

Heterosexism, homophobia, and the current analysis of same-sex desire, are not given the appropriate degree of significance as a socio-political position in teaching and learning. This text extends the dialogue of the sexual and gender politics of power and education, and functions as a useful companion reader for both teachers and students of queer theory and English instruction.

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GERALD K. LETENDRE & REBECCA ERWIN FUKUZAWA. *Intense Years: How Japanese adolescents balance school, family and friends*. New York: Routledge Falmer (2001). US\$50 / C\$75 (HB ISBN: 0-8153-3145-2)

In their new study, *Intense Years: How Japanese adolescents balance school, family, and friends* (2001), Rebecca Fukuzawa and Gerald LeTendre examine the lives of middle school students based on research they conducted in Japan between 1982 and 1995. They argue that as “young adolescents are moving between the world of children and the world of adults, their lives are affected by a broad range of social forces not found in other age groups” (p. 2). Given examples of social forces, they note that “[d]espite the Japanese predilection for depicting themselves as a harmonious and homogeneous society, the modern history of Japan suggests that it is a dynamic society prone to change, conflict and tension” (p. 1). By presenting case studies of five students, they attempt to convey the sense of balance that these students struggle to maintain in this changing Japan. They hope that discussing the experiences of young adolescents will provide a means to understand the forces that are shaping and transforming Japanese society.

The book begins with a discussion of “The Curriculum and Life in Classrooms.” The authors note that the emphasis of the middle school curriculum under the Ministry of Education has been “the development of the whole person or balanced individuals” (p. 11) rather than learning of academic subjects, which is to be realized through a well-structured curriculum combining academic and non-academic activities. While the academic classes are carried out in a highly teacher-centered manner, the non-academic activities, which occupy almost forty percent of the curriculum, provide students with the opportunity to take initiative, to be engaged in independent and group projects, and to build a strong bond with classmates and friends. It is through participating in the non-academic activities at school (e.g., clubs, moral education) that students develop personally and learn to manage Japanese social relations and the hierarchy of the adult world.

In chapter 2 “Exams, *Juku*, and the Pressure to Advance in School,” the author discuss the tensions inherent in Japan’s competitive exam system. As high school education has become the norm rather than a dream in this

modern era, Japanese middle school students face increasing pressure to do well academically. Despite the official goal mentioned above, the reality is that middle school education pulls students away from the learning ideal (namely, learning to become a “whole person”), and pushes them towards cramming information for the high school entrance exam. The conflict between the ideal of education and what actually happens in school are further discussed in chapter 3 (The Ideal of Education: A “Family Community”).

The authors then analyze the role of the student’s peers and friends in chapter 4 and of the student’s teachers in chapter 5. As students willingly come to school because they want to be with their friends and participate in their club activities, the development of strong friendships and a sense of belonging to both the classroom and school is cultivated by skillful teachers. The dual role of teachers, especially home-room teachers (*tannin*), is “to assume a leadership role within the class as a group” (p. 72) and to “create elaborate systems of management in order to integrate young adolescents and teach them how to work in complex social institutions” (pp. 72-73). Based on these two chapters, the authors conclude that “most of the social development for young Japanese occurs in a school-based context” (p. 6).

Given the importance of school to the development of friends, social networks, and social learning, when problems arise in school, students encounter enormous pressure (chapter 6. Adjustment: Problems in School). In Japan, schools can neither suspend nor expel students (p. 80); thus, in order to maintain order, middle schools “rely. . . heavily on the use of peer socialization” (p. 80). A student’s friends are expected to help fellow students who are having problems at school. Due to the importance of friends, when students have problems with friends (e.g., excluded from friendship circle or bullied), they become severely affected and disadvantaged. Because most students go to school to meet friends, being “excluded from friendship networks means, effectively, being excluded from the positive aspects of school” (p. 88). Thus, schools continue to face the challenge of how to integrate those students who fail to develop a strong friendship at school, feel excluded from school, and refuse to attend school as a result. Similarly, as discussed in chapter 7, family support in middle school students’ lives, especially in the lives of those who have problems at school, is crucial for not only forming students’ attitude toward school and studying but also overcoming difficulties that they experience at school (e.g., friendship problems). In conclusion, the authors analyze how the dynamics of middle school years are connected “with changes in Japanese society and overall social capacity for change” (p. 6). They conclude that “the ability to instill resiliency in young adolescents will play a major role in the future of Japanese society” (p. 6) if Japan is to overcome reported problems with the education system and social change.

Intense Years significantly contributes to our understanding of how the Japanese education system is being transformed and the kind of social change that Japan is currently undergoing. One important contribution of this book is that it brings to our attention the importance of friends in the lives of young adolescents. Despite the observation made in chapter 2 that the intensity of the *juku* (cramming school) forces students to focus on cramming information, the authors state that it would be a mistake to conclude that *juku* has no social aspect. The authors emphasize that while friendship is usually formed through non-academic activities, it is also developed through attending *juku*. For non-Japanese, the idea of going to cramming school after regular school seems absurd; yet, for Japanese students, it is one way of making new kinds of friends and spending time with them. *Juku* is therefore as much about socialization as studying.

Another contribution of the book is that the authors convincingly convey the sense that the problems contemporary Japanese adolescents are reported to face are not due to one specific cause. Therefore, there is no single, definite answer to their problems. Rather, their problems derive from a number of external and internal factors including the changing economy, society, and global environment, which all influence in one way or another the experiences of adolescents.

Despite these excellent contributions, the book would have been improved if the following points were taken into consideration. First, despite the broad time span of their research (1982-1995), the authors give little description as to which data come from which year. Given this, the book fails to convey a sense of time and change within the research period. Second, the authors make a number of general statements which may or may not apply to the diversity of regions found in Japan or to the differences between urban and rural areas. The case studies of five students appear to be used more to support their argument than to inform readers of the diverse experiences of the students.

Overall, *Intense Years* is a book that can be read not only by educators who are interested in Japanese education system but also by those who have general interest in current Japanese social change.

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