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Lucy K. Spence and Yuriko Kite

Abstract

Focusing on writing instruction within an era of international curricular reform, this study analysed classroom observations, educator interviews, and documents related to Japanese elementary writing instruction. A deductive approach using discourses of writing framework and an inductive approach to Japanese cultural practices uncovered beliefs and practices of writing instruction. Discourses of writing such as skills, creativity, process, genre, and social practice were found within cultural practices such as repetition, experience, and inner-most heart. These discourses influenced Japanese writing instruction, yet also created tension between cultural practices and current reform efforts aimed at expression and independent thinking.

Introduction

Educators and policy makers in Japan and other nations have responded to a competitive and globally interconnected world through curriculum reform efforts. While reform efforts seek to develop students’ ability to think and write, to address an audience, and form opinions, writing instruction is complicated by the close connection between writing, identity, and cultural norms. This study explored writing instructional practices in Japanese elementary schools under current curricular reforms. The study schools displayed beliefs and practices that are unique to Japanese classrooms as well as beliefs and practices that are shared with other countries.

Japan is in the midst of intensive educational reform. Major reforms in 2002 decreased the school week to five days and called for integrated studies. This was followed by a dip in some international tests and the reforms were gradually modified and more hours were added for the teaching of conventional academic subjects (Cave, 2016). Currently, educational reform efforts involve four broad concerns: a declining population, perceived decline in moral values, excessive rote learning, and changes in society and the economy accelerated by globalisation and information technology (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, MEXT, 2011a, 2013).

In order to prepare students for a globalised world, the Course of Study revision (MEXT, 2011b) includes ‘the enhancement of record-keeping, explanation, critique, dissertation,
and debate learning in various subjects’ (p. 6). According to the Course of Study, listening, speaking, reading, and writing should be integrated and balanced. Students should:

- Learn to express themselves orally and in writing
- Read their work to peers and exchange advice
- Investigate issues of their choosing and write to express opinions or report activities.

These are in addition to instruction in organisation, expression, penmanship, and grammar. Moreover, the Course of Study highlights classical Japanese literature in order that students might gain a firm sense of Japanese identity. We sought to understand how teachers and curriculum materials introduce these elements of the Course of Study for Japanese.

**Literature review**

In order to uncover beliefs and practices, we focused on discourses embedded in curriculum documents, interviews, and observations. Written composition theorist Ivanič (2004) developed an analytical framework based on beliefs and practices of writing instruction, which she calls discourses of writing. The discourses of writing broadly describe values, beliefs, and practices that undergird situated actions, decisions, and how things are worded by teachers and in curriculum materials.

Ivanič found six discourses teachers drew upon in their theory and practice: skills, creativity, process, genre, social practices, and sociopolitical. The skills discourse of writing involves learning how to use sound–symbol relationships, syntax, and grammar; the parts that make up a whole written composition. The creativity discourse focuses on style and meaning making. The process discourse focuses on how writing is composed, rather than written products. The genre discourse focuses on teaching a particular text type. The social practices discourse involves writing for a purpose within a social context. The sociopolitical discourse is closely associated with social practices. It is a view that writing is shaped by social forces and relations of power and has consequences for the identity of the writer. Ivanič’s framework is useful for analysing Japanese writing instruction in order to trace the theory behind teaching practices.

Developed in the UK, Ivanič’s framework has also been used in the United States and Canada and provides a common approach for theorising writing instruction in a global context. Three previous studies using Ivanič’s discourses of writing informed our research, one in Canada (Stagg-Peterson, 2012) and two in the US (McCarthey, Woodard, & Kang, 2014; Spence & Cardenas-Cortez, 2011). The Canadian study analysed curriculum, while the US studies analysed writing instruction and teacher interviews. All studies revealed instructional practices that combined two or more discourses of writing, a practice Ivanič (2004) promotes. The process discourse of writing was most prevalent in the Canadian curriculum study and was most frequently combined with genre instruction. In the McCarthey, Woodard & Kang study, teachers combined a number of discourses that were congruent with their experiences rather than with the district-adopted curriculum. The teachers negotiated the tension between skills and social practices approach that arose from their own writing histories, professional development experiences, and the district curriculum.
The sociopolitical discourse was not used by teachers in the McCarthey, Woodard & Kang study and the Canadian curriculum study revealed limited sociopolitical discourse. However, in the US study, the sociopolitical discourse was significant to the persuasive pieces written in one third grade classroom. That classroom, located in the US southwest, had a majority of Spanish/English bilingual students and a bilingual teacher. The children wrote persuasive pieces about topics such as gun violence, litter, and drug abuse prevention.

Given the current emphasis on educating students to be strong communicators in an interconnected world, we were interested in the discourses of writing instruction we would find in Japanese curriculum documents, interviews with teachers and parents, and in classroom observations. Because Ivanič’s discourses of writing framework were developed in the UK, it was necessary to additionally draw upon Japanese culture and history to account for cultural influences on writing instruction in Japan and to review the literature on Japanese elementary school writing available in English. There are no studies of Japanese writing instruction which draw upon Ivanič’s discourses, however, Dotera (1998) described Japanese first- and second-grade classrooms as having a process-orientation:

This process-orientation entails a variety of teaching activities including reading aloud or chat-like interaction to involve the maximum number of students in story reading. Despite this focus on the process of verbal interaction, though, it is interesting to note that Japanese students’ academic achievement most often appears to be evaluated in paper work, as a product, separately from verbal interaction. (p. 42)

Below, additional studies shed further light on the attention to the process and products involved in Japanese writing instruction.

**Japanese elementary school writing**

Previous studies of Japanese elementary schools have touched upon writing instruction. Cave (2007) reported that instructional practices relied heavily on the nationally approved language arts textbooks, although teachers made modifications to these. In another study, Japanese writing lessons addressed the purposes for writing and effective language use (Stevenson, 1991). Sato (2003) described a writing curriculum that focused on effective description, sentence composition, and Japanese character writing.

Expressive writing for the development of children’s minds, attitudes, and emotions was pioneered in the 1920s and 30s and continues to be found in elementary school writing instruction in Japan today (Satsuki, 2011). An emphasis on writing to develop children’s minds, attitudes and emotions can be found in the practice of nikki (diary or journal) writing. This type of writing was implemented prior to WWII as a means for students to write about their experiences and reflect on social situations (Richardson & Konishi, 2013). Diaries continue to be used throughout elementary and into middle school with an emphasis on writing about personal experiences. Richardson and Konishi (2013) wrote, ‘During our most recent research trip to Tokyo, we asked teachers if they invited their students to journal at home or about their lives. They largely reported, “yes”’. Shimahara (2013) also found that ‘encouraging students to write diaries is a well-established, common practice in Japan’ (p. 138) and they offer ‘a vital communications channel between them [teachers] and their students’. In Japan, diary writing incorporates ‘writing
that comes from one’s personal experiences or observations’ (Kitagawa & Kitagawa, 2007, p. 53; see also Satsuki, 2011). Diaries shared between students in a class and between students and teacher are used as a tool in ‘life guidance’ (Roland & Bjork, 1998, p. 267). The Japanese method encourages students to write about everyday experiences, to report direct observations, and for teachers to give consistent written feedback in order to connect with the writer. The written comments often focus on content rather than correction. This approach to writing in elementary school seems to persevere amid current educational reform efforts.

In this study we explore a perspective of writing as more than a set of skills, but also as personal development. We connect this perspective to teachers’ beliefs and practices in a time of curriculum reform in Japan. Our study contributes to a global awareness of writing instruction, as countries strive to integrate cultural practices with practices that will meet the needs of students in a technically sophisticated, globally interconnected society.

**Research method**

We combined document analysis with observations and interviews in order to contextualise and triangulate our findings (Denizen, 1970). Two researchers, Spence and Kite collaborated in this study. Spence was an elementary-level teacher educator at a university in the south eastern US. Kite was a native Japanese and a professor of linguistics at a Japanese university.

Kite obtained entry to the schools by making inquiries and receiving recommendations of educators interested in writing instruction. Teachers who were affiliated with Kite’s university also made introductions for us. We observed a total of 10 classrooms in 4 different schools in the Kansai region. Observations lasted between 20 and 50 minutes. We returned to three classrooms (one urban public, one suburban public, and one suburban private) for follow-up observations in order to augment our observational data from this range of school contexts. We interviewed eight teachers and two parents and we collected curriculum documents from grades one through six. The observations and interviews also encompassed grades one through six. This data helped us answer the following research question: What beliefs of writing instruction can be discerned from educational documents, classroom observations, and interviews in Japan?

**Context**

The context of this study included four elementary schools in a large city and its outlying areas: two public schools and two private schools. In Japan, nine years of compulsory education are provided tuition-free in public schools. Consumable textbooks are also provided free of charge. Private elementary school teacher salaries are partially funded by the Japanese government. The private schools we studied also used the Japanese government-approved textbooks. Since 99% of elementary schools in Japan are public, findings regarding the private schools may not represent practices found in public schools.

One of the public schools was in the city centre and served grades one through six. The school had served the community for approximately one hundred-thirty years and the community had a declining number of families with school-aged children. The families represented a mix of socioeconomic backgrounds. The second public school was
located in a suburban region of the city. It also served grades one through six. The school was approximately 50 years old. Compared with the city school, this community was thriving with young families and a mix of socioeconomic backgrounds. The third was a private school located in a smaller city adjacent to the large city and was affiliated with a local university. It was four years old and served grades one through six. Many of the students were from affluent families and commuted from other neighbourhoods. The fourth school was a Catholic girls’ private school in an industrial, urban area. It was 60 years old and served grades one through six. The children commuted to school by a combination of train and bus from the surrounding area. Most of the families were upper middle class and non-Catholic, as modern Japanese are typically comfortable with a variety of religious beliefs (Dolan & Worden, 1994).

**Data collection**

We visited 4 elementary schools, 10 classrooms in all as shown in Table 1. We video-recorded or took field notes in classrooms and conducted interviews with teachers and two parents from different schools. Materials included lesson descriptions written by teachers across Japan and published in professional journals or books available in a local university library, prefaces to anthologies of elementary children’s writing (assembled and published by schools), and curriculum plans developed by the school districts in this study. One of the study teachers gave us four sets of language arts textbooks for grades one through six as shown in Table 2. The textbooks were published by independent publishers and authorised by MEXT. Working together, a researcher and researcher/translator systematically searched the documents for writing lessons then noted the source, grade level, genre taught, teaching methods, and discourses of writing instruction.

Kite or another native Japanese linguist provided simultaneous English translation for Spence during each school observation and interview. The linguists also assisted in analysis of the journals, books, and curriculum materials.

**Analysis**

Deductive coding of transcripts and teaching materials was carried out collaboratively by the two researchers using Ivanič’s (2004) discourses of writing as an analytical framework.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom observations</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Number of observations</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private university affiliated school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private Catholic girls school</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public city school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public suburban school</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Each transcript, interview, and document was coded for the discourses of writing. The prefaces of the two anthologies written by teachers were also coded. The children’s writing itself was not coded. We monitored the document analysis with a table that included the title of the document, genres, lesson information, and discourses of writing. Data sources were triangulated throughout the on-going data collection and analysis.

In addition to deductive analysis using Ivanič’s framework, we inductively coded for Japanese cultural practices as additions or extensions of Ivanič’s discourses. We wrote memos as patterns in Japanese cultural practices began to emerge and these were grouped into four categories: repetition, experience, inner-most heart, and outward expression. We returned to the data and counted instances of each category in the data in order to triangulate our findings across the four schools (Table 3). The count revealed the categories held up across schools. Due to varied lengths of interviews, specific lessons being taught during our observations, and other factors, the number of instances of each category varied, but each category was sufficiently present across the schools and the categories were also represented in the teacher professional journals.

We looked for patterns across schools, interviews, curriculum materials, and educational publications and developed four new categories that reflected both traditional and contemporary cultural practices. In order to verify the relation to Japanese cultural practices, we referred to books, articles, and digital documents describing Japanese education, history, and culture. We returned to the coded data to explore links between the discourses of writing and the four categories, analysing each transcript line by line, coding each new instance of the category.

We wrote our initial findings in English then translated them into Japanese. Japanese or English versions were given to four teachers for member checking. We made changes based on additional information provided by the teachers and by going back to our data sources, books, and articles on Japanese history and culture.

Findings

With varying frequency, the observations, interviews, and documents contained each of the discourses of writing instruction: skills, creativity, process, genre, social practices, and sociopolitical. We present these findings within four additional categories: repetition, experience, inner-most heart, and outward expression. This is followed by a discussion regarding the tension between inner-most heart and outward expression related to the

<table>
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<th>Table 2. Curriculum materials.</th>
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<td>Professional journals</td>
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</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 3. Number of observations or interview references for each category by school.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom observations, documents and interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private suburban school</td>
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<td>Private city school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public city school</td>
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<td>Public suburban school</td>
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</table>

**Repetition**

Repetition often appeared with lessons that reflected a skills discourse of writing instruction, which took the form of recitation, re-reading, copying, memorisation, and tracing. Skills that were taught through repetition included learning new kanji and vocabulary. As Wray (1999) wrote, ‘Japanese pupils learn to do a task well and proper attitudes and forms must precede it at every step of the process and it must be practiced over and over with due attention to mastering the basic skills’ (p. 62). Skills and repetition were also present with the genre discourse of writing instruction.

Skills were taught through repetition across all four schools, curriculum materials, and educational publications. A clear example of learning skills through repetition came from a fourth-grade class in which students learned a new kanji (character derived from Chinese writing). The teacher stood in front of her 28 students and wrote the kanji for ‘order’ in the air, using large, sweeping gestures. The children followed along, counting out the number of strokes in unison, then repeated the process. Then they practiced writing the kanji in their workbook, which they took to the teacher to inspect. They continued writing the kanji a total of 20 times and within 6 minutes, the kanji lesson was complete and the class began a lesson from the language arts textbook. Kanji lessons are taught at every grade level and are an important aspect of the language arts curriculum since one must know about 3000 kanji to read a Japanese newspaper. The teaching of kanji is a clear example of the cultural practice of repetition of basic skills.

Repetition through reading was also observed. The idea of oral reading has been a Japanese tradition since the Edo period (1603–1868) and involves reading aloud and memorising Chinese and Japanese classics (Maeda, 2004). In the schools we observed, the passages were read several times: by the teacher, in unison by the whole class, and independently by individual students. One lesson idea book described repetitive reading and reflected a skills discourse of writing. ‘Read an essay in a textbook many times, very quickly. Write about the essay in two minutes, and then talk it over with a neighbour’. This lesson was intended for sixth grade with the goal of developing the ability to summarise the text in one’s own words.

Another example of repetition was observed in a first-grade class. The students were in the process of reading and writing about spring. They read stories in the language arts textbook in unison, focusing on expressive reading. Then the teacher encouraged the children to recite the story from memory.

What is important when you read? Slowly, and pause where appropriate. Read without hesitation like water running. You might stumble, but do not stop, don’t hesitate … You didn’t start in unison, so you have to start again … At the end, I want you to do it again by memory.

This teacher’s goal was for the students to internalise the sound of the Japanese language through the use of repetitive choral readings and memorisation. These first graders were just beginning to read, and the repetition, choral reading, and memorisation helped them develop basic reading skills.

Fourth-grade students were observed reading and writing a passage from the textbook. They read chorally then copied parts of the passage, which the teacher had written on the
chalkboard. The teacher wrote the main idea for each paragraph, while acknowledging the students’ ideas. By repeatedly reading and writing various paragraphs, combined with a discussion analysing the passage, the students learned the skill of paragraph writing. The repeated reading and writing were closely connected to the genre discourse of writing as the class described the paragraph in terms of a beginning and main idea. Another example of genre was found in educational publications. The four steps, *kishōten-ketsu* includes an introduction, development, twist, and conclusion. We also found a *Sakubun* recipe, laying out the steps for writing a story. These lessons reflected a genre discourse of writing in which text types are taught explicitly. The examples above highlight repetition in relation to both genre and skills discourses of writing.

**Experience**

As noted above, we found writing lessons that reflected more than one discourse of writing such as skills and genre. Three discourses of writing were found in combination with experience: creativity, process, and social practices. Some lessons focused explicitly on experience and some teachers insisted that experience was absolutely necessary to writing.

One first-grade private school teacher was an excellent example of combining these discourses. He began his lesson asking the children, ‘What are the techniques of good writing?’ He elicited their ideas, and then said, ‘I want to take a look at what you wrote in your diary’. He displayed one child’s diary onto a screen using a document projector. The child, Yoshi (pseudonym) read his diary entry to the class and the teacher asked, ‘What is good in Yoshi’s writing?’ The children offered several examples and the teacher explained that the power of Yoshi’s writing was in its action. ‘It says, “we planted [the seed]” Yoshi said what he actually did’.

This first-grade example reveals the importance of experience, as the first graders wrote about the vegetables they planted. Opportunities for experience were provided in school, on school field trips, or at home. A process approach was evident as the children shared their writing with the whole class or with a partner in order to think about what makes good writing. This teacher also valued creativity, as he said during an interview, ‘The children have ideas about what to write and I honour whatever the children say’.

The creativity and process discourses of writing were also found in a lesson idea book. The author suggested that rather than memorising a poem, students should write their own poetry booklets. Students should first observe animals, then write poems about the animals, and finally bind the poems into booklets. Through observing the animals, the children developed ideas for their poetry. They engaged in a process of writing through generating ideas, writing, and making a booklet to share with friends and family. The experience of observing animals was essential to this lesson.

The social practices discourse of writing was evident when community experiences were the topic of writing. The language arts textbooks instructed students to interview community members and write a report about special products or events. Another social practice in each school was diary writing either during the school day, on weekends or week nights. A parent from one suburban school complained about the amount of time she put into guiding her child to write in the diary, yet she was also pleased with what her child was able to accomplish in writing. One fourth-grade teacher gave
her students a special notebook for conducting personal inquiry at home. In an interview, she explained the comments she wrote after every entry.

Not only ‘good job,’ ‘well done,’ that kind of phrase, but very specific feedback toward the content of that entry. Also, ‘I’m with you.’ ‘I feel the same way.’ That kind of comment.

Teachers wrote comments to empathise and guide. In the lower grades, diary sharing among classmates encouraged children to build trust and empathy among the class. In the upper grades, diary sharing was used to develop an awareness of society.

**Inner-most heart**

Diaries encouraged reflective writing and sensitivity to children’s personal development. A sixth-grade teacher described his approach to writing instruction, which focused on the child’s essence.

Most teachers would correct this way of writing, because this is not really the correct way to write it, but this is her essence, and I want to respect that. I didn’t like to write when I was young, so that is why I do not want to force them to write in a certain way.

This is one example of inner-most heart, writing with one’s own essence. The idea of writing with one’s essence or inner-most heart reflects a creativity discourse of writing, in which the motivation and inspiration for writing come from within.

Poetry writing allowed students to tap into their inner-most heart and creativity. Both poetry reading and writing were used to develop a sensitive heart. Poetry was embedded throughout the language arts curriculum, educational publications, and interviews. It was included in every language arts textbook and children were encouraged to write poetry, sometimes publishing their poems in the class newspaper.

Two of the teachers in this study highlighted poetry in their curriculum and the first-grade teacher published a book of his students’ poetry. Describing a third grade class, one parent reported, ‘I remember at that time my daughter enjoyed making tanka (poetry) everyday, everywhere. When she saw something she just immediately came up with a tanka’. Thus, classroom practice overflowed to this child’s home life and activities outside of school. Tanka writing became a social practice. Through exploring inner-most heart, poetry writing reflected the social practice and creativity discourses of writing instruction.

Another frequent practice associated with inner-most heart was writing impressions. Students wrote impressions of school events in order to explore their thoughts and feelings regarding a particular topic. In one school, impressions were written across the curriculum. For example, students wrote impressions after making paintings of classmates playing musical instruments. One teacher said, ‘At the end of the class, the students have to write. ‘What point did we learn? Did I understand? Was I aware? There is a time to write at the end of the class’. In this school, time was allotted in every class period to reflect on their learning through writing. Reflective writing required students to look within.

Writing to reflect and to record experience was evident in classroom observations, interviews, the curriculum, and publications. However, there seemed to be less of this type of writing than in the past. According to one teacher,

It used to be, students wrote about the immediate, the experience. It was part of the core curriculum. We thought that fixing it would be damaging it. But it was said, that was not real explicit teaching. So now the curriculum has shifted and we explicitly teach students how to write.
This statement illustrates the tension between writing from inner-most heart and writing for outward expression.

**Outward expression**

Our data revealed a tension between students writing for themselves, to see things more deeply, and writing to express an opinion to others. Some educators believed there was not enough emphasis on expressing one’s opinions. This was found in curriculum documents, educational publications, and interviews. A former sixth-grade teacher, who became a principal held this view.

Our weakness is that we’re not able to express ourselves well. In a rice culture, you work collaboratively, not voice your own opinion. Wa, harmony is valued. The most respected person says what and when to do it. Unlike the Europeans, who always express themselves, we are not trained to be explicit and express ourselves. It is not really valued. We cannot stay in that stage anymore because the world has changed. You need both, you need to negotiate diplomatically. We need wa, but Japan is changing. It’s a historical reason that affects who we are. We are in an age where you cannot be just Japanese. We need to raise the minds of the little ones to be expressive.

This educator felt strongly about the need for outward expression and as a sixth-grade teacher, he worked to develop his students’ expository writing on subjects they chose themselves, such as space rockets and the symbolism of colours. He felt that such teaching involves writing for authentic purposes of interest to the students. This focus on authentic purposes reflects a social practice discourse of writing.

In another school, we observed a sixth-grade teacher’s lesson on how to critique ancient Japanese art. This teacher valued outward expression and in this lesson, the class, and teacher brainstormed the students’ critical opinions.

‘Oh, Nakamora says, “although they are called gods, they look like demons.” Don’t you think that is interesting? Do you have some opinions about it?’ The discussion continued with children speaking enthusiastically to each other from across the room as the teacher carefully wrote their ideas on the chalkboard. This teacher encouraged the students to express various perspectives on the topic and to argue to defend their opinions.

Outward expression was embedded in genres such as critique, opinion, and persuasion. In the language arts textbooks for fifth and sixth grades, these genres were introduced by drawing upon social issues such as Japan’s trash problem, Hiroshima survivors, and gender issues in language. These lessons reflected a sociopolitical discourse of writing. Lessons that built upon student experiences and authentic writing such as interviewing community members about special products from the student’s hometown reflected a social practices discourse of writing. Starting in fifth grade, students began to look outward at society around them. They researched and wrote about their communities and social issues in Japan and prepared presentations about topics they chose to explore. One teacher described the scope of writing instruction:

So diary or letter writing for lower grades. Expository writing for third grade up to fifth and sixth grade. This includes data collection and interviews. You have to organize your writing and learn how to express.

Beginning in third grade we observed an emphasis on explicitly teaching writing structures and preparing students for outward expression. Yet traditional practices such as
poetry writing were also deeply rooted in educators’ beliefs about writing. In the following section we explore the tension between reform efforts and cultural norms.

Discussion

Cultural practices

We begin this discussion by going back to the skills and genre discourses of writing. These were often instantiated through repetition. In the west, we think of teaching skills through repetition as too narrowly focused on lower-order thinking. However, in Japan, teaching skills through repetition is a cultural practice. Repetition and memorising for learning can be seen as part of the historical context of Japanese education. Learning to write through repetition has social consequences for the Japanese student who is learning in a society where repetition is valued and has a long history in education. Such learning also has consequences for attending cram school to prepare for entrance exams for prestigious middle schools, high schools, and colleges (Cave, 2016). From this perspective, Japanese language arts are a vehicle for developing students’ cultural identity. Befu (1986) as cited in Sato (1998) describes ‘role perfectionism’ (p. 122), which refers to developing the ability to do a task well, with high attention to detail. In many of our observations, role perfectionism was encouraged by direct instruction to the whole class. We observed students listening intently to the teacher, reading, responding, and reciting in unison. They practiced calligraphy through repeated writing and careful character formation. Teachers wrote on the chalkboard as the children watched. Teaching through repetition and demonstration is embedded in Japanese culture and can be seen in lessons involving traditional Japanese arts such as dance, tea ceremony, and karate (De Mente, 2003).

Next, we look at how creativity, process, and social practice discourses of writing instruction were influenced by Japanese cultural practices. Diary writing reflected interpersonalism (Sato, 1998). Throughout the elementary school years, students write personal experiences in a diary with assistance from their parents. This forms a strong link between the teacher, parents, and child. Through diary entries, the teacher learns about the student’s home life. Interpersonalism is developed through sharing diary entries with the teacher and with other children in the class and suggests a social practices discourse of writing. In addition, a process discourse of writing was exhibited by the first-grade teacher in our study as he engaged his students in discussions about one another’s written works. Such discussions seem essential to life guidance in Japanese classrooms (Roland & Bjork, 1998). Through discussing student writing, teachers and classmates come to know one another’s life experiences and can help each other get through difficult times. One of the educational reform efforts in Japan focuses on a concern for social awareness and respect for rules and morals among youth. Cultural practices that address these issues are diary writing and life-experience writing, which provide a vehicle for life guidance by teachers, classmates, and parents.

Educational reforms and the sociopolitical discourse of writing

Another issue raised by educational reform efforts is dealing with changing conditions of the times and society. In this vein, several educators in our study said that students
should be taught to express their ideas and opinions, rather than always accepting the direction of their seniors. This involves writing from an authoritative stance, rather than for personal development. This thinking is clearly a result of curricular reform efforts. Historically, Japanese have been influenced by deep-rooted hierarchical social norms. Traditional social norms in the workplace, schools, and clubs include showing great respect and preference to older or more senior members. Therefore, a younger or more novice person takes a humble position, rather than asserting their own ideas and opinions. This practice provides continuity in Japanese culture and develops self-identity. The culture is perpetuated in part by passing along attitudes and skills to the young through the Japanese school system. Current educational reform efforts however, complicate this reluctance to assert oneself. New guidelines mandated by MEXT (2013) promote outward expression:

Promote initiatives to improve language activities through all subjects to effectively nurture the abilities to think, make decisions, and express oneself … and … acquire the skills for independence, collaboration, and creativity (lifelong). (Section 2, part 2)

In Japan, traditional instruction co-exists with the demands of a technologically mature, globalised society. The tension between traditional Japanese behaviour and new expectations reflects the sociopolitical reality of today’s increasingly competitive global economy. Japan as well as other nations are concerned with providing students with the attitudes and abilities to live in an interconnected world and a knowledge economy, one in which nations are investing in human intellect and creativity as key economic strategies (Takayama, 2013). Japanese educators must strike a balance in developing healthy individuals and a strong society.

Writing as an outward expression of critique and opinion might be seen as existing in tension with writing that draws upon the inner-most heart. However, these two aspects of writing might be coming together in new ways. Both inner-most heart and outward expression can be used to create a curriculum that encourages students to explore their personal feelings, interests, and affinities and to use these personal attributes to inquire, research, and write about topics that are close to their heart. Informative, persuasive, and opinion genres can be used to express one’s inner-most heart outwardly.

Another way these two aspects of writing can come together is through drawing upon Japanese interpersonal identity and the social practice discourse of writing in order to express inner-most heart through writing about life experiences (Kitagawa & Kitagawa, 2007; Satsuki, 2011). Life-experience writing can be extended to explore social conditions and to take action to improve conditions in students’ own lives and communities. Extending life-experience writing into an outward expression would develop a sociopolitical discourse of writing instruction that could tie together inner-most heart and outward expression.

Conclusion

International approaches to writing instruction

In Japan, like other countries around the globe, educators are working towards educational reform that meets twenty-first century needs. Yet education is also tasked with imparting culture to a new generation. The Japanese teachers in this study practiced
within the crossroads of traditional culture and a complex, interconnected, global future. Similar tensions were found in McCarthey et al.’s (2014) study of discourses of writing in the US and Stagg-Peterson’s (2012) Canadian study.

In the US study, teachers negotiated the increased standardisation of writing instruction in their schools, while trying to adhere to a social practice approach to writing. Skills and social practice discourses were also observed in Japan, but did not seem to create tensions for teachers. The social practice discourse of writing emphasised experience as important to writing, for example: researching local products, interviewing community members who created these products, and reporting the findings to an audience. Experience and social practice seemed essential to writing instruction. Simultaneously, extensive use of repetition for learning reflected a skills discourse of writing instruction.

In Canada, Stagg–Peterson analysed discourses of writing in grade six Canadian curriculum and traced movement from a creativity discourse to a genre and process discourse. The creativity discourse of the 1980s in Canada focused on individuality and personal experience and continues to influence Canadian curriculum. However, in the 1990s, the Canadian curriculum turned towards genre and process discourses. Genre was the largest component of the Canadian writing curriculum. In both Canada and Japan, there seemed to be a movement and accompanying tensions between a creativity discourse and a genre discourse. In Japan there was tension between an emphasis on journal writing and explicit expository instruction. This arose through an increased emphasis on outward expression as important for clear communication. Outward expression was associated with expository genre instruction.

Finally, our observations and interviews did not reveal sociopolitical discourses of writing. However, the Japanese language arts curriculum offered some opportunities to explore sociopolitical topics such as the plight of Hiroshima survivors. In a globally connected world, the sociopolitical discourse of writing seems to be necessary, therefore teachers should be provided with an understanding of how to address sociopolitical issues in the writing classroom. As nations continue to be concerned with internationalisation and the global economy, writing is an increasingly important mode of communication. Curricular reforms in nations such as Japan, the US, and Canada reflect a desire to develop students’ ability to communicate clearly. At the same time, history, culture, and teacher beliefs continue to impact how writing is taught. Our study of Japanese writing instruction adds to a growing body of research exploring this complex topic. Further research is needed. Exploration of teachers’ beliefs of writing instruction in additional countries would add to our understanding of the intersections between culture and educational reform.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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