

Unvarnished Inside of Japanese School Education: A Case Study of Disciplinary Action to Principal Kubo in Osaka

In 2021, during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Japanese elementary school principal, Takashi Kubo (“Kubo-sensei”), submitted a “proposal” to the mayor of Osaka City and the superintendent of the Osaka City Board of Education. This action was prompted by the mayor’s call for an immediate transition to online teaching across all schools in Osaka City. Drawing on his school’s experience during the first year of the pandemic, the principal’s “proposal” offered a critique of this policy direction, emphasizing the profound and uneven harms that prolonged school closures imposed on children and their families. It also highlighted the problematic aspects of neoliberal policy orientations and the bureaucratization of educational administration, which tend to prioritize surficial notions of “efficiency” over pedagogical perspective in education.

Because the “proposal” was disseminated not only through formal channels but also via social networking services (SNS), it entered a broader public sphere. In response, the Osaka City Board of Education—holding personnel authority—issued an official admonition to the principal, which effectively functioned as a disciplinary administrative measure. This institutional reaction raises critical questions about the governance of professional voice within public education, particularly under conditions of crisis. At stake is not merely the propriety of an individual act, but the structural positioning of educators in relation to bureaucratic authority.

Subsequently, the “proposal” circulated internationally through automated translation technologies, generating transnational attention and dialogue. A series of online joint seminars involving researchers from more than ten countries transformed what might otherwise have remained a localized administrative dispute into a site of comparative and practical inquiry. This trajectory invites reconsideration of how local educational practices and conflicts can be rearticulated within global epistemic networks, thereby destabilizing the presumed boundedness of “domestically politicized” education systems.

This symposium takes the case of the “proposal” as an entry point for interrogating the structural dynamics of public education from a cross-national perspective. Rather than treating the case as exceptional, the presenters approach it as symptomatic of a broader configuration: the persistent tension between pedagogical professionalism and administrative bureaucracy.

Modern public education systems are characterized by layered governance structures in which micro-level pedagogical practices are embedded within meso-level local administration and macro-level state policy. Within this configuration, professional judgement is often subordinated to bureaucratic imperatives, particularly during crises, when centralized decision-making tends to intensify.

From a theoretical perspective, this case must be understood within the broader field of

educational research, which integrates analysis of both educational practice and systems. Without an approach that accounts for both micro- and macro-level dynamics, it is not possible to fully grasp the significance of the “proposal” and the disciplinary measure that followed. At the same time, the case reveals the potential for “voice” to exceed these constraints through alternative circuits of communication, including digital platforms and transnational scholarly exchange. In this sense, the case illuminates both the fragility and resilience of pedagogical professionalism under contemporary regimes of bureaucracy and neoliberalism.

A central research interest guiding this symposium is: “For whom is school education constituted?” This question shifts the focus from institutional maintenance to the normative and political considerations of pedagogical purposes. The “proposal” challenges a government-centered model of public education by foregrounding the lived experiences of teachers, children, and families. In doing so, it opens space for rethinking public education beyond conventional domestic framing.

The presenters conceptualize this as a dual movement: (I) toward localization, in which grassroots actors reclaim agency in shaping educational practices, and (II) toward globalization, in which educational discourse and critique circulate across national boundaries. Crucially, these two movements do not unfold independently but evolve while influencing one another.

This symposium consists of five dimensions: (1) The unvarnished inside of Japanese education; (2) the case of Kubo-sensei’s “proposal”; (3) local civic movements and global academic networks; (4) the need for transnational educational dialogue; and (5) implications for social change through education. Through these dimensions, the presenters aim to trace the broader structural processes through which a single case acquires wider social significance.

Ultimately, this symposium contributes to a critical re-examination of public education by situating the case within a micro–meso–macro analytical framework, highlighting the disjunctures that often exist between classroom practice and policy regimes. More importantly, it explores the possibility of “de-nationalizing” public education—not by dissolving institutional structures, but by reconfiguring the relationships among local practice, national governance, and global knowledge production. This perspective underscores the importance of grassroots democratic movements and transnational pedagogical dialogue as counterbalances to the centralizing tendencies of educational bureaucracy. In this regard, the case of Kubo-sensei is not merely a local Japanese issue, but a heuristic lens for understanding the contemporary condition of public education worldwide.
