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Editors' introduction: Emerging issues for educational research in East Asia

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Editors' introduction: Emerging issues for educational research in East Asia

Abstract

In recent decades, globalization and regional integration have brought significant economic and demographic changes in East Asia, including rising economic inequality, growing population movements within and across borders, and the emergence or renewed geopolitical significance of cultural and linguistic minority populations. These trends have coincided with significant changes in family formation, dissolution, and structures. How have these changes played out in the diverse educational systems of East Asia? In what innovative ways are East Asian governments addressing the new demographic realities of their student populations? This volume offers a snapshot of key educational stratification issues in East Asian nations, and their evolution in conjunction with changing student populations. Scholars of Japan, China, and Korea in this volume address issues ranging from curricular adaptations to globalization, to persisting and new forms of educational stratification, to new multiculturalism in educational policy. In addition, authors consider the ways that migration is shaping education in the city-states of Hong Kong and Singapore. Collectively, the pieces in this volume represent a first attempt to investigate national responses to critical regional trends.

Keywords

education, mobility, globalization, stratification, youth, China, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, East Asia

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Sociology

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION: EMERGING ISSUES FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN EAST ASIA

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BACKGROUND

In recent years, scholars, policy makers, and the popular press have hailed East Asian nations for their impressive educational performance. In China, dramatic expansions in education coincided with a period of dramatic growth in the youth population, setting the stage for a period of unprecedented economic growth (Fang & Wang, 2005; Hannum, Behrman, Wang, & Liu, 2008). Educational expansion in Korea during the past few decades has been remarkable, to the point that now Korea has the highest rate of college graduation in the world among young adult cohorts (Park, 2007). Korea and Japan have achieved some of the highest scores and lowest levels of inequality in comparative tests of achievement, although Japan has fallen in the rankings in recent years (OECD, 2008). The city-states of Hong Kong and Singapore commonly perform well in comparative tests, with Singapore's curriculum for math, in particular, singled out by some scholars and policy makers in the West as a model for emulation

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(Ginsburg, Leinwand, Anstrom, & Pollack, 2005). The effectiveness of primary and secondary education in East Asia is also reflected in the competitiveness of these students in global higher educational admissions. For example, in the United States, the most frequent destination for international postsecondary educational migration, China, Korea, and Japan alone account for 29.5% of total international student enrollment (Institute of International Education, 2009).

Although intense global scrutiny has focused on sources of achievement in East Asian educational systems, much less popular attention has been paid to the question of how the challenges that confront many educational systems around the world are playing out in East Asia. For various reasons, three related issues – diversity, global competitiveness, and equity – lie at the center of many recent policy debates in East Asia. These issues are commonly experienced across the region, although the forms they take and the specific shapes of policy debate they stimulate are rooted in the particular socio-historical trajectories of each nation. In some cases, these issues are enduring staples of domestic policy discourse, whereas in others, they are newly emerging, in the context of new economic inequalities and increased flows of people, money and information across borders, within and beyond the region.

Of course, social scientists and educational researchers, including many of the eminent scholars whose work appears in this volume, have investigated issues of equity, diversity, and global competitiveness in East Asian nations. However, much past research in East Asian education interprets findings through a national lens – as a function of domestic policy, culture, and social realities. With the occasional exception of comparisons of Japan and Korea (e.g., Brinton & Lee, 2001; Park, forthcoming), there has been surprisingly little cross-fertilization among scholars of education working in different East Asian nations, and little research cataloging commonalities and disparities in educational policies and outcomes within East Asia. This situation is unfortunate, as there are important parallels across the region in economic, demographic, and curricular trends, and in the evolving nature of inequality.

This volume of *Research in Sociology of Education* is the first of its kind to adopt a regional perspective on globalization and education. The volume brings together scholars of and from different nations of East Asia, including policy analysts and empirical researchers operating in interpretive and quantitative research traditions. The volume is organized geographically and includes pieces about educational policy and educational inequalities in Japan, China, Korea, and the city-states of Hong Kong and

Singapore. Thematically, the volume investigates student diversification and associated policy initiatives, government efforts to promote global competitiveness, and students and families crossing borders. Chapters encompass various methods and approaches, including analyses of policy, field methods, analyses of large-scale survey and census data, and textbook content analysis. Here, we synthesize some of the main themes connecting the chapters.

DIVERSIFICATION OF STUDENT POPULATIONS

Certain parallels exist in the economic, social, and demographic shifts shaping the populations coming into East Asian school systems. Rising inequality in recent decades has dramatically diversified the socioeconomic status of the student population in many East Asian countries. As China, once considered highly egalitarian, has opened to the outside world, rising inequality has accompanied unprecedented economic expansion and the emergence of classes of people with both the desire and the capacity to invest like never before in children's education (Cao, Wang, & Wang, 2009; Fong, 2004). Although Japan has also long been viewed as a relatively egalitarian country, income inequality has worsened since the mid-1980s, to the point that inequality has reached a moderately high level. Unlike the case of China, rising inequality has emerged in the context of economic stagnation (OECD, 2008; Tachibanaki, 2005). Following decades of economic expansion, Korea has also seen sharp increases in economic inequality in recent years, especially after the economic crisis in late 1997 (Lee, 2002).

Globalization, economic integration, and rapidly aging ultra-low-fertility populations have created the demand and mechanisms for an infusion of formal and informal labor migrants, across international borders into Korea and Japan (Cho, Kariya, and Rapple, this volume); across an increasingly porous but still institutionalized urban–rural divide into urban China (e.g., de Brauw & Giles, 2008); and from China into Hong Kong (Pong and Tsang, this volume). Indeed, educational policy discourse in Hong Kong refers explicitly to the need to be able to attract migrants, given the aging structure of the Hong Kong population (Post, this volume). Labor migration has created significant numbers of minority and ethnically mixed families in Korea and Japan and has heightened the visibility of urban–rural disparities in China. Beyond labor migration, educational migration is moving families – mainly mothers and children – across borders, as well, as Jeehun Kim illustrates in this volume in his study of educational migrants to

Singapore. Although Hong Kong and Singapore have long traditions of migration, Korea and Japan are relatively new hosts to international students in their school systems.

POLICY ADAPTATIONS TO GLOBALIZATION

This volume points to two key ways that policy makers across East Asia are adapting to globalization: adapting content and teaching styles to the needs of diversifying student populations and addressing perceived skill requirements of a global information economy. This volume contains examples of policy adaptations to both aspects of globalization.

Adapting to Migration and Diversification of Student Populations

In Korea, rapid economic growth and rising inequality, migration, and the increasing diversity of family types present new challenges for Korean schools accustomed to dealing with relatively homogeneous populations (Cho, this volume). In one of the first articles of its kind in English, Cho provides a policy note on Korea in which he outlines the numerous challenges faced by what he calls “multicultural students” – children of international-marriage couples, children of foreign workers, and children who are North Korean defectors (or who are born in South Korea to parents who are North Korean defectors). Such students are entering Korean schools in rising numbers. Summarizing his own empirical work and that by others, much of it in Korean, Cho discusses the home and school issues facing students from these backgrounds and highlights the complexity of developing multicultural policies in a national setting in which cultural and ethnic unity have been an enduring hallmark of national identity.

As is the case with migrant and minority students elsewhere in the world, the problems of multicultural students in Korea are as varied as the backgrounds of the students themselves and occur at the intersection of a number of dimensions of identity, including culture and language, but also legal status and poverty. Some migrant children in Korea are, in some sense, ethnically Korean – North Korean defectors or members of the Korean ethnic minority in China. These students face dialect differences but not linguistic barriers, and they often face barriers of poverty. Students from international-marriage families can face linguistic and cultural differences,

whereas those who are the children of undocumented workers may face enrollment barriers associated with their legal status.

Cho points out that nation of origin can also play a role in shaping identity and experience with the school system, as students from poorer nations may face stigma, and students who are phenotypically similar to Koreans may be able to “pass.” In Korea, both the policy makers and the research community are just beginning to think systematically about how to conceptualize a newly diverse student population, and how increasingly complex identities of students interface with the structure of the Korean educational system.

The problems of multicultural children are serious. Enrollment rates among children of defectors are much lower than their native-born counterparts. For example, high school enrollment rates among the former group are an amazingly low 10.4%, compared to 91.0% in the general population (Cho, this volume, p. 190). Moreover, Cho reports that many children of undocumented workers simply do not attend school at all, for fear of discovery of their non-legal status.

Diversification in Korea has also emerged in terms of economic inequality. Kim and Byun (this volume) note that increasing income inequality, particularly since the economic crisis of 1997, has called attention to the problem of growing educational inequality. Although recent research has been directed mostly at understanding the socioeconomic gap in academic achievement, few studies have empirically examined how this gap has changed over time during the past decade in South Korea. Using nationally representative data for the most recent three cohorts (1999, 2003, and 2007) of eighth grade South Korean students from the Third International Math and Science Survey (TIMSS), this study examines trends in the relationship between socioeconomic background and student achievement and shows that the influence of socioeconomic background on student achievement has increased during the past decade. Kim and Byun attribute the new high levels of inequality to both the widening income gap and the recent educational transformations away from standardization and toward school choice and tracking – reforms linked to the desire for choices and freedom for families.

Diversification and inequality are also critical issues in Japan. Since changes were made in Japan's Immigration Law in 1990, the number of non-Japanese-speaking students in Japanese schools has grown rapidly. In Japan, questions about how to provide equal opportunities and educational supports to linguistic minority students have become a pressing concern. Like the case in Korea, reliable statistics on children of foreign-born

workers are difficult to come by. Kariya and Rappleye (this volume, p. 26) cite work by Sakuma (2006) estimating that just 51% of foreign-born high school are enrolled, as compared with nearly 97% among non-foreign born, Japanese students (Sakuma, 2006). Kariya and Rappleye also summarize research showing that foreign students are more likely to have lower academic achievement; lower enrollment ratios in senior high schools and universities; and linguistic difficulties in attaining reading fluency for educational tasks.

Yet, Kariya and Rappleye point out that in Japan, social inclusion in education has not come to underpin educational policy. They argue that this lack of focus on inclusion is a function of “imagined” aspects of globalization obscuring focus on “real” aspects. In their framework, real aspects of globalization are defined as “changes that are occurring as the result of the acceleration and intensification of cross-national flows in commodities and people, transformations in the nature and logic of global capital (and its concomitant impacts in domestic labor markets), breakthroughs in communications technology and so on” (pp. 21–22). “Imagined” aspects of globalization are defined as “discursive responses that do not necessarily correlate with concrete (‘real’) domestic change but those that are presented...as such, perhaps because they are intentionally utilizing the rhetoric of ‘globalization’ to push through reforms they prefer or shift attention away from issues they would wish to ignore” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2000), cited by Kariya and Rappleye (this volume, p. 22).

In China, much of the diversification of the student population has been economic, although internal migration plays a role. As compulsory education has been made free, and rapid expansions in access have occurred, concerns with inequality have shifted away from a focus on guaranteeing access to basic education, to quality of education received and to costs and supply constraints associated with post-compulsory education. Little research exists about achievement disparities, although parents are highly cognizant of the performance of students and schools on high-stakes tests such as the high school and college entrance examinations. There are now marked disparities in educational expenditures across schools and regions, just as massive increases in income inequality have created huge socioeconomic diversity within the school-aged population (Hannum et al., 2008). Although some retrenchment has occurred in the form of recentralization and tuition remission at the compulsory stages, ability to pay now means choices for families of wealthier children. At the same time, many school systems in China struggle to provide reasonable access to a high-quality experience for the rural poor.

Wu and Zhang illuminate recent trends in inequality of access and attainment in China, in the context of these changes. They examine trends in school enrollment and transitions to senior high school and college for selected young cohorts since the 1990s, based on analyses of sample data from population censuses in 1990 and 2000 and the mini-census in 2005. They focus on educational inequality based on gender and household registration system (urban or rural residence status or *hukou*). Results show a substantial increase in educational opportunities over time at all levels. In particular, women have gained relatively more, such that gender inequality has decreased over time, and the gap in college enrollments was even reversed to favor women in 2005. However, rural–urban inequality grew in the 1990s. Educational expansion has mainly benefited females and urban residents.

The Wu and Zhang chapter does not explicitly address migration. However, the rising importance of residence status in educational inequality reflects larger urban–rural inequalities that set the stage for labor and educational migration, like the cross-border migration considered elsewhere in this volume. Even within rural areas, fieldwork suggests that relocating for better educational opportunities is a common strategy for rural families (Kong, 2008). More visibly, increasing numbers of rural children are entering urban schools as part of family labor migration (e.g., see Chen & Liang, 2007). Because of China's household registration system, rural children in urban China have, in the past, lacked the papers to possess full legal access to urban school systems (Chen & Liang, 2007). As policies have adapted to accommodate these students, they remain susceptible to problems of stigma associated with rural and impoverished origins, and to dialect, if not language, differences. Although these migrants and their children do not cross international borders to reach Chinese cities, many of the issues they face have parallels in the experiences of cross-border migrants into Korea and Japan.

Policies for Global Competitiveness

In the case of Japan, Kariya and Rappleye argue that the very “real” challenge to the school system of migration has been obscured by a focus on “imagined” challenges, including, prominently, the need for deregulation, flexibility, and promoting creativity. This “imagined” challenge is driving policy debates in Japan and elsewhere in East Asia. Reforms in Japan have also sought to promote an individualized and flexible curriculum (see Kariya and Rappleye, and Bjork, this volume). Moreover, as part of the

current administration's decentralization policy, local governments have been granted substantial autonomy in developing their own curricula (Bjork, this volume). This trend, in turn, has created significant diversity in school policies and financing among local governments within Japan. Both Kariya and Rappleye and Bjork focus on a 2002 educational policy in Japan known as "relaxed education (*yutori kyoiku*)."

"Relaxed education" in Japan was introduced to help students to develop new types of academic abilities including "student initiative, independence, critical thinking, creativity, and the ability to investigate topics of interest to the students" (p. 91, note 3), all of which are considered essential qualifications 21st-century economic competitiveness. The policy was also supposed to release the students from pressure for their academic studies and give substantial autonomy to local agencies such as schools and teachers.

Both chapters about relaxed education policy in Japan offer critical perspectives about its likely social impact. Using ethnographic methods to explore perceptions among various stakeholders at elementary and junior high schools in a rural area, Bjork uncovers the complexity of policy implementation at the local level. Different educational agents such as teachers, students, and parents had different perceptions of the goals and effectiveness of the policy. Most importantly, the study illustrates powerfully that the policy helped high-achievers with high academic aspirations, whereas lower-achievers were left further behind, contributing to wider gaps in achievement among students. Bjork's finding of wider achievement gaps is consistent with findings reported by Kariya and Rappleye (this volume) that "relaxed education" increased the number of students who did not study outside of school and that students from disadvantaged families stopped studying at a higher rate than those from advantaged families, resulting in expanding inequality in education.

In Kariya and Rappleye's framework, the "real" effects of globalization in Japan reduced opportunities for disadvantaged youth to become full-time workers through local, relatively low-skilled manufacturing jobs. Yet, the "imagined" response to globalization, namely a "relaxation" of the curriculum and pedagogical approach intended to promote creativity, further reduced these youths' incentives to work hard, with clearly measurable negative impacts on academic achievement levels. Thus, Kariya and Rappleye (this volume, pp. 51–52) write, ...not only were there fewer outlets and clear pathways for these youth to find full-time, stable employment, but they became even more heavily disadvantaged because they lacked a strong set of basic skills in traditional, core subjects. Therefore, the "imagined" response to globalization at the national policy

level led to a curricular and pedagogical change that in reality ushered in increased social stratification and inequality in educational achievement.

Similar to the 2002 reforms in Japan, major curricular reforms in China occurred in 2001, designed to allow for more local content, more interactivity, and more tailoring to student needs (Sargent, 2009). In part, these changes aim to promote interactive learning styles deemed suited to the needs of a global information economy (see Sargent and Xiao, this volume); they also seek to enhance engagement by adapting more content to local needs and interests. Sargent's earlier work in Gansu Province indicates that these reforms have had an impact on student experiences and teacher behaviors in the classrooms (Sargent, 2005), although studies of the consequences of new curriculum reforms for inequality have yet to emerge.

The Sargent and Xiao piece in this volume, however, focuses on questions of curricular content: the mix of traditional and global values in textbooks. Sargent and Xiao analyze the contents of three Chinese language arts textbooks to see how the mix of traditional Chinese values and global values are laid out in textbooks in one language arts text published before the reform and two published after the reform. They found a fair amount of stability in the materials: despite a slight increase in contents concerning global citizenship, sustained emphasis on the traditional Chinese cultural values were prevalent in the language arts textbooks. These findings remind us that political rhetoric does not always translate cleanly to significant changes in curricular content.

Finally, Post's paper on Hong Kong presents an extended case study of how policy making has followed the vicissitudes of global interconnectedness and globalization, in a setting where government policy could be made centrally, and was largely unaffected by grassroots pressures. Post highlights the global roots of major educational initiatives. In 1978, accelerating expansion of compulsory schooling to the first nine years of school was a consequence of trade pressures from the European Economic Community, concerned about competition from child labor in Hong Kong's textile industry. Massive expansions in higher education followed concerns about outmigration of professionals following the 1982 Sino-British Accord and Tiananmen in 1989, as concerns about the handover to China loomed, as well as the concerns about the relocation of Hong Kong's manufacturing base to southern China in the 1980s. In 2000, Tung Chee Wah, Hong Kong's first post-handover Chief Executive, proposed a self-supporting short-course or associate degree sector that would enable a further 40% of Hong Kong's youth to pursue their educations (Post, this volume, pp. 237–238). This decision was made in light of mounting unemployment among the young as

Hong Kong faced an increasingly competitive environment in relation to other Asian centers of technology and service, especially Singapore and Shanghai. In 2007, Hong Kong's Chief Executive Donald Tsang used the prospect of demographic change and global competitiveness for migrants explicitly as a rationale for educational expansion, as he promised to "continue to raise the quality of education and upgrade our human capital, encourage more outstanding non-local students to study in Hong Kong and work here after graduation, and attract more talents to Hong Kong with a view to optimising our demographic structure" (Post, this volume, p. 239).

STUDENTS AND FAMILIES CROSSING BORDERS

Another set of papers in this volume addresses the experiences of students and families crossing borders for education, often in search of global competitiveness at the micro level. Jeehun Kim's chapter addresses class and international migration in globalizing East Asia, through the experiences of so-called *kirogi* (wild geese) families. *Kirogi* families are those in which mothers migrate with children to English-speaking countries, in the past, mainly the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, for the educational benefit of children. The practice is evolving rapidly. Once confined to the upper classes, it is now seen across the socioeconomic spectrum, as poorer families seek to assure a competitive future for their children in a setting where global cultural capital and English are deemed critical for educational success. Related to the socioeconomic diversification of the *kirogi* phenomenon, migrants are now traveling to new destinations that involve lower costs to families, including Singapore, the Philippines, India, and South Africa.

Drawing on extensive fieldwork in Singapore, Kim argues that the Korean state's emphasis on international competitiveness and parental aspirations for social mobility led many families to settle abroad to acquire foreign language credentials. Singapore is an emerging destination due to the relatively low cost; due to the relatively short geographic and cultural distance from Korea; and due to the possibility of learning not only English but also Chinese, a language of emerging global importance.

Relatively few detailed studies of the *kirogi* phenomenon exist, and those that do tend to treat the phenomenon as an elite one. This piece is the first to highlight the mechanisms by which experiences of migration, an important element of globalization, are shaped by class position. In his piece, Kim illuminates the challenging experiences of the less-wealthy in Singapore, and

the down-sides of their experience – being forced to move down grades and getting stuck in vocational or less-rigorous educational tracks mean that many migrants are finding themselves moving on a pathway that is unlikely to facilitate either upward mobility or reintegration into the Korean system.

Immigrant children's educational assimilation is also an enduring concern of policymakers in the former British colony of Hong Kong, which has received regular immigration from mainland China. In this volume, Pong and Tsang address migration across the border from China to Hong Kong. This chapter is one of the first to investigate closely the academic progress of mainland Chinese immigrant students in Hong Kong's junior secondary schools. The authors focus on Form 1 (7th grade) to Form 3 (9th grade) and analyze a dataset called the Medium of Instruction Longitudinal Survey (MOILS), which tracks a cohort of junior secondary students in 1999–2000 from a representative sample of all Hong Kong secondary schools.

Unlike the difficult circumstances outlined by Kim for children from Korea in Singapore, Pong and Tsang find that mainland students start out in Form 1 at a higher level of achievement than do native Hong Kong students in all academic subjects except the English language. Migrants attain greater subsequent achievement gains than do native students in most subjects. Even though they do not catch up with native students in the English language, they narrow the nativity gap over time. Mainland students' high performance cannot be explained by their socioeconomic background, which tends to be lower than native students, or by the schools they attend, which tend to be poor and low-achieving.

Of course, the Hong Kong and Singapore case studies adopt different methodologies and are not directly comparable. However, the contrast between the picture that emerges of a relatively favorable educational experience for low socioeconomic status mainland migrant students in the Hong Kong system, and the challenges faced by middle and lower socioeconomic status Korean migrants in Singapore, is suggestive of the need for additional theorizing of the migration experiences of children and youth in East Asia.

DISCUSSION

Collectively, the chapters in this volume attest to important parallels in the ways that student populations are changing across East Asia, and in the challenges that these changes bring to educational systems. Inequality is rising in many East Asian nations, and migration is playing an increasingly

important role in educational policy and inequality in these nations. Just as wealth and opportunity in China's cities, combined with population aging, incentivize domestic labor migration, wealth and low fertility in Japan, Korea, Hong Kong have created new space for cross-border labor migration, and the children of migrants are not always faring well in host country educational systems. In China, Japan, and Korea, migrant children's education is a problem to be addressed, but in the case of Hong Kong, children of migrants from the mainland are faring relatively well, and the need to attract cross-border educational migrants has been emphasized as a rationale for educational improvement in recent years. Singapore is already competing well for educational migrants from the region: the combination of distance and capacity to offer English and Chinese language instruction has driven a demand for educational migration to that nation.

In many of the nations of East Asia, rising migration is coinciding with rising economic inequality, such that policy makers are struggling to conceptualize new forms of diversity in both socioeconomic and ethnic terms. At the same time, policy makers are attempting to reform educational systems to support national positions in the global economy. There are striking commonalities in curricular discourses, around efforts to promote global competitiveness through flexibility and creativity.

Beyond some commonalities in diversification and efforts to promote global competitiveness, this volume also speaks to the socio-cultural rootedness – and path-dependence – of forms of inequality and discourse about inequality. In Japan and Korea, the highly standardized and egalitarian recent past casts into sharp relief current levels of educational inequality, which might be viewed elsewhere as moderate. National narratives of cultural and ethnic unity in both nations have meant that the stark educational barriers that evidently facing children of migrants have been difficult to recognize as serious problems, and thus difficult to address. In China, one of the most persistent forms of inequality – that across the urban–rural divide – is a stratifier that has endured for centuries, and one that has also set the stage for massive domestic migration that brings forth some, but not all, of the educational issues facing migrant children in cities elsewhere in the region.

This volume also offers critical perspectives on the effectiveness of some reforms, and on possible stratifying consequences of some of the reforms undertaken in the name of globalization. In China, evidence of an infusion of global content to curriculum is mixed. In Japan and Korea, some of the reforms intended to enhance creativity and flexibility may have raised social disparities in achievement.

Overall, the studies presented here suggest that the East Asian region offers an exciting site within which to investigate the diffusion of similar educational trends and ideas across nations that share a common cultural heritage, but differ dramatically in recent socio-historical trajectories. Recent developments in the region offer an opportunity to road test and refine Western theories about globalization and education, and about immigrant adaptation. It is hoped that the theories, empirical studies, and frameworks contained here may serve as a foundation for additional studies that can help East Asia to become a core site for global learning about approaches to educational diversification and for theory-building about educational policy and inequality.

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