Teaching Culture as National and Transnational: A Response to Teachers’ Work

by Kathryn M. Anderson-Levitt

This comment applauds the blending of global culture and national culture perspectives. It proposes a more systematic synthesis and discusses what it means to take both transnational parallels and cultural variation seriously.

In Teachers’ Work: Institutional Isomorphism and Cultural Variation in the U.S., Germany and Japan, LeTendre, Baker, Akiba, Goesling, and Wiseman (2001) argue against an overemphasis on national culture, particularly a static view of national culture, in comparative studies. They draw our attention to institutionalism or institutionalism, a theory about global parallels in schooling. However, in my reading of their article, they also merge institutionalism with an acknowledgement of cultural variation in a synthesis they call “global cultural dynamics.” Despite the jargon, the ideas in their essay demand our attention because they have important implications for both research and reform.

Institutionalism and Cultural Variation

It is high time that researchers outside a small circle in comparative education attended to institutionalism. Also called the world culture, world politics, or world systems approach, institutionalism is a grand sociological theory. Its principal argument is that nation-states adopt a global model of the modern state, which includes a global model of modern schooling, as part of the ideological work they do to imagine themselves (Finnemore, 1996). As a result, “much of the ‘culture’ of nations like Japan, the U.S., and Germany is embedded in shared common institutional forms” (LeTendre et al., 2001, p. 12). As LeTendre and his colleagues note, institutionalists find evidence of a global model in the spread of compulsory mass education (Ramirez & Boli, 1987), in the similarity of national goals for schooling (Fiala & Lanford, 1987), and in cross-national agreement on the basic content of an elementary curriculum (Meyer, Kamens, & Benavot, 1992).

Sweeping as it is, institutionalism does not cover everything. Its authors do not address teachers’ work or classroom processes, and that is where LeTendre and company dare to tread. Moreover, institutionalism significantly underplays the role of coercion in the diffusion of a global model or models (Anderson-Levitt & Alimasi, 2001; Ginsburg, Cooper, Raghu, & Zegarra, 1990), although that lapse is not relevant to the current discussion. It might not be clear from the discussion in Teachers’ Work, but institutionalism also seriously underestimates national cultural differences (Cummings, 1999).

LeTendre and colleagues build cultural variation back into institutionalism in the hybrid they call “global cultural dynamics.” Although they contrast global cultural dynamics with the national culture perspective, their own view recognizes national cultural differences as well as regional and local variation. They cite with favor anthropologists who have made convincing cases for national differences in teaching practices—Spindler and Spindler (1987) and Tobin, Wu, and Davidson (1989). LeTendre himself, although he studied with institutionalists like John Meyer and Francisco Ramirez, discovered through his own fieldwork in Japan and the United States that the organization of schooling and teachers’ practices in the two nations “differ remarkably” (LeTendre, 2000, p. xviii).

Filling in Gaps in the Synthesis

LeTendre and colleagues build their synthesis with data from surveys and interviews of middle-school mathematics teachers in Japan, Germany, and the United States conducted by the Third International Math–Science Study (TIMSS). They use the data to argue that there are national differences in the way teachers’ work is organized but transnational similarities in teachers’ beliefs and teaching practices. (Transnational is a more accurate word than global for findings that do not encompass the entire world.) However, examining a broader range of studies, one finds both differences and similarities in all three areas (Table 1).

LeTendre and his colleagues look in detail at the organization of Japanese, German, and U.S. math teachers’ work. They demonstrate significant national differences in teacher gender, degree of specialization in math, amount of planning time, and duties outside class. Yet researchers who zoom out to get a broader view also note general similarities, some of them cited in the same article: a common curriculum at least at the elementary level, broad similarities in national administrative structure. Other transnational similarities could be added, such as the “egg-carton” school structure in which one teacher works with a group of students isolated in a class more or less at the same grade level.

When LeTendre and company examine teachers’ beliefs, they find transnational similarities rather than differences. The German, U.S., and Japanese teachers attribute student performance to ability, effort, and family background (LeTendre et al., 2001), as do teachers in France and Belgium (Anderson-Levitt, 2002). But a closer focus also reveals significant national differences in teachers’ beliefs. For instance, Spindler and Spindler (1987) and Tobin, Wu, and Davidson (1989) illustrate powerful national differences in teachers’ understandings of the nature of the child.
LeTendre and company themselves imply that Japanese teachers define democracy differently than U.S. teachers, because their sense of democracy and sensitivity to student shame make them hesitate to use ability grouping (2001, p. 10). Similarly, teachers in France define equality differently from U.S. teachers and, as a result, likewise have resisted ability grouping (Anderson-Levitt, 2002).

Teaching practices, too, are both similar and different across countries. LeTendre and his colleagues argue from the TIMSS survey data that “Japanese, German and U.S. teachers all appear to be working from a very similar ‘cultural script’” (2001, p. 9), meaning that teachers in all three countries reported using similar proportions of whole-class instruction, seatwork, “individual guidance,” and pair work (pp. 8–9). Although they draw this conclusion from survey questionnaires only, they back it up with findings from the Classroom Environment Study by Lorin Anderson and his colleagues on actual practice in eight countries (Anderson, 1987; Anderson et al., 1989; LeTendre et al., 2001).

In sharp contrast, Stigler and Hiebert (1999b) analyzed data from the TIMSS videotapes and concluded that teachers in the United States use different cultural scripts for running lessons. However, they do not mean the same thing by cultural scripts. Whereas LeTendre and his colleagues use script to label what Anderson called a broad “repertoire of behaviors” such as whole-class instruction and seatwork, Stigler and Hiebert use script to mean a “way of structuring a classroom session and sequencing the instructional activities” (1999b, p. 127). For them, in the cultural script of a typical mathematics lesson in Japan, teachers present but do not solve the problem for the day and then have students work on it and related problems (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999a, pp. 79–80). U.S. teachers typically follow a different script, demonstrating how the solve the problem of the day and then assigning students practice on related problems (1999a, pp. 80–81). From the same limited repertoire of whole-class instruction and seatwork, Japanese and U.S. teachers construct different kinds of lessons. The difference matters, for attacking problems before seeing a model solution encourages a different kind of learning than attacking them after seeing a solution.²

More Than a Difference in Focus

LeTendre and his colleagues cite data selectively. More complete information shows that schools around the world are similar in general but different when examined in detail.³

However this is not the important lesson to draw from Teachers’ Work. LeTendre and company make a subtler point, even though they do not follow through in their data analysis. By taking both institutionalism and cultural variation seriously, they acknowledge that each perspective, on its own, misses something crucial. It follows that we cannot simply shift the focus from the transnational to the local as we please. We must view schooling from both near and afar simultaneously.

A truly hybrid theory would require that we recognize the local within the transnational. This means, first, acknowledging that local educators reshape global innovations as fast as they import them.⁴ Second, it means recognizing that the global model to which institutionalists refer is abstracted from many specific ways of doing schooling. We cannot think of generalities like whole-class lecture-recitation without imagining, say, “my second-grade year with Mrs. Berman” or “the class I observed in that West African town.” When Anderson says that “the nature of classroom teaching is quite similar in all countries” (1987, p. 81), he is abstracting from a very wide range of classroom behaviors, as he himself admits parenthetically: ‘teachers talk ‘at’ or ‘with’ their students (from 35 to 82 percent of the time across the countries)” and “students work on assignments at the desk or at laboratory tables (from 15 to 47 percent of the time)” (Anderson, 1987, p. 82).

At the same time, a hybrid theory would require that we recognize the transnational in the local. Even though a global model

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Table 1. Examples of Similarities and Differences in Teachers’ Work Across Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Organization of work</th>
<th>Beliefs and values</th>
<th>Teaching practices</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Similarities</td>
<td>A common elementary curriculum (Meyer et al., 1992)</td>
<td>Attributions to students` ability, effort, emotional stability, and home life in Japan, Germany, Belgium, France, and United States (LeTendre et al., 2001; Anderson-Levitt, 2002)</td>
<td>Whole-class instruction and seatwork in many countries (Anderson, 1987; Anderson et al., 1989; LeTendre et al., 2001)</td>
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<td>National education ministries with centralized policy (Ramirez &amp; Boli, 1987)</td>
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<td>Pair work and individual guidance in Japan and United States (LeTendre et al., 2001)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Age-graded, “egg-carton” schools</td>
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means different things in different local settings, it is hardly meaningless. As different as the Japanese and U.S. math lessons are, both are nonetheless lessons, and specifically whole-class lecture–recitation and seatwork lessons conducted by one teacher with a group of children isolated in a classroom. Comparing a lesson to its alternatives makes the significance clear. In other places and in other eras, people have used many other means to conduct formal instruction, from monochannelary classrooms with 1,000 pupils to one-on-one apprenticeship with an adult, to on-the-job training, to dialogues with a master (Henry, 1976). The repertoire to which Anderson, Ryan, and Shapiro and LeTendre et al. point really is, as they claim, a small repertoire within this larger universe, however creatively teachers in different countries use it.

Implications for Reform

LeTendre and company worry about the danger of adopting idealized solutions of another nation, such as the Japanese way to teach math. However, their synthesis also implies other lessons for reform. On the one hand, reformers who do not recognize a transnational model as a cultural model—as just one cultural model among others—take the current form of schooling too much for granted. They cannot think outside the box because they do not even see the box. On the other hand, reformers who do not know how local variation works are doomed to discover over and over the “implementation problem” (Jacob, 1999). People will never borrow an idea from Japan—or for that matter, from San Francisco or the school next door—without transforming it into something new.

Teachers’ Work demonstrates the importance of comparative research—sweeping research that compares educational models across different eras as well as contemporary cross-national comparisons. Meaning lies in contrasts. We cannot understand, or reform, a U.S. math lesson until we see not only how it differs from a lesson in Japan but how both differ from the wider universe of alternatives.

NOTES
1 One can debate whether international agencies and bilateral donors promote a single, internally inconsistent model or competing models.
2 To draw a similar example from first-grade reading instruction, establishing comprehension before reading the text—as teachers in France typically do by having the students generate the text themselves (Anderson-Levitt, 2002)—differs significantly from establishing comprehension after reading the text, as happens in classic U.S. lessons (Durkin, 1984).
3 The author wishes to thank an anonymous reviewer for sharpening this point.
4 Even an icon of global standardization like McDonald’s takes on distinct local forms in different countries (Watson, 1997).
5 An analogy from linguistics comes to mind: A phoneme like /p/ is just an abstraction from the many different ways that people actual pronounce the sound at the beginning of “pat,” the end of “cup,” and so on. Nonetheless, that abstraction means something when contrasted with its alternatives, such as the /b/ in “bat” or “cub.”

REFERENCES