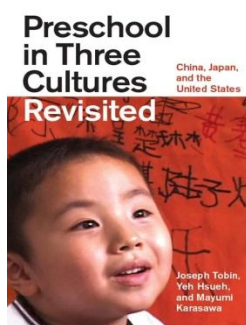


Professional Book Review

Tobin, J., Hsueh, Y., & Karasawa, M. (2009). *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited: China, Japan, and the United States*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 280 pp., ISBN: 9780226805030 (hc). \$39.00

Reviewed by Eric J. Johnson, Washington State University, Tri-Cities, U. S. A.



The original *Preschool in Three Cultures* project (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) applied an ethnographic lens to illustrate varying cultural values and patterns embedded within early childhood education settings in China, Japan, and the United States. While the impact of the original study was far reaching in the fields of early childhood education and educational anthropology, Tobin and his new team of scholars have managed to restructure their approach to increase the level of insight into the social and cultural forces driving change and continuity in preschool education in all three countries. In *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited*, Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa return to preschools in China, Japan, and the United States to (re)examine how systems of early childhood education reflect and reproduce cultural values “while at the same time responding to changing social pressures and expectations for what young children should learn, do, and be” (p. 1). The authors’ sophisticated implementation of ethnographic video-prompts elicited a range of illustrative and rich commentaries that will surely interest practitioners, researchers, and anyone involved in education or anthropology.

As an anthropological endeavor, the general goal of this book includes prioritizing the insider perspective to portray core cultural norms in three countries. The concept of “revisiting” mentioned in the title has multiple meanings here. In this project, Tobin’s team “revisits” the original research sites in both time and space. By returning to the same three schools in China, Japan, and the United States, Tobin is able to describe both physical and philosophical changes within and between each site. Methodologically, Tobin decided to include an additional school in each country to contribute another layer of complexity to his discussion. The authors clearly communicate their views on the representativeness of the schools and classrooms that were selected for the study, stressing that the schools “are not atypical, in the sense of being perceived in their communities as odd or extreme” (p. 8). As part of the process, Tobin’s original consultants were asked to revisit the videos from 20 years ago to establish a temporal context for their current descriptions. While the original study involved looking at cross-cultural variation between countries in terms of

classroom routines, student behavior, and interpersonal social patterns, this version expanded the overall discussion to include reactions to economic and political factors involving globalization.

The analytical sophistication of this project stems from Tobin's novel data collection methodology. Inspired by Bakhtin's notion of *multivocality*, Tobin revisits the video-cued multivocal ethnography approach (also known as the "Preschool in Three Cultures method") to privilege local educators as cultural experts. In general, this method involves filming a day of preschool and using the footage as a prompt to allow educators from each school to discuss a wide range of behaviors and practices. The videos are also shown to focus groups from other countries as a way to highlight interpretations of cultural outsiders—while simultaneously communicating their own ingrained cultural beliefs involved in the process of schooling. The authors emphasize the role of the videos as stimuli for focus-group discussions to produce dialogue for analytical data, rather than using the videos themselves as sources of analysis. As a result, Tobin and his colleagues have assembled a rich collection of nuanced first-person descriptions of how social behaviors and political forces are manifested within the field of early childhood education.

The overall organization of the book is readily accessible, making it easy to follow the authors' discussion as it circulates through multiple sites and voices. The authors weave in enough contextual and historical background information throughout the chapters that reading the original 1989 book is not a prerequisite. By grounding the reader with general theoretical concepts of culture, education, and policy, the introduction clearly sets the stage for the subsequent chapters which are organized around each country. Within each country's chapter, the original school is revisited first before extending the conversation to the new sites. This helps to provide a clearer view of the complexities involved in a cross-cultural comparison by illustrating the range of variation within an intra-cultural comparison. Furthermore, the authors were careful when selecting the new schools to include cultural contexts that complement the emphasis on social change and continuity.

By touching on such issues as China's ideological shift in economic and political policies, Japan's social structure and gender roles, and the multiple contradictions between American educational policies and legal issues involved in schooling, the authors are able to paint a vivid portrait of the crucial role that early childhood education practices play in the reproduction of cultural values, as well as the importance of preschools in the process of cultural adaptation to external social forces. Visually, the authors supplement their "thick" descriptions with multiple photographs of the schools, children, and educators. Furthermore, a companion video including footage from each school magnifies the authors' descriptions by bringing all of the participants to life. The video, narrated by Tobin, dedicates approximately 20 minutes to each school and integrates the same themes discussed in the corresponding chapters (information on purchasing the DVD can be found at <http://joetobin.net/videos.html>).

While beyond the overall aim and scope of this book, I found the absence of the students' and parents' voices mildly disappointing. The descriptions, photos, and video footage of the students in all six schools were so vibrant that I was deeply intrigued and left wanting to know more about their thoughts—especially in the United States where the structure of federal education policies continues to marginalize students from culturally diverse backgrounds and economically stressed living conditions. That said, the purpose of this book was to focus on social perceptions and cultural values stemming from early childhood education systems, not to examine how the students understand their own contexts. Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa have successfully “revisited” the Preschool in Three Cultures project, and this book will definitely make a significant contribution to the fields of education, anthropology, and cultural studies.