

Review of Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited by Tobin, Joseph; Hsueh, Yeh & Karasawa, Mayumi.

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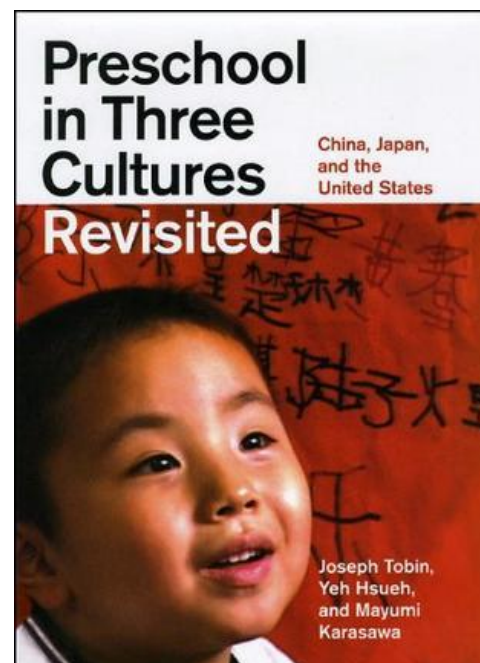
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This is a book I strongly recommend. It is a rich text presenting a cross cultural, cross national, and cross time account of preschool education. The research presented builds on the work conducted by Joseph Tobin and colleagues for *Preschool in Three Cultures* originally published in 1989. In that book, the thesis was that in the mid-1980s the distinctions found in schools across countries were to be thought of primarily as cultural differences. While the first book's focus was on how a cross-national and cross-cultural research perspective could inform what preschools are about, this book, using the original three cultures frame as a point of



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departure, integrates yet another layer: time. In that respect, it builds on a historical framework, integrating it with an ethnographic perspective, to better explore how recent societal changes have produced a specific set of modifications in China, Japan, and the United States; and how these changes, in turn, have an impact on everyday school practices.

Since in this book the focus is on change over time across three nations, and on whether globalization has had an important impact on their preschool educational systems (or whether their localness is still strong), it is worthwhile to reflect on the term *revisited*. *Re-visited*, a key signifier in the title, means that two points in time are taken as reference to look at what has changed and what still remains. The points of reference are three schools in China, Japan and the United States visited in 1984 and 2002. Additionally, to this revisiting of places already seen and analyzed, this new book portrays fieldwork in three more schools in each of the countries. It is returning to some (place) already seen that is at stake. There is yet another meaning to *revisited*, closer to *revising*, by taking into account those aspects that had been understated, or not completely developed in the first book, and addressing them in the second one. The treatment of the contextual forces underlying cultural practices as an observer may identify and analyze them and the ways in which the audiovisual tools are used during the documentation phase are two prominent examples of the revising done by Tobin *et al.*

If those forms of revising make this book appealing to educational historians and to educational anthropologists, other qualities in this book will be of interest for other potential readers. First, from a rhetorical point of view, it is a very well written text, and thus, it is interesting to read. Once you start reading it is hard to put it down; you want to know what happens next. This is a very valuable attribute for any academic book and even more so for a scholarly co-authored book, portraying complex realities in three different contexts, produced at the intersection of several languages/cultural gazes. This is a book that deserves to

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reach a wide audience, because the authors have put time, effort, and art into writing a compelling, interesting piece.

Secondly, it is a high quality research methods piece, one in which readers find themselves coherently guided to understand what it takes to use a “video cued, multivocal ethnography.” Readers can see how the research team was able to construct a multimedia data set, and how interpretations were being made of these data by the participants themselves, by other educators, and by researchers. Multivocal indeed. And multimedia as well, since audiovisual, photographic, oral, and written text are all tools used by the team. Since the video does not come with the book, it is important that you find a way to watch the seven video-essays that comprise the series. The visual documents, because of their quality, are indeed excellent portrayals of daily life at the schools where the fieldwork was conducted. More importantly, as the authors tell us, the video-essays are documents in which specific points for each school and culture are shown, and so they become a text from which to construct interesting dialogues with several participants in this research project: the teachers and school staff directly involved, teachers from other schools in the same country, and teachers in other schools from different countries and cultures. I want to highlight the aesthetic care put into the videos, providing a very fresh, spontaneous narrative of what it is like to be a child in three cultures through images that may move you to tender tears, or so it happened to me.

I believe this multimedia text will also appeal to professionals interested in understanding variations of traditional ethnographic methods, and complementary uses across visual and other types of text (oral and written, for example). It will also be interesting for a wide audience of teachers and school personnel since anyone who has worked in schools will find a special interest in seeing and reading about how the most familiar school practices may seem strange somewhere else, and, interestingly or paradoxically, vice versa: how practices that relate to very young students may remain constant across nations.

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Thirdly, this book is equally relevant to teachers as well as to researchers in the field of Early Childhood Education who want to understand the relationship between policies, social changes and everyday school life. Perhaps, more than that, it is relevant also to professionals teaching and conducting research at any school level, because the way the argument unfolds allows the reader to understand why it would be important to conduct research across a certain (relatively ample) period of time when looking at a set of educational practices at any level, and why it would be important to compare and contrast cross-culturally, if this opportunity is available.

Ways of Using the Text

I encourage practitioners and researchers from several different disciplines or interests to read and share this book. I also find it interesting that, because of the relationship between content and format, this is a text that can be used in several ways: as reference material to understand some recent historical facts and their impact on preschool practices in three countries; as material from which to identify themes and discuss them in order to understand how context-situated educational practices (and thus their rationales) are socially and contextually constructed; and as a text from which to read aloud with colleagues, and in some way, perform the multivocal ethnography anew, since its narrative voice is strong, and allows reading-out-loud sharing, which can be very powerful.

The video clips linked to the book chapters can also be collectively watched, replicating the video-cued method by which the study was conducted. The ways in which I suggest using the text (written and audiovisual) present, however, a limitation: the text is written only in English, probably because as the authors state, it was written “primarily with a (USA) American readership in mind” (p. 158). Even though this was indeed the purpose, and moreover, it cannot be denied that English is today a language used by millions of people per force of geopolitical facts, it is also true that many of the teachers, professionals and researchers in Japan

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or China who participated in or are interested in relating to this text are not fluent in English. It would be worth exploring the possibility of making the book and all seven videos tri-lingual (Chinese, Japanese, English), and broaden the scope of the audience. That the intended audience is USA English Speakers is probably related to the fact that the Spencer Foundation supported the study behind this text. It is interesting to think about the possibility of co-funding these types of study across nations. I am not aware whether or not the authors had explored this possibility and it simply was not available. If not, I find it an interesting avenue to think about: What are the ways in which collaborative support can be built to finance these types of study?

Some Aspects This Book Provides an Opportunity To Discuss.

It was somewhat of a surprise to read, early in the book, the claim that “our videotapes are not data” and that the schools videotaped “are not representative” (p. 10). Through these statements, the authors emphasize the idea that what constitutes the core elements on which they build their analysis is what is *dialogued about* once the videos are used as stimuli. Whether or not the schools chosen are representative, is not at question, since what is important is what teachers and professionals, confronted with the narratives about these schools, have to say about the schools contexts in which they teach. However, both the book and the videos present what is observed and recorded as narratives from which analysis is indeed built, claims are made, and conclusions are drawn. Also, and precisely because of the orientation with which the authors have chosen to work, they use the visual and textual narratives to interact with hundreds of educators as a way of comparing and contrasting, making visible the (cultural) practices underlying what the data show, and interrogating change in the last 15 years or so. I find no problem in stating that the audiovisual and textual narratives on the schools chosen *are* data, since (carefully constructed) narratives are basic, identifiable tools in anthropology. It is clear also, as the authors state some pages later (pp. 12-15), that much professional knowledge and energy have been put into the

videotaping. And even though it is not as clearly stated, it seems obvious that the same applies to the way in which the written text was crafted.

I confess I have not read the original *Preschool in Three Cultures*, nor seen the videos; therefore, it might have been the case that for that book, some of the critiques about data, narratives, and so forth may apply. I don't think they have a place in the case of this book or videos. It is interesting, however, that these "charges" about what constitutes data, and how the sites were chosen, seems to have been a stimulus for the team to introduce interesting changes. For example, the fact that they chose to observe, film, and interview in 6 rather than in 3 schools seems an asset, because new insights are gained from working at more sites. The pursue of high quality filming and editing video technology also contributes to the method chosen (that of ethnographic interviewing based on visual text instead of on a questionnaire), and to the products themselves, the clips that constitute the visual narratives. This book raises the key issue of what counts as data, what are the bases for informed claims, and what news bring a multimedia and multivocal ethnographic framework to fieldwork and to interpretative analytic team work.

Another interesting aspect is that the book reminds us constantly how relatively young is preschool education as a way for socializing children, situating the field of early childhood education in a larger context. Not so long ago, children ages 4 and 5 (or younger) were not at school, nor school was mandatory for that age. This is important in that it provides a historical perspective from where to understand what we are trying to comprehend: an educational system that is still being regulated upon, and that thus is still being subject to determining what place it holds in the educational system as a whole. Questions at stake seem to be of the kind: should it be mandatory? Why? Should the age of entrance to preschool be regulated (as it has been for other school levels)? What are the curricular guidelines that should mandate their practice? There are other questions that unfortunately this book did not engage as much. Is the education of the younger children a right or an optional

service that some families choose to buy? (It would be interesting to know (and this information is not provided in the book) what percentage of the 0-6 years old is covered in each of the countries visited, and what percentage of those children who attend preschool go to private or to public schools.)

As a whole, the education of children 0 to 6 is still an arena where several different possibilities are available: along the book, examples are provided about these distinct possibilities. For example, about the period of the day in which these schools should function (including extended school hours, be those early in the morning or late in the afternoon); about ways in which the school settings provide for experiences that otherwise young children may not find available, such as the caring of younger siblings in Japan (due to the decreased birth rate); or situations in which the school provides for opportunities for children to interact with nature (see for example, the case of Madoka, Tokyo). Yet another interesting theme discussed throughout the book is that of whether educational ideas/systems can be exported (or imported) or whether their localness is always so strong that they prevail. The book presents examples of cultural contact across educational perspectives and how while educational practices are contextually bound, there are threads that weave their way throughout time. Indeed, some of these practices, such as whether or not to intervene when children carry out disputes or even physical contact, are discussed across cultures to show that there are traditional grounds on which educational practices are based.

Whether or not these grounds may be continually informed by what others (countries and cultures) do, some fundamental orientations remain. The specifics for each country in this respect are the core elements taken for the concluding chapter, one that you will surely enjoy, since the authors have done an excellent job at relating every day practices and their cultural rationale (as seen by direct participants and as informed by research analysis) with other historical and global elements that provide situated explanations for each of the nations visited and researched upon.

About the Reviewer

Ana Inés Heras, Ph.D. earned her masters and doctoral degree in Education at UCSB with a Fulbright Fellowship for International Students, specializing in sociolinguistics and ethnography. Currently she conducts research in Argentina (as a researcher member of IRICE/CONICET (Instituto Rosario Ciencias de la Educación (Rosario Institute for Educational Sciences)/CONICET (National Research Council, Argentina) and of INCLUIR, Instituto para la Inclusión Social y el Desarrollo Humano). She is the Principal Investigator for "Aprendizaje y Creación en Proyectos de Autonomía" and "Aprendizaje y Percepción de la Diferencia en Proyectos de Autonomía". These studies are funded by the Ministry of Education and Science and by CONICET, Argentina, and co funded by INCLUIR and IRICE.

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