Paine, 1990), of learning as a process of "self-perfection" (Li, 2003), and a belief that is both traditional and Chinese socialist in the pedagogical value of constructive criticism.

This notion of cultural hybridity complicates the linear story we told in the previous section of China moving inexorably as a nation down a path from more didactic, teacher-directed, knowledge transmission pedagogy towards constructivist, child-initiated and child-directed pedagogy. A final round of interviews that the Preschool in Three Cultures research team conducted in 2007 with Chinese early childhood educators suggests that the aggressive push toward progressivism and child-centeredness that characterized Chinese early childhood education from about 1990 to 2006 has begun to be counterbalanced by an acknowledgment of the value of traditional Chinese pedagogical practices, including the value of direct instruction and the mastery of skills. The period of intense borrowing is being replaced by a period of consolidation and hybridization of foreign and domestic educational ideas (Schreier, 2000; Steiner-Khamsi, 2000).

Continuity in Japan

Our research suggests that whereas China during the last twenty years has been viewing early childhood education as an agent of change, Japan has been more concerned with how early childhood education can be a source of continuity, that is, with maintaining core cultural values in an era of economic difficulty and perceived social decline. During the 1990s, between the periods of our first and second study, Japan experienced a series of changes: the birth rate, already low, became even lower; the economic bubble burst, and the economy that had been robust in the early 1980s was in decline; young people continued to move from rural areas to urban neighborhoods, where families raised their young children without close contact with relatives, friends, or neighbors. Many social critics lamented the loss of traditional values, as Japan's postmodern condition and consumption-oriented ethos had produced an increasingly anomic, alienated society.

In our interviews with Japanese educators in the early years of the new millennium, we heard a familiar, sad refrain: Japan is in decline, socially and culturally as well as economically. Young parents no longer know how to raise their children. Teachers have lost their way. Neighborhoods are no longer sites of support and resilience. In the face of such challenges, Japanese see the role of preschools as not to change, but instead to more than ever be sites of cultural preservation, where contemporary children can acquire traditional Japanese values and habits. In response to the perception that the rest of society is changing too fast, Japanese preschools are viewed as sites of social and cultural continuity. We found evidence of this continuity in the lack of change we found in preschool practices and in Japanese early childhood educators' beliefs.

The Teddy Bear Fight at Komatsudani

A prime example of this continuity in beliefs and practices can be seen in teachers' approaches to dealing with fighting children in our first and second study. In *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited*, there is a scene in which three girls pull and tug on a teddy bear until they fall into a struggling heap on the floor. During this struggle, the only visible and audible reaction of the classroom teacher, Morita-sensei, is to call out from across the room: "*Kora Kora*," (which in English means something like "Hey there!").

Figure 1. Three girls pull the bear



Source: Tobin et al., 2009

Figure 2. Girls fighting



Source: Tobin et al., 2009

Figure 3. Morita-sensei walks by



Source: Tobin et al., 2009

When asked about this scene, Morita-sensei explained that this is typical of her approach of watching children and letting them know that they are being watched, but avoiding otherwise intervening. Morita-sensei explained that she called out “*kora, kora*” at the moment when she became concerned that the children were fighting too close to the sharp corner of the piano bench. Her intent was to cue the children to be careful without intervening in a stronger way, which would have risked ending their interaction. To describe this strategy of supporting children’s social-emotional development by holding back, and watching without intervening, Morita-sensei used the term *mimamoru*. *Mi* literally means “to watch” and *mamoru* means “to guard.” Together, when used in the context of preschool, the words describe a Japanese pedagogical strategy we translate as “teaching by watching and waiting.”

In the original (1989) *Preschool in Three Cultures* study, Fukui-sensei, gave a similar explanation for a fight videotaped in her classroom:

When there’s a fight among children, I watch and wait and try to decide if they are really attempting to hurt each other, or if it is just rough play. It’s sometimes hard to tell. If it looks like it’s getting to be too rough or that it might get out of control, I tell them to be less rough, but I don’t tell them to stop (p. 133).

The Preschool in Three Cultures method involves showing the videotape made at one preschool to teachers and directors at five more sites around the country and getting their reactions. Most informants said the Morita's approach in the Teddy Bear fights was familiar. Some teachers said they would have intervened more aggressively than did Morita-sensei, but no one found her approach surprising and everyone was able to infer the thinking behind her practice (in contrast to the surprised, bewildered and critical reactions of most Chinese and American educators).

Further evidence that *mimamoru* is a pedagogical practice that is widely culturally shared is that it has been documented not just in both Preschool in Three Cultures studies, but also by other scholars who have studied Japanese preschools in single settings, including Catherine Lewis (1984; 1995); Merry White (1987); Joy Hendry (1989); Eyal Ben-Ari (1996); and Daniel Walsh (2002; 2003). The fact that both the practice and logic of low-intervention has been documented by scholars working in such diverse settings (*hoikuen* as well as *yochien*; private as well as public; in various regions of the country) suggests the workings of a process of meaning making that transcends the local. Finding the practice across such diverse settings would be easy to explain if it were discussed in Japanese teacher education textbooks, found in the national kindergarten guidelines, or was a practice that is circulating globally. In the absence of such explicit pressures, I suggest that a cultural explanation is most logical.

Conclusion

The Story Telling King activity is an example not of the power of the global to homogenize or of the local to resist change, but of both at once. In Chinese early childhood education, a new hybrid form of progressivism is emerging, that combines Dewey, Vygotsky, the Project Approach, and Reggio with Confucianism, Chinese socialist principles, and Chinese educational traditions that give importance to memory, performance, mastery, content knowledge, and critique. Professor Zhu Jiexiong of East China Normal University suggested to us that the globalization of education in China works like a pendulum, swinging back and forth between periods of looking outwards and inwards. But unlike a pendulum, there is no final, fixed, pre-determined resting place. Instead, the pivot point of the pendulum is constantly shifting, as new hybrid forms of education emerge, mixing once external with internal elements, producing a new center.

The Teddy Bear fight at Komatsudani is an example of how Japanese early childhood educators in the face of what they perceive as disturbing forms of social change, see the primary function of preschools as providing young children with opportunities to experience a kind of social complexity they lack in their contemporary lives in one-child families living in alienating urban environments. Parents, teachers, directors, and child development we interviewed expressed a sense of pessimism and even despair about the overall condition of Japanese society, citing problems including the fact that young people are not getting married and having children, that high housing costs are forcing young families to live in distant suburbs, leaving inner city neighborhoods aging and inner city preschools struggling to survive, and that parenting skills have dramatically deteriorated among the young generation of parents who themselves were raised by preoccupied, overly Westernized parents who lost touch with Japanese cultural traditions. In the face of these challenges, preschools are oases of traditional cultural values.

Methodological approaches that combine cross-national with diachronic analyses make it possible to locate educational approaches in time as well as space. Our analyses shows that political, economic, and social change can lead to a paradigm shift in preschool pedagogy, in one country, in one time period (in this case, China, between 1982 and 2002), while during the same time period, in another country (Japan), which was experiencing its own economic and social upheavals, preschool pedagogy changed very little. The implications of this story is that we comparative educators and educational anthropologists need to avoid a one-size-fits all conceptual orientation on the impacts that that external (e.g. globalization) and internal forces

have on educational systems, and instead do careful empirical studies of how political, economic, and other forms of social change contribute to both continuity and change in educational practices.

Joseph Tobin is the Elizabeth Garrard Hall Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Georgia. Email: joetobin@uga.edu.

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