

An Examination of Japanese Returnee Students and Their Social Identities in Relation to Class Engagement.

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Abstract

As globalization continues to increase, the number of returnee students in Japan has also grown. These students offer valuable experiences and knowledge sets that may be useful to other students and teacher learning. However, in many cases, these returnee students find themselves disengaging from classes. The social identities of returnee students offer an interesting way in which to critically examine how identity and engagement manifest themselves. This paper looks at several social identity theories to better help scholar practitioners and educational institutions create positive learning environments in which returnee students thrive. Teachers and other classroom facilitators have the main responsibility of recognizing and engaging returnee students. Being genuinely interested in students and their situations, teachers can better understand a returnee's situation. Through this raised awareness and more teacher training, teachers in Japan will be better equipped to deal with this important and increasing student population.

Key words: Social identity theory, returnee students, engagement, student identity, self-categorization theory

Introduction

According to a census done by the Japanese government's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology in 2015, there were roughly 80,000 returnee students studying at elementary, junior high, senior high, or universities in Japan (MEXT, 2015). Returnee students are classified as native Japanese students who have lived abroad and gone to a foreign educational institutions for at least one full academic year and then have returned to Japan to reenter the Japanese educational system (MOFA, 2013). Many of these students when they are reintegrated into the Japanese educational system show a marked difficulty with succeeding and performing well in classes. One of the main causes of this reverse education culture shock for returnees deals with their conflicting ideas of identity. According to an article by Song (2001), returnee students have considerable difficulty with engagement issues, teacher/student relationships and the curriculum.

This idea of social identity is a multidimensional entity that includes cognitive, evaluative, and affective dimensions (Cameron, 1999). It gives people a sense of belonging to social categories that for young adults is pivotal in giving them the communal support they need to succeed in an educational setting. This paper will look at the social identity problems for returnee students by examining some of the academic literature on social identity theory and how specifically these intersect with returnee students' identities. Returnee students who are considered "low identifiers" need to be given special attention as they are at most risk for undergoing reverse culture shock. Finally a set of recommendations about how to better engage returnee students will be made.

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The Research Problem

Block (2007) writes that inclusion in a social group through language by an individual is usually automatically assumed, however when language differs, identity may somehow come under threat or be viewed as problematic by the hegemonic majority. From this questioning of identity may come ambivalence and exclusion. Unless teachers and institutions strive to help returnee students thrive, students, classmates, and teachers will all lose out on the opportunity to gain valuable multicultural learning experiences. It also helps to perpetuate a sense of oppression by returnee students and other minorities by not positively helping them to engage that part of their identities.

Evidence Justifying the Problem

A person's social identity is based on a person's sense of belongingness based on social groups or categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For returnee students many of them have lost this sense of belongingness and struggle to categorize themselves in their educational environment. The concept of social identity is extremely important especially for young adults who are trying to figure out who they are and what role they play in a community. Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell (1987), gives us the self-categorization theory, which is a social psychology theory dealing with "the circumstances under which a person will perceive collections of people as a group, as well as the consequences of perceiving people in group terms." Literature has also shown that while social identity may not play a direct role in academic performance it still plays an indirect role in learning (Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Hendres, 2011). Val and Vinogradova (2010) also make the connections that language and identity are intertwined and by lessening one, the other may also be devalued. Many returnee students grapple with this problem of social identity and as a result may withdraw from actively and positively participating in the educational environment.

Literature Review

To begin with, this literature review will look at some of the major social identity theories that have been theorized thus far. It cannot be overstated how important social identity is when looking at learning. Educational psychologists have confirmed that the role of social context is vital to affect and encourage learning (Anderman and Andermann, 2000). Even before the term social identity began to be used, researchers sought to understand how aspects of their identity affected their behavior in educational settings.

One such example of this is the differentiation –polarization theory by Hargreaves (1967) and Lacey (1966). In this theory, psychologists looked at the social identity aspects of low-track students, and put forth the hypothesis that how students interact with their peers may have a huge influence on anti-school behavior. They found that students who were identified as more different than the majority acted out more. Due to their perceived image as low-track these students sought positive image reinforcement elsewhere. This was met by interactions with other low-track students who would intensify social bonding through anti-school behavior. There have been many cases of returnee students acting out or disengaging from classes.

In another study done by Brewer (1991), researchers hypothesized that identity affects behavior based on context. If the context that a student is in rewards anti-school behavior then it can be assumed that there will be more students acting out in order to appear more similar to peers. However these contexts are radically different from country to country, state to state, and even school to school. However, one could also argue that being dissimilar to other students, returnee students have a different context and therefore different set of identity formation influences than other students. One must then ask the question of whether the definitions and contexts used to define students can be used across all student bodies.

Weedon (1987) argues that social identity is a constant battle if power relations between individuals, groups, and communities. Because contexts and factors are constantly changing, an individual's social identity is also fluid and changes depending on the context. Weedon (1987) offers three characteristics in which to look at social identity. The first characteristic has to do with the multiple nature of a subject. These deals

with complexity of an individual and how there are countless ways in which to define a person. The second characteristic has to do with the idea of social identity as an idea of constant struggle. Individuals are constantly being motivated by personal investments. Finally, the third characteristic has to do with how social identity changes over time. These three characteristics help to provide a framework for which to look at social identity theory.

Social Identity Theory

The notion of social identity dates back to the 70's when social psychologists coined the phrase. Social identity is based on a person's sense of belongingness based on social groups or categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is very malleable and denotes a sense of emotional attachment to a certain group. The concept of social identity is extremely important especially for young adults who are trying to figure out who they are and what role they play in a community. In the university setting, many Japanese returnee students turn out to be freshmen in college or high school first year students as the Japanese education system does not allow for easy international transfer. These pivotal first years of returnee students in an educational setting are especially sensitive as it may set the tone for the rest of their time in school.

Theoretical Framework

Social identity and actual learning are definitely intertwined as social identity affects a student's perception of their learning community (McInnis, 2001). In a study done by Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Hendres (2011) empirical data was looked at to analyze how social identity affected attitudes toward learning contexts and whether it resulted in deeper learning. More specifically, the main aim of this research was to explore whether students' social identities have any bearing on the way they learn (approaches to learning and learning outcomes) by integrating ideas and approaches from phenomenographic research into student learning in higher education and ideas and approaches drawn from social identity literature. The results showed that indeed a positive attitude towards a learning environment greatly increased the chances for a positive outcome. As many returnee students find that their social identities and learning styles differ from those of their peers, many of them shut down and choose not to actively participate in classes resulting in a negative outlook of the learning environment. This is an underlying problem as returnee students offer insights and experiences many other non-returnee students won't have and by not sharing that they reduce the chance to develop their social identity while also decreasing the opportunities for peer students to learn from them. This is problematic because the Japanese government has claimed to want a more global educational environment and returnee students themselves are treasure troves of global knowledge and experience.

Students are more inclined to be friends with who they deem as similar to themselves (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). And other research has shown that friends exude a level of influence on another friend's level of engagement (Hallinan & Williams, 1990). This is especially true in Japan, where conformity is rewarded and students have a strong desire to fit in and be accepted by peers. Based on this, one could argue that the social identity of returnee students suffers from the inability to make friends and find individuals similar to themselves. Instead they must choose to conform to the Japanese individuals around them and change themselves in order to fit in more smoothly. This transition and forced change may create a great deal of stress for returnee students leading them to disengage or become apathetic towards academic performance.

In an article by Kelly (2009), the researcher mentions the concept of minimal group paradigm. This is based on the theory that looks at identity formation as affected by group membership even when there is no salient identity. Results showed that there was an internal conflict in many of the members as an 'in group' and out group' were created. Returnee students upon returning to their native country find themselves in the "out group" creating a discord between other students and the educational setting. Horvat & Lewis (2003) also showed that stronger peer networks related in better engagement in the classroom. One could thus argue that returnee students suffer from poor peer networks which could be caused by having an "out group" men-

tality.

Building on this idea of in-group and out-group conflict by Tajfel & Turner (1979), other social psychologists have argued that how in-group members form their identities and perceive a sense of uniqueness manifests itself in several ways (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Oakes, Haslam, and Turner 1994). Many of these manifestations are cognitive, attitudinal, or behavioral. One example of cognitive in-group membership would deal with stereotypes. In the case of returnee students, native Japanese students would stereotype returnee students as being very social, outgoing, and friendly while they would view themselves as more reserved and shy. These stereotypes have important implications toward identity development as they contribute heavily towards social attitudes and therefore behavior (Haslam, Oakes, McGarty, Turner, Reynolds, and Eggins, 1996). Other scientists have also found that in-group membership is usually automatically given to others who may not exhibit any key features that would disqualify them.

When examining the process of self-categorization it is imperative that the context under which the categorization is taking place be understood. The social categories in which individuals categorize themselves are all part of our society. Their relationships to each other are purely based on social constructs, which give more social prestige, power, status and so on (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Stryker (1987) states that these social constructs are symbols used as building blocks to build hierarchy within society. Thus, one could argue that social identity theory and identity theory deal mainly with the ideas and perceived contexts of a social structure.

Thus far we have looked at how social identity theory is a very context-based, in-group, out-group, mental construct full of categories. However, when do students actually activate or form the identity is also important. Social psychologists have also looked at how a certain aspect of an identity activates in an individual. How does self-categorizing affect how, when, and in what context will a person assume a category? A salient identity is one in which it may not outwardly appear, but may be activated from within. Oakes (1987), states that it is not about appearances but more about the psychological significance of membership within an in or out-group. Many students in a classroom may look exactly the same as everyone else however, if he/she has some kind of psychological barrier, it may prevent them from self-categorizing them as in-group or out-group.

When thinking about social identity theory it is important to consider the underlying goals and desires people have when creating their identities. A social identity theory of student disengagement is fundamentally a theory of collective action. Turner (1987), gives us the self-categorization theory, which is a social psychology theory dealing with “the circumstances under which a person will perceive collections of people as a group, as well as the consequences of perceiving people in group terms.” Literature has also shown that while social identity may not play a direct role in academic performance it still plays an indirect role in learning (Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Hendres, 2011). For returnee students, based on their own unique histories and experiences, coming back into the Japanese educational system can present its own set of unique challenges.

Returnee Students’ Social Identity

A Japan Times article in 2014 stated that the number of returnee students in Japan has tripled since 1977, however, the government and policy makers have largely ignored their existence (Clavel, 2014). Another 2012 article by the same newspaper reported that many returnee students undergo bullying and have extremely negative thoughts or actions brought against them by their peers and sometimes even teachers or other adults (Thompson, 2012). As Lincicome (1993) writes, the Japanese educational system is dealing with an influx of international influences at a local and national level. How they attempt to interact with these forces will shape how the future of the Japanese population will be. The significance of this problem is being compounded by the timely increase in the number of returnee students in Japan. By looking at the social identity of returnee students, scholar practitioners may be better equipped to help engage these students in a positive manner and make recommendations to government policy-making institutions.

Kanno (2003) writes in her book that returnee students undergo a significant amount of isolation and difficulties when they reenter Japan. Lincicome (1993) also points out that the Japanese government's policy of *kokusaika*, which is meant to internationalize Japanese society by putting an emphasis on Japanese-ness Japanese identity, actually marks out returnee students and other minorities thereby making it even more difficult for them to integrate back into Japanese society. The social identities of returnee students mark them at an automatic disadvantage and discourages them from viewing themselves in a positive light. Showstack (2012) examined how bilingual Hispanic students constructed their linguistic and cultural identities as well as notions of different kinds of Hispanics and Spanish speakers in a heritage classroom in central Texas and found that linguistic and cultural identities have interwoven existences.

In another article by Hoffman (2000), the author looked at the roles of individualism and individuality in Japanese and American classrooms. One could argue that Japanese society rewards conforming while western society rewards autonomy. This social construct has huge ramifications for returnee students who may have grown up with different social rules. In his research Hoffman (2000), showed that American students were much more inclined to do individual work, usually seat-work, while Japanese students spent a considerable more amount of time on more group oriented activities. American students work on forming their own opinion, sharing it, and being rewarded for that. Meanwhile Japanese students work together carefully seeking out a consensus within a group and then cooperating to present findings. When returnee students, especially those who have spent a considerable amount of time in a western country go back to Japan there is an internal conflict. The social rules they were taught are not necessarily applicable and while they seek out engagement with the group do not necessarily know how to do so. As a result, in classes many disengage with their classmates, teachers, and curriculum. In the case of a language class, even though many returnee students have a very high degree of language proficiency, they are hesitant to speak out and many end up failing courses.

Recommendations for Better Engagement with Returnee Students

Returnee student must be given the opportunity and guidance to help them understand that the returnee part of their social identity can be used in a positive way. In an article by Kelly (2009) the researcher mentions the concept of minimal group paradigm. This is based on the theory that looks at identity formation as affected by group membership even when there is no salient identity. Results showed that there was an internal conflict in many of the members as an 'in group' and out group' were created. One could argue that this is applicable to the returnee case as even at the beginning of a class, students have not yet formed their identities in class and that simply by being a returnee there it by itself creates a division. How teachers and schools engage with these students on day one must be discussed. A set of guidelines on how to better train teachers to help encourage returnee students is one possible solution. One could also argue that these students also have valuable insights and experiences, which could serve other students and teachers as well. By creating opportunities for returnee students to celebrate this would help them to view themselves in a more proactive way. Educational institutions have to find a way to positively engage these students while celebrating their differences.

Machesky, Lowney, Buhrmann, & Bush (2008) point out that teachers should create a meaningful well-thought out strategy for students with a goal of creating a community in the classroom. Teachers must help returnee students view their learning environments in a positive light. In a paper published by Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Hendres (2011), they showed that positive perceptions about learning context lead to greater learning experiences. They also noted that positive learning environments also helped to create stronger positive perceptions of identity and encourage connections with peers. This tells teachers that helping returnee students to feel safe and positive towards their learning context should be important. Also by getting to know the returnee students more and showing genuine sincerity towards them can do a great deal to help them open up

Parsons, Nystrand, & Parsons (2014) argue that teachers are responsible for increasing or decreasing student engagement. Also they say that teachers can increase engagement by showing that they genuinely care about students. Thereby, this creates a positive social environment for which students feel safe and secure. Teachers serve as leaders in the classroom and therefore should be the first person that helps not only returnee students but also all students to actively take part in the learning environment. By looking at the qualitative interviews conducted in this paper, one can see that returnee students and their social identities are complex but filled with a wealth of valuable experiences. By getting to know returnee students on a more personal level and understanding their background a teacher may be better equipped to determine whether the student is a low identifier or a high identifier. This engagement leads to better results in the classroom. Engagement is not static and is influenced by a myriad of factors including, context, environment, and identity. To better engage returnee students, teachers have to understand these things and develop a more personalized stance towards engagement with their students.

Conclusion and Potential Areas for Future Study

Returnee students to Japan face a multitude of difficulties stemming from their social identity in the Japanese classroom. High identifier students usually have spent less time abroad and seem to develop a less negative view toward being a returnee student. Meanwhile low identifier returnees, who have usually spent a longer time abroad, seem to exhibit more difficulties with adjusting to life in Japan. This concept of low identifier and high identifier can be extremely useful when determining how to engage returnee students in the classroom (Ellerman, Spears, & Dossje, 1997). As leaders in the classroom, teachers have the responsibility of engaging students (Parsons, Nystrand, & Parsons, 2014). Thus, one could argue that teachers must understand and create opportunities for returnee students to express themselves in a way that they are familiar with. They can also help returnee students connect with their peers on a more personal level; thus, a more positive learning environment can be encouraged. Possible areas for future studies could be a more in depth analysis of the self-categorization theory and returnee students (Turner, 1987). In what ways are returnee students determining their identities, which produces a high-identifier or low identifier? How can teachers better ease the reintegration into the Japanese educational system? And finally, what are some concrete exercises teachers can do to help raise the self-confidence and motivation of struggling returnee students? As the number of returnee students continues to rise and Japan keeps its goal of internationalizing its education system, returnee students offer an extremely valuable knowledge source. It will be our duty to help guide them on a positive learning experience about themselves and the subjects that we teach.

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