The Japanese PTA
―Civil Society and Gender Roles―

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This article will discuss the Japanese Parent Teacher Association (hereafter, PTA) as an important part of Japanese civil society. It first situates the Japanese PTA in the international context. Then, after briefly discussing the history of the Japanese PTA, it outlines the nature of present day Japanese PTA, and the relationship between gender roles and PTA participation. It argues that the PTA is an under-researched phenomenon given its significance in the educational environment and its role in the lives of parents, particularly women. The paper concludes by briefly suggesting an approach to researching this field.

This paper employs various special terms, an understanding of which is necessary in order to understand the central argument put forward by the paper. Those terms include PTA, civil society, social capital, intergenerational closure, and cultural theme. These special terms are defined for the purposes of this paper:

PTA: Parent-Teacher Associations, which exist throughout Japan at most pre-schools, primary, and secondary schools.

Civil society: is defined by Davies (2008, p.68) as "the sphere of un-coerced collective action, as opposed to individual action, on the one hand, and government, on the other hand". In other words, it is comprised of voluntary social institutions such as clubs, unions, associations and firms, that work for a common good.

Social capital: is defined as, "resources inherent in a person's social networks that

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potentially help the person" (Cheung, Lam and Ngai, 2008, citing Coleman, 1988). It should not be confused with the term cultural capital that is part of a person's cultural background, including beliefs and lifestyle (Feuerstein, 2000).

Intergenerational closure: is defined by Grant (2001) as a situation in which children know each other's parents, parents are in communication with each other and expectations and obligations connect the parents. In a situation of high intergenerational closure parents help each other, and together establish good norms of behaviour (Grant, 2001, p.104).

Cultural theme: is defined as, "a general position, declared or implied, that is openly approved or promoted in a society or group" (Cresswell, 2012, p. 468).

1. PTA: Literature and Context

1. 1　PTA and Civil Society

Both inside and outside Japan PTAs have been acknowledged as a component of civil society. According to Aldritch (2008) PTAs constitute one component of civil society operating in Japan, itemised along with unions, chambers of commerce, lobby groups and shrine associations. Grant (2001), while writing about civil society and education in the American context, argues that school PTAs can unite parents in a community, bringing them together despite race and class divisions, and furthermore that elementary school PTAs are arguably one of the most effective sites for generating social capital for parents. He enumerates the reasons for this:

"Parents of young children have the highest attendance at school events; elementary schools draw parents into the school as volunteers and classroom helpers more than at any other level of schooling. Parents are most likely to engage in face to face interactions around grade school issues and to develop the trust that is essential for shared norms and common expectations" (Grant, 2001, p.103).

Thus, school PTAs can be seen as important because they are a component of civil society and because they are sites where parents can develop social capital.

Grant (2001) also argues that elementary school PTAs contribute to intergenerational

closure. As mentioned above, in cases of high intergenerational closure parents help each other, and together establish good norms of behaviour. The establishment of good norms of behaviour is achieved through modelling (children observing both their parents' actions and the actions of other children's parents) and through parents' direct interactions with each other's children (Grant, 2001). The main thrust of Grant's argument is that high intergenerational closure leads to improved behavioural outcomes for children and adolescents. This point is further addressed next, in a discussion of international research literature on PTAs.

2. The International Context

There has been research and writing on PTAs internationally (Cheung, 2009; Ekundayo, 2012) as PTAs are considered both a significant element of civil society, and potentially a significant factor in enhancing learning outcomes and quality of life for children. A major focus of PTA research has been whether or not increased parental involvement in schools through PTAs leads to increased parenting efficacy and child performance, with performance here having a broad meaning, going beyond academic performance and into conduct and emotional stability (Cheung 2009). Cheung writes such studies have tended to be quantitative in nature, and characterized by a preponderance of contradictory findings. He cites the contradictory positions of various researchers such as Desimone (1999), and Jeynes (2002), who are both in favour of PTA involvement, and contrasts their position with that of McNeal (2001) and Kim (2002) who both found negative or insignificant benefit to PTA membership. Regardless of one's beliefs concerning the efficacy of PTAs for enhanced student learning, such research does not directly address the topic of the proposed research, the purpose of which is to illuminate women's role in PTA and the significance of gender in this context.

PTAs in Japan form part of a wider national culture of education. Similarly to Taiwan, China and Korea, Japan has a highly competitive educational system. Knipis (2011) includes Japan in his list of East Asian societies exhibiting a high degree of educational desire. Japan is acknowledged to be an, "educationally credentialized society" (Pool, 2003), in which a student's examination results may grant them access to prestigious tertiary educational institutions, and attendance at these institutions, guarantees access to middle class employment, comfortable lifestyles and the respect that goes with them. In this context schooling takes on overwhelming importance for parents, especially parents of elementary school aged children where parental involvement is still somewhat efficacious (Cheung, 2009, cites Short et. al., 2001, as showing that parenting involvement is most efficacious for children in the elementary grades.)

While there is a dearth of research specifically concerning PTAs within Japan, both Japanese schooling and Japanese women have frequently been topics of research, though for quite different reasons. On the one hand, Japanese education was frequently researched in the latter half of the twentieth century as Western researchers sought to discover the source of Japanese students' success on standardized international achievement tests such as those conducted by PISA. Such research spanned the gamut of research approaches, from ethnographic, empiricist, through to mixed methods, and largely focused on elementary schooling (Knipprath, 2004). One example relevant to this proposal is Benjamin's (1997) research. Benjamin performed 'day-to-day ethnography' to find out how differences in practice between American and Japanese schools affect differences in outcomes, and discusses the relationship between home and school and how the Japanese mother is involved in the academic performance standards reached by Japanese children. In contrast, the research suggested in this paper would take the focus out of the classroom and into the community of mothers surrounding the classroom.

Yet despite the PTAs connection with schooling, there seems to be considerable ambivalence by mothers regarding participation (see Kittaka, 2013, for an example of reportage in the local press). Possible reasons for this are discussed below, after a brief discussion of the history of the Japanese PTA.

3. The History of the Japanese PTA

PTAs have a long history in Japan. Originating as *koenkai* (supporters organisations) that existed in all schools prior to the Second World War, they were reconfigured into PTAs by the occupying forces as part of a conscious effort to promote the growth of "democratic" organisations that would be free from governmental direction or interference (van Staaveren, 1949, p. 162). But after the Americans left, "the Japanese government quickly undid liberal education reform measures introduced by the Americans and reduced the community and parental role in education" (Knipprath, 2004, p. 98). She goes on to report that the Japanese government directed that:

"PTA should not interfere with personnel and other administrative tasks of schools, and [the government] replaced elective education boards by appointed ones, indicating to local education boards that parents should not get involved with school education at all. Teachers were the experts and parents returned to their original position as

laymen in education" (Hiroki, 1996, p. 88-89, cited in Knipprath, 2004).

Thus the operation of Japanese PTAs is significantly different from that in western countries. PTAs in western countries, such as America, are more likely to give parents a voice in school administration (Gary, 2010).

A comparison of the roles fulfilled by American and Japanese PTA members reveals some differences. PTA functions in America may include serving on committees for selecting school personnel and reviewing finances, many Japanese PTA functions are menial in nature. Examples of work done by the mostly female members includes raising finances through Bell Mark programs, patrolling the school grounds and neighbourhood streets to monitor student safety and behaviour, cleaning school grounds, and giving morning greetings to children at the school gates. Following is a more detailed consideration of the nature of the Japanese PTA, its members, and the type of work they engage in.

4. The Nature of Present Day PTA: Gender Roles and Participation

The work involved in Japanese school PTAs almost inevitably falls to women to undertake. PTA duties are the work of women for a variety of reasons, amongst them differences between the sexes in lifetime employment patterns (Yu, 2012), cultural themes that constitute mothers as educators responsible for schooling (Castro-Vazquez, 2011), and Japan's status as a country with high educational desire (Knipsis, 2011).

Japan is a country characterised by severe gender inequality (Yu, 2009; Tachibanaki, 2010). Yu writes that Japan has "arguably the highest degree of gender differentiation among more industrialized countries" (2012, p.208). She also summarises research on Japanese women as showing considerable gender gaps in earnings, promotion opportunities, and employment status. In particular, Japanese women's working lives start to differ from men's soon after they enter the labour force. According to Yu men may expect relatively great job stability and opportunities for upward mobility throughout their careers, whereas women frequently interrupt their labour force participation upon marriage or childbirth and shift to nonstandard (part-time, fixed-term) jobs after their employment interruptions. This shift to nonstandard employment perpetuates the gender gap in earnings.

A gender gap in participation in childrearing and household chores also exists. At home women do virtually all the work of child rearing and household chores, while their husbands are frequently absent, either working or engaged in work related socializing (Yu, 2012). This

gap exists despite recent media attention in Japan on the apparently increasing roles played by some fathers in family life. Such fathers have been dubbed *ikumen* by the local media, "a buzzword that describes fathers who are actively involved in childrearing" (Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher & Schimkowsky, 2015, p. 212). However, it is worth noting that the young fathers interviewed by Mizukoshi, Kohlbacher and Schimkowsky (2015) in their study of *ikumen* showed a distinct degree of scepticism concerning its implementation. Gender roles in Japan may well be gradually changing, and the proposed research could well shed light on this issue.

Research specifically on the topic of Japanese PTAs is scarce and appears to be essentially quantitative in nature. Within Japan one primary source of PTA information is Sumida's (2001) report based on surveys of 395 elementary school PTAs which described the types of activities engaged in by 'well organised' PTAs across Japan. Knipprath (2004) presented an analysis of an OECD publication, *Parents as partners in schooling* (1997). This publication was produced by the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation and is a cross-national study of parents as partners in 9 countries, of which Japan was one. In the same paper she presents an analysis of statistical information gathered from *TIMMS1999 International Science Report, findings from IEA's Repeat of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study at the Eighth Grade*. While such research is useful in giving us an understanding of the activities of parents in support of schools in Japan, it does not give us detailed information regarding the activities and experiences of the women doing such work, or their understandings and motivations for doing such work, which is information best gleaned by qualitative research.

The lot of Japanese women has frequently been the topic of research because of their conspicuous lack of achievement in terms of community roles, business and political leadership. Studies on Japanese women have identified various cultural themes; and women's roles as education monitor and manager for their children, derisively termed '*kyoiku mama*' (pushy education mother), are well documented (Adams, 2012, p. 95; Castro-Vazquez, 2011, Stevenson & Stigler, 1992, p. 82). In this research the focus is on mother and child interactions. In contrast to this I propose research with a focus on interactions between adults, specifically mothers engaged in the PTA community.

In sum, this review has revealed a significant body of research concerning PTAs, Japanese women and education. However it has also identified a significant gap, the lack of any qualitative research specifically concerning elementary school PTAs in Japan. The following section suggests one approach for implementing research on the PTA in Japan that could address the gap identified above.

5. A Suggested Approach to Research

One possible methodology for a study of the Japanese PTA is ethnography. Fetterman (1998) gives a definition of ethnography, "Ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture" (p. 288). Fetterman then proposes that the purpose of undertaking ethnography is to understand and describe a social or cultural scene from an insider's perspective. Ethnographers look for shared patterns of behaviour exhibited by the group over time. (Frankham and MacRae, 2011). There are presently no qualitative, ethnographic style research reports in the literature specifically focused on Japanese PTAs. However, this type of research is suggested as an appropriate methodology for two reasons. Firstly, ethnographic research provides a rich and deep contextualized knowledge through detailed observation. Secondly, the nature of the group to be studied seems to particularly lend itself to ethnographic study. Being a local public school all students are required to live within the school zone unless special permission has been granted, and indeed the vast majority of students do live there. Many of the children and mothers have known each other since preschool days when their children attended the same preschools and their mothers were on the pre-school PTA together. This type of geographically and socially close can be effectively studied through ethnographic means.

It is difficult to precisely articulate a research question or hypothesis at the beginning stage for ethnographic research. This is because the nature of ethnography is such that themes and hypotheses develop as the research proceeds. On the other hand, Gobo, (2008, p.88 citing Hymes, 1978, Silverman, 1993, and Yin,1984) writes that ethnographers can conduct an "hypothesis oriented ethnography perfectly well if he or she already has a good level of knowledge about the culture that he or she is studying". Based on the author's 18 year experience living in Japan and 8 year affiliation with a Japanese PTA, the following working hypotheses are proposed:

- Japanese elementary school PTAs act as a locus for performance of gender associated with beliefs concerning motherhood and education.
- Ideals of reciprocity and duty are enacted through the performance of PTA duties.

Ethnography is also a flexible research approach in which questions and focus may well change in response to fieldwork experiences. However, the following questions could be used to add an initial guiding or 'sensitizing' focus to the research:

- What are the behaviours and beliefs exhibited by PTA members at one specific Japanese elementary school?

- Is PTA membership voluntary? In what sense?
- In what sense is PTA part of civil society?
- Do the activities of the PTA contribute to intergenerational closure?
- What types of work do women do as part of their PTA duties?
- What types of work do men do as part of their PTA duties?
- What types of benefit/disadvantage are perceived to accrue from participation?

6. The Significance of the Proposed Research

It is anticipated that the research argued for in this paper would provide an understanding of one aspect of women's role in Japanese society and the gendered trajectories of their lives. It might incidentally contribute to an understanding of fathers' roles in supporting, or otherwise, their families' participation in the PTA. It also aims to give insight into the functioning of one aspect of civil society in Japan. Inside Japan the research may also be of use to PTAs themselves as a source of information that may ultimately lead to a clarification of problems and possibilities for Japanese PTAs.

The research may also be of use outside of Japan. Certainly the literature review has demonstrated that PTAs are a concern of international interest. Further research in this area may lead to increased understanding of the operation of PTAs, how PTAs are constructed and understood by their members. The research may be useful to governments when considering whether to promote or discourage PTAs, as there are other options for providing support for children and their schooling.

Conclusion

The proposed research moves away from the past focus on Asian mother's monitoring of homework and setting high standards of academic achievement, by providing a fuller picture of Japanese mothers' contribution to the creation of a school community, and ways in which intergenerational closure is built. Education is not limited to what takes place within the classroom. The proposed research is relevant to that wider view of child education, a view that educational environments include not only classrooms, but also school communities.

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