

Teachers as "Professionals": Comparing Canadian and Japanese Contexts and Perspectives

Arthur Meerman

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Abstract

Despite periodic international declarations attesting to the "professional" status of teachers, debate continues at many levels in education as to the legitimacy of this claim, and as to what exactly it is that marks a professional educator. This debate becomes particularly interesting when educators of different national and cultural backgrounds, and often radically different cognitive frameworks, are asked to work together on both short and long-term projects.

That the quality of professional working environments in schools is positively correlated with both student and teacher performance, satisfaction, retention, and efficacy has been well documented. Such environments demand unity of educational objectives, yet cultural expectations of professionals, and even basic understandings as to what makes a "good teacher" often differ among cultures. Whereas international student and faculty exchanges are increasing in both scope and duration, the need for practical approaches to reconcile means and objectives is paramount in order to maximize their positive impact.

This paper is written under the premise that the enhancement of professional working environments is a key factor in addressing both persisting and evolving problems in education, and is presented as a background for research in progress that focuses on the impact of foreign instructors on professional working environments in Japanese public schools. As such, it focuses particularly on shedding light on the contexts and perspectives of Canadian and Japanese educators as regards professionalism in education. Perspectives afforded by the comparative study of professional working environments in different nations are invaluable in avoiding hasty and often costly administrative decisions, as well as they foster deeper mutual understanding when cultures meet to work together. Canada and Japan are discussed not only in consideration of their suitability for this project, but also in light of the author's own educational background and teaching experience, which includes graduate research as well as employment in public schools in both countries.

Introduction

In recent decades Japan's education system has been the focus of investigation and wonder in light of the post-war "Japanese miracle" and the worldwide presence of its graduates. Simmons (1990) wrote, "The 1980s saw a spate of articles and books, both British and American, that praised the Japanese for their educational achievements, sought to understand the reasons for their success and hoped to discover what lessons could be learned for the writer's own country" (p.49). Current discussions regarding the state of education in Canada and Japan, however, clearly reveal that a sense of impending crisis exists in both countries. In addition to a host of other issues, newspapers regularly report declining levels of parental and community support, as well as foreboding trends in students' overall academic preparedness, moral integrity, safety and general outlook for the future. It is now more widely known in the West that

youth in Asia share and are falling subject to similar pressures and vices as those found in other developed nations.

The fact remains, however, that while Japan spends less per capita on education than the top five biggest spenders - Canada, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark - it continues to outperform said countries year after year in international academic competition (McConnell, 2000; Simmons, 1990; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). While one might be sceptical as to the reliability or significance of such competitions, how it is that Japan is said to be getting more academic output from less material investment relative to other countries begs further investigation. Beyond the broad investigations of the last two decades, what is needed is a deeper examination into professional contexts, practices and perceptions that result from well entrenched culturally-specific behaviours and thought processes among the Japanese. In conducting such research, not only might we discover that some aspects of a successful education system can in fact be transferred to other cultures, but through becoming better acquainted with other cultures we can also enjoy the benefits of smoother inter-cultural professional relationships.

The purpose of this paper is three fold. First, it provides a brief theoretical overview of what it means to be a "professional" educator, and what the elements of a professional working environment are. Second, it offers a comparative analysis of the status quo in Canadian and Japanese schools, and evaluates how well the working environments in the respective countries are meeting the professional needs of those who work in them. These questions retain their importance not only within each respective educational system, but take on a heightened importance when educational systems - not to mention whole cultures - meet, as with the steadily growing number of international faculty and student exchanges worldwide. It is therefore important, thirdly, to consider what challenges face foreign and Japanese professionals who work together.

Professionalism and professional working environments

Traditional understandings of the word "profession" might invoke images of doctors and lawyers, white collars, or the words "advanced, specific education" and "limited access". At one point, perhaps, these were sufficient to make for general understanding as to who was, and who was not a professional. However, as Husen and Postlethwaite (1989) note, the last half of the century has seen a dramatic increase in the number of occupations into the ranks of "professions" (p.4069). Of course, there now are a host of "professional" teachers' organizations, colleges and unions in most developed nations. Perhaps the earliest and most influential statement that teaching be considered one a professional enterprise was represented in the 1966 Special Intergovernmental Conference held in Paris, entitled the *Recommendation Concerning the Status of Teachers* (Unesco, 1966). This comprehensive document outlines specifics concerning recruitment, selection and training, preparation and professional standards of teachers at different levels, job security, rights and responsibilities, disciplinary action, and professional freedom. Regardless of recommendations and declarations, some debate continues in the West as to whether or not teachers indeed are, or should be considered (and, perhaps most importantly, paid) as professionals (see Lieberman, 1988 for examples of specific arguments). However, by and large, mainstream society in both Canada and Japan accept (although with considerably more hesitation in the former), the general labelling of teaching as a "profession".

What are the behaviours, practices and thought processes that mark teaching professionals and represent professional working environments in schools? Again, a host of suggestions have been made over the years, complicated exponentially by the difficulty in distinguishing the latter term - environment - from other, similar terms. For example, over the years "working environment" has been likened to "organizational climate" and the "personality of an individual" by pioneers Halpin and Croft (1963); a medical "health profile" by Miles in 1969 and again by Hoy and Feldman in 1999 (as cited in Frieberg, 1999,); the "learning core" by Fullan (as cited in Frieberg, 1999); "the air we breathe" by Frieberg (1999), and "normative learning communities" by Leonard and Leonard (2001).

From all of this, it can be seen that arriving at a single, workable definition in attempts to identify a "good" school is a formidable task; those that do evolve are soon challenged, and are by no means permanent. As with "common sense", while we all might believe we can recognize it when we see it, arriving at a consensus as to what it actually means is an exercise in frustration. Nevertheless, and at the risk of further contributing to what might forgivably be interpreted as a

game of semantics, it is necessary to establish working definitions and approaches in order to proceed with any comparative study. In this respect, this paper relies considerably on the leadership of Frieberg (1999), Leonard and Leonard (2001), and McLaughlin and Yee (as cited in Lieberman, 1988).

School environment, according to Frieberg (1999) "has multiple dimensions encompassing organizational, environmental, social emotional, structural and linguistic elements" (p.3). Within the broader school environment exists the professional environment, which describes the value that teachers place on collegial support and collaboration, and the efforts expended in achieving these. The observable forms of collaboration include mutual observation, discussion (including constructive criticism), professional development in conjunction with outside agencies and proactive involvement of administrators. Leonard and Leonard (2001) identify a host of necessary attitudinal elements of collaboration. According to these authors, teaching professionals must: have a clear purpose; value diversity; be trusting and trustworthy; and be selfless (p. 7).

Reward structures are also indicative of how teaching is both perceived and valued not only by the general public, but also by the teachers themselves. The main reason that teachers teach is because of a desire to work with youth (McLaughlin & Yee, as cited in Lieberman, 1988; Stevenson and Stigler, 1992). According to this "expertise" notion of a career, teachers pursue their work in terms of an internally defined sense of advancement and satisfaction, rather than in terms of organizational structures and rewards such as monetary bonuses or promotions. That is to say, teachers are motivated when they enjoy their work, feel they are good at it, and derive a sense of accomplishment from personal perceptions that they are making a positive contribution to the lives of their students. Lortie (as cited in Fullan, 1991) calls these the "psychic" rewards of doing a job well (p.120). McLaughlin and Yee see it as hindering the advancement of the educational enterprise when teachers are expected to be motivated by changes based largely on different extrinsic rewards. "Wholesale solutions, particularly those that place primary emphasis on traditional promotion systems, mis-specify the incentives that motivate teachers and the nature of a satisfying career" (McLaughlin and Yee, as cited in Lieberman, 1988, p.12). Such "individually based" reward structures discourage a forward-looking approach to teaching. Motivation for teachers to develop their careers can and should instead be represented in appropriately designed and more complex reward structures (i.e. those that recognize why teachers teach, and those conditions conducive to better teaching). Such reward structures are conducive to professional working relationships and environments.

As for physical and procedural conditions which are indicative of professional working environments, McLaughlin and Yee (as cited in Lieberman, 1988) note that teachers must have sufficient opportunity to develop their skills and abilities, as well as the *capacity* to do their jobs effectively. Five examples of the former are: professional development seminars and conferences; freedom to ask colleagues for help - comfortably; mentor relationships (especially in the early stages of a career); peer observation and feedback, and horizontal movement (school-school, class levels, etc.). Conditions characterizing teacher capacity include: sufficient access to resources and the ability to mobilize them; availability of the tools to do the job, and the capability to influence goals and direction of their institution (i.e., participatory decision making).

It is with in an eye to the existence or lack thereof of the preceding conditions that the working environments of Canadian and Japanese schools will now be considered. This must be accompanied with the admission, or qualification, that for such broad evaluations to be made in a paper of this scope is to engage in generalization in the extreme. It is acknowledged that just as there are any combination of rich or poor, successful or dysfunctional families in every nation, the same can be said for schools and their districts; there are always exceptions to the rule.

Current Contexts - Fostering or Frustrating Professionalism?

Canada

In their decades-long investigation into the present working conditions of teachers and the prospects for effective and lasting change in North American education, Fullan (1991) and Hargreaves (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996) paint a bleak picture of a profession in decline, wherein teachers struggle daily with the repressiveness of routine, overload and limitation to reform. While much is asked of teachers in terms of daily tasks and student accountability, the circumstances

of teaching "give back little in the time needed for planning, constructive discussion, thinking, and... rewards and time for composure" (p.119). Lortie (as cited in Fullan, 1991) notes other negative influences on what teachers do and think, among them: teacher training does not equip teachers for classroom realities; teachers tend to deal with their problems in isolation (either self-imposed or otherwise) from teachers; teachers rely heavily on their own informal observations to gauge their effectiveness, and teachers are often uncertain as to whether they have made any difference at all (pp. 119-121).

The themes of "autonomous isolation", "ambiguity" and "uncertainty" pervade this description of the atmosphere in which teachers work. Fullan (1991) notes that "while a majority of teachers have expressed their desire to observe other teachers and share pedagogical approaches, few are capitalizing on the opportunity to do so" (p. 123). Teachers have little indication other than "gut feelings" or "hunches" as to how effective they are. Rozenholtz (1989), in her discussion of teacher certainty, categorizes the resultant "technical cultures" as "routine", in which teachers begin to perform tasks in standardized ways regardless of the diversity of the students they serve (p. 105). Fatalism, pessimism and general apathy become the order of the day as teachers gradually reach "burnout". The result of successive years of such conditions is not surprising:

National polls indicate that teaching was not the first choice of as much as a third of the teaching force (more so at the secondary level). In a sample of Ontario teachers... teaching was the reported first choice of occupation for 71% of female elementary teachers, 64% of male elementary teachers, 56% of female secondary teachers, and only 37% of male secondary teachers" (Fullan, 1991, p. 124).

It is difficult to associate the teachers responsible for these statistics with those in the portrait painted by McLaughlin and Yee. Obviously, schools are not being staffed with those who have a passion for or professional commitment to teaching. Evidently, the concept of teaching in Canadian schools no longer appeals to the brightest and most dedicated graduates, nor is the "profession"- if it can be called this - retaining its best teachers.

Japan

By North American standards, the workload of the Japanese teacher would, at least on the surface, seem impossible, absurd, and flat-out unacceptable. Miyashita (as cited in Chandler & Kootnikoff, 1999) offers an astonishing depiction of what it is like to work at a Japanese junior or senior high school. Whether it be due to the "Japanese work ethic", or "the norms of the society of teachers",

Many younger teachers do not have any holiday except for Obon (13th to 16th August) and the new year holidays. They look after their club activities on Saturdays and Sundays, too. They rarely take the following Monday off, even if they are exhausted from looking after their team on a Sunday. This usually continues throughout their career, until they are excused from those hard club activities... because of their age or other reasons. ... Generally, many teachers do not go home till 6 or 7 at night... There are of course teachers who go home early, but they are either part-time teachers or very old teachers who have only four or five years before retirement" (p. 74).

In addition to long working hours, the Japanese homeroom teacher assumes 24-hour responsibility for the discipline of a child, especially in cases of truancy. This is a 24-hour duty. For example, if the whereabouts of a student are not known, or a student is seen to be misbehaving away from home, it is the teacher - not the parent - who must seek him/her out and put things right. Japanese teachers generally spend their summer vacations supervising activities and projects for their pupils or updating their skills and knowledge (Simmons, 1990).

The explanation as to how such a schedule is proved workable is multi-faceted and much is owing to the particular Japanese culture that cannot be readily transferred into practice in the Canadian context. While the average Japanese teacher earns a comfortable salary (Simmons, 1990), it has been established that monetary rewards alone cannot satisfy

the motivational requirements of a teaching professional. Furthermore, even though the title of "teacher", or *sensei*, has long been one of esteem and high regard in this culture, positive regard - while adding a sense of pride and professionalism among teachers - cannot in itself prevent "burnout".

Part of the explanation as to how Japanese teachers manage to work successfully lies in how their daily routine is scheduled, which allows for frequent rest breaks for teachers and students alike. Ten-minute breaks separate each 50-minute class, during which time the teachers can plan and/or rest, and students can socialize with their classmates while revitalizing their attention spans for the coming lesson (Simmons, 1990; Stevenson and Stigler, 1992). Furthermore, teachers can use these break times between classes for planning and discussion with one another. While class sizes in Japan are high relative to those in Canada (those in Japan generally hover around 40 students, much higher than the 30 or so in Canadian classrooms), Japanese teachers teach fewer classes, allowing for at least one hour of preparation every day. Japanese law limits the number of hours that a teacher can instruct to four per day (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Finally, owing to student organization into *han*, or pre-determined small groups, "teachers in Japan are more able than their colleagues in many Western countries to concentrate on teaching because matters of class control and organization are taken care of by the children themselves" (Simmons, 1990).

Japanese teachers also advance with their students through up to three grade levels. Not only does this allow teachers to become more familiar with particular student needs, but it also facilitates interaction with parents. Three years constitutes enough time for parents and teachers to do more than merely become acquainted with one another, but also to interact and cooperate. While frequent compliance of North American teachers is the "stuck" feeling that accompanies teaching the same subjects at the same grade level year after year (Rozenholtz, 1989), the variety, or change, that accompanies being able to teach a wider range of material may serve to help Japanese teachers maintain interest in what they are teaching.

Levels of teacher collaboration in the Japanese school are much higher than in Canada. This is due not only to cultural factors (the oft-referred to "group mentality"), but also due to the physical setting in which Japanese educators work, including the design and use of school facilities. Usually, teachers have their desks in the same staff room, grouped according to grade, with the desks of both the principal and the vice principal at one end of the room. The sheer physical proximity facilitates teacher discussion and coordination not only with each other, but also with school administrators. This represents a sharp contrast with the image of the Canadian teacher, isolated in her own classroom, engaging in rushed conversations before coffee machines in teachers "lounges". As for administrators in Canadian schools, they almost always work in rooms separate from the rest of the staff.

Challenges for the Future - Professional Educators of Different Cultures Working Together

The preceding section of this paper represents only a drop in the bucket of differences between prevailing working environments in Canadian and Japanese schools. Only a brief pause to imagine a Japanese and Canadian teacher switching work locations soon produces an image of shock, confusion and misunderstanding. In such a case, the Canadian teacher might think, "Why do I have to stay later if I am not paid for it, and why does the system not arrange for a substitute teacher if I cannot come to work?" and in the next moment wonder why she was not included in the morning staff meeting. On the other hand, her Japanese counterpart might express wonderment at the lack of consultation in any matter among Canadian staff, or at the disrespect shown to her by both students and parents even in regular conversation.

In recent years Japan has experienced a dramatic increase in the number of foreign teachers that it employs in private teaching institutions (*eikaiwa kyoushitsu*), as well as in its public schools, most notably under the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. The latter, for example, now employs upwards of 6000 foreign teachers as Assistant English Teachers (AETs), as opposed to only a couple of hundred just ten years ago. With the recent introduction of English lessons in elementary schools, expanding use of the mostly-English Internet, and the establishment of special "English-Immersion" high schools this number - barring a prohibitive economic recession - is bound to increase ("English-

immersion," 2001). With this in mind, it is vital that both foreign and Japanese educators who are to work together successfully have an understanding, if not an appreciation, not only of other cultures in general, but also of culturally-specific professional norms and expectations. Misunderstandings and insensitivity, as well as simple, objective differences, have led and are leading to resistance and resentment on both parts of the equation (McConnell, 2000; Miyashita, as cited in Chandler and Kootnikoff, 1999).

Several sources of misunderstanding can be readily identified. The tendency of Western teachers to encourage and reward vocal individuality has proven to be difficult to reconcile in the Japanese classroom, in interaction with both students and teachers. An even deeper gulf is found in different attitudes on the part of foreign and Japanese when it comes to the goals of education:

The [foreign instructors] are problematic precisely because many (though not all) assert universal ethical principles that contradict and can damage the norms of group process. Given that [foreign and Japanese instructors] often hold divergent views of the goals of the educational process itself, it is surprising that battles do not erupt more frequently (McConnell, 2000, p. 227).

Both Japanese and foreign educators would agree that until now, contractual obligations have generally been more favourable for foreign teachers than for their hosts. Considering the tendency of Japanese teachers to work longer hours and more days than they are contractually obliged, this has often proven a rather thorny issue between and among cultures. Miyashita (as cited in Chandler & Kootnikoff, 1999) explains,

Most [foreign instructors] may think that their main job is to teach English conversation in Japan. Most Japanese teachers, however, think that team teaching is only part of [their] job. ... Because many [foreign instructors] fail to appreciate this, they often come unprepared and [their] image suffers (p. 72).

Furthermore, the fact that foreign instructors need only hold a university degree in any discipline in order to gain employment as English teachers has often drawn criticism in Japanese teaching circles. The short term duration of most foreign instructors also causes an immense strain on those Japanese teachers who have been instructed - with little or no extra compensation - to arrange for their colleagues' smooth transition and stay in Japan.

Generally, given that the influx of foreign educators to Japan has been extremely rapid in recent years, it is to be expected that there will be challenges and hurdles to be overcome. The greatest challenge in the immediate future will lie in reconciling perspectives as to the goals of the educational enterprise, and how to move past a "guest" perception of foreign instructors to a more meaningful professional regard. It is important in any case that foreigners working in Japan maintain the presence of mind to objectively view the benefits as well as what they might perceive as the drawbacks of group process and a different kind of work ethic which can serve to facilitate professional collaboration in schools both in Japan and their own countries.

Conclusion

At present, in terms of those conditions deemed prerequisite in the literature considered in this paper, it appears that Canadian teachers are experiencing great difficulty in realizing their goal and right to pursue a professional career, as opposed to a mere "job". They are not being provided with sufficient time for lesson preparation, nor for collaboration with colleagues. While Canadian schools, universities, and unions struggle to enhance professional working environments in their schools through increased professional development seminars, more stringent application and evaluation procedures and so forth, they appear to be overlooking the fact that not all remedies need be expensive or costly. At the time this paper is written, teachers Canada's third most populous province, British Columbia, are courting the idea of large scale walkouts unless conditions do not soon improve - the first time that they have done so since teachers were unionised 85 years ago ("Teachers," 2001). What is interesting to note is that the demands of the British Columbia

Teachers Federation are based primarily on salary increases and guaranteed reductions in class sizes. However, increased salaries, bonuses or promotions will make little if any improvement in the working conditions in their schools. Neither will new, lavishly appointed schools nor reduced class sizes necessarily provide an answer; that many of the schools being built need to be supplemented with portable classrooms within one or two years of their construction is testimony to poor planning and thoughtless resource allocation.

A comparison of working environments in both Canada and Japan reveals that despite surface appearances, the latter seems to foster the development of more rewarding and productive professional careers. This is rather ironic given the extent the debate surfaces in the Canadian literature relative to the case in Japan. It is vital that thinkers in education realize the value of intangible as well as tangible rewards when considering how school environments ought to be changed in order to meet the demands of a changing world. Japan's success in achieving consistently high academic performance from their students, combined with the settings in which this is achieved represents a lesson from which Canada and the world can learn. The sense of urgency that Canadian educators attach to reducing class size or obtaining higher material rewards for their service is neither supported by existing evidence (Finn & Achilles, 1990), practical given current financial realities (Odden, 1990), nor based on those factors which actually serve to motivate teachers (McLaughlin and Yee, 1988). It is not until Canadian teachers have adequate time to prepare lessons and work on improving their teaching practices by interacting with one another and with master teachers that they will be able to achieve working environments that motivate them most. This might be achieved through a reassessment of how Canada trains its teachers, as well as how the school day is organized. Canadian administrators can learn also from the cost-effectiveness of the Japanese model, as well as its ability to provide its teachers with a working environment in which accomplishment - and professionalism - can thrive.

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(主任指導教官： 二宮 皓)