

The Significance of “*Seikatsu Tsuzurikata*” in a Global Age: Contextualizing an Educational Discourse of Liberation, “Intent Observations” and De-centering

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Building upon the recent English-language scholarship (Kawaji, 2017, Miyazawa, 2015; Hiraoka, 2011) on the Japanese pedagogy movement of seikatsu tsuzurikata (“daily life writing,” hereafter referred to as DLW), this essay seeks to locate its significance within a broader global context. It is as much a polemic for why DLW should be better known outside of Japanese academic circles as it is meant to be a dispassionate, historical analysis of an education movement per se. The fact that such a large-scale, politically radical grassroots education movement as DLW took place within Japan’s highly technocratic and centralized educational tradition is intrinsically interesting. Greater international awareness of DLW can thus serve as a valuable touchstone for a broader reconsideration of 21st century education change. This essay highlights three ways that DLW complicates understandings of modern Japanese education as well as education development more generally. First, the spread of DLW in the 1930s reminds us that discourses of liberation and socio-economic empowerment proved surprisingly enduring, even during the supposed “dark-valley” era of prewar Japan. Second, the essay explores how DLW’s critical pedagogy arose from a hermeneutical skepticism of “intent observations” that emerged from a humanistic (particularly Diltheyan) philosophical tradition distinct from the progressive, Anglo-American discourses that have come to dominate contemporary Japanese education (Takayama, 2011). Finally, this paper explores the subversive ways DLW de-centers conventional understandings of educational change, by noting how previously marginalized groups (in terms of geography, class and education status) generated compelling critiques of dominant education discourses. DLW’s similarities with later, better-known, movements of critical pedagogy overseas suggest a globalized discourse of educational iconoclasm that is longer-lived and more geographically varied than is often recognized. To give overseas readers a better sense of DLW ideology, this essay includes extended quotes from key DLW writers and documents.

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1. Introduction

A specter could be haunting global education –the specter of *seikatsu tsuzurikata*. As a pedagogical method, practitioner network and quasi-political movement, *seikatsu tsuzurikata* (translated into English as “daily life writing,” hereafter DLW) has long been acknowledged within Japan for its pedagogical innovation and socio-political radicalness.

Indeed, over the past seventy years, few indigenous education movements have attracted as much attention – and as much debate — among Japanese scholars. Be it as an example of popular resistance to prewar authoritarian education discourses (Ebihara, 1975), a transitional step to a more progressive postwar curriculum (Umene, 1952), or a quintessentially *Japanese* pedagogical tradition (Nakauchi, 1970), leading historians of education have felt compelled to incorporate DLW into their broader narratives of modern Japanese education. DLW research has become more specialized in subsequent decades, but interest remains unabated, with an ever-growing corpus of academic monographs and journal articles. Scholars continue to explore DLW’s impact on diverse aspects of contemporary Japanese education, including classroom assessment practices (e.g. Kawaji 2004), curriculum design (e.g. Kawaguchi, 1980), group-based learning (e.g. Tomisawa, 2016), as well as its broader contributions to student “guidance” (e.g. Mimura, 2013), and teacher-initiated research (e.g. Tarora, 1990). As Haruo Soeda has summed up, DLW is “one of the intellectual legacies of Japan which is due more appreciation from the world” (Soeda, 2018, 162).

This makes DLW’s relative absence in English-language scholarship perplexing. Until the last decade, the little English-language scholarship on DLW was mostly limited to specialized articles on writing pedagogy (e.g. Kitagawa and Kitagawa, 2007). John Dower’s best-selling work, *Embracing Defeat* (1999), literally wrote DLW out of Occupation history when he characterized the movement’s seminal work of the postwar period, *Mountain-Echo School (Yamabiko Gakko)*, as simply another example of Japan “embracing” the progressive reforms of its American occupiers!¹ This neglect is not for lack of overseas interest in Japanese education per se. For almost half a century, foreign commentators have valorized the high-performing nature of the Japanese education system, be it as a cornerstone of Japan’s long-ago claim as an economic super-power (Vogel, 1980) or its more recent reputation as an “education superpower” as seen by its success on international assessments such as the PISA, TIMSS and PIAAC (Crehan, 2016). Catherine Lewis (1999) and Gerald LeTendre (1999) have rightly pointed out the objective flaws in “Japan Inc.” “myths” (15) of the post-war Japanese education system. But the obstinacy of these “myths” highlights the intrinsically political nature of such industrial policy-adjacent portrayals. When English-language scholarship emphasizes the Japanese education system’s directive, technocratic and centralized nature, it risks – wittingly or unwittingly -- endorsing directive, technocratic and centralized solutions. Introducing the world to the radical iconoclasm of one of modern Japan’s largest and longest-lived grass-roots pedagogical discourses is therefore intrinsically interesting.

Broader awareness of the DLW movement reminds educators worldwide that even a seemingly “successful” example of educational technocracy has come with its own costs and tradeoffs. As the human capital-focused, neo-liberal truisms of the late 20th century break down and are subject to populist reappraisal both from the left and right, DLW reminds us how global education discourses have always been (and must always be?) pluralistic, contested and political.

This essay builds upon recent DLW-related English-language scholarship (e.g. Hiraoka, 2011; Miyazawa, 2015; Kawaji, 2017), and makes an explicit case for why more attention should be paid to DLW from a global audience. It notes the ways the movement *paralleled* (but did not copy) critical pedagogical discourses in the Americas and in Europe. Given recent scholarly discussion (e.g. Takayama, 2011; Rappleye, 2018) on how to situate Japanese education within scholarly discourses of the “particular” and the “universal,” DLW is noteworthy for how the very marginality of its practitioners allowed them to be less influenced by the norms and assumptions of metropolitan education hierarchies. Neither a discourse that can be said to be reactively “Japanese,” nor a derivative adaption of supposedly universal, Anglo-American models, the innovative, politically informed set of practices created by 1930s DLW practitioners anticipated better-known postwar critical pedagogy movements in places such as in Brazil (Friere, 1971), Germany (Horlacher, 2016) and the United States (Graves, 1998). Indeed, by including the prewar efforts of DLW in a broader global context, one can begin to trace the outlines of a multipolar discourse that contested the dominant narratives of technocratic, “scientific” educational progress in a surprisingly sophisticated, sustained and coherent way. DLW is not simply an isolated, essentially “Japanese” education discourse; rather it could serve as a useful touchstone from which to interrogate broadly capitalist-oriented education practices across time and space.

Specifically, this essay seeks to articulate three interrelated aspects of DLW. First, DLW is an example of a radical, grass-roots teachers’ movement of liberation and social justice. Building upon Miyazawa’s (2015) designation of DLW as a critical pedagogy in its own right, this essay analyzes how Japan’s own “pedagogy of the oppressed” served to liberate students from the hegemony of prewar status-quo power structures. To convey the passion and originality of their writings, this essay quotes extensively from DLW educators. Second, DLW’s emphasis on learning through the rigorous, critical observation of daily life –of “intent observation” -- provides a valuable counterpoint to “progressive,” Anglo-American education discourses that dominated Japan and the world through much of the 20th century.ⁱⁱ Through class-based analysis of society and the critical interrogation of student life “as it really is” (*ari no mama ni*), the movement achieved an intellectual vitality and theoretical incisiveness not widely appreciated outside of Japan. Third, DLW is a compelling way to de-center conventional models of educational development. Be it in terms of geography, class background or educational attainment, the leaders of the DLW were often from the peripheries of the modern Japanese educational system. Despite or because of this, they created an education discourse that was eclectic and *sui generis*. Making DLW widely known to the rest of the world therefore presents a powerful example of how frontline practitioners outside of academia and far removed from the metropole could reshape educational discourses in innovative ways. In facilitating greater awareness of DLW, this essay also hopes to stimulate wider translations of both DLW writings and the leading Japanese-language scholarship that has analyzed them.

2. DLW's Pedagogy of Liberation

Emerging in the late 1920s, DLW was a loosely aligned movement of regional, practitioner-led study groups devoted to discussing issues related to writing education at the primary and early secondary school levels. Ayako Kawaji (2017) has defined DLW as “an education practice in schools aimed at developing guidance on how to live, through the process of children writing compositions inspired by their own lives.” (109) How did this DLW education discourse arise? First, the development of DLW teaching practices were facilitated by serendipity. Because essay writing was considered a practical skill requiring myriad pedagogical approaches, the prewar Japanese state did not micro-manage content by creating its own writing textbook. Composition teachers throughout the country were thus given a surprising amount of curricular freedom in their classes (Hiraoka, 2011, 23). Second, this curricular discretion was supported by the rich body of composition theory and practice that had emerged during the first three decades of the 20th century. Japanese scholars (Nakauchi, 1970; Ebihara, 1975) have long emphasized that, by the 1930s, rural teachers could draw upon a wide range of global education discourses, be they from German Neo-Kantian, American Pragmatist, Soviet Developmentalist or French Vitalist traditions. DLW educators also built upon indigenous practices, such as Ennosuke Ashida's elective topic writing approach or Miekichi Suzuki's emphasis on writing about everyday life “as it really is.” Given the wide-ranging and decentralized nature of the movement, it is therefore important to recognize DLW's inherent diversity. Although this essay will focus on writers usually associated with the “northern education” (*hoppo kyoiku*) variant that came to dominate the DLW movement during the 1930s and early 1950s, it is important to recognize that other regional sub-strains continued to exist and retained distinctive characteristics. As Toshio Nakauchi (1970) has painstakingly documented, other DLW discourses ranged from the nationalist “soil”-centered education discourses associated with Shizuoka's Gitoku Fuhara to the pragmatic, progressive pedagogies of Hideo Sasai's Tottori-based *Hakuseisha* group, to the explicitly Marxist, “proletarian” approach of Shikoku's Shozaburo Ueda (473-475, 833-836, 778-780). Generally smaller in size and lacking the organizational reach of their northern counterparts, however, these other discourses would not exercise the same influence during the peak of DLW's influence.ⁱⁱⁱ

Finally, DLW was catalyzed by the socio-economic crisis of the Great Depression. Particularly in northern Honshu and Hokkaido, DLW incorporated social realism to help free students from entrenched ways of thinking and to give them the intellectual tools to help them overcome crushing poverty. Miyazawa (2015) has already noted the “liberatory” nature of prewar DLW (196), particularly in how the act of writing about daily life helped students “decode” (in a Freirean sense) the received ideologies of official textbooks (194). Almost from the very beginning of the movement, DLW practitioners challenged their students to question conventional wisdom. For example, a young Yamagata elementary school teacher named Ichitaro Kokubun, writing in 1935, pushed his class of third-year elementary school students to go beyond simply “repeating the concepts (*gainen*) of morals textbook sages” by engaging in their own self-directed “daily life study (*seikatsu benkyo*).” As Kokubun argued, this new “daily life” approach helped students escape from the “influences of conventional notions (*kannenteki na eikyo*)” whose “viewpoint, way of thinking and attitude lacked the ability to reflect on daily life.” (10-11) Specifically, this “daily life study” was a probing, interrogative process meant to develop student autonomy. By examining the world with an ob-

jective eye, students could create a space free from official ideologies (i.e., a “classroom that no longer needed lies”) and thus become freed to “carefully scrutinize themselves” (30). As Kokubun summarized:

In the first semester, to instruct in the means of studying for life, (one must first) teach methods of properly valuing oneself and raise arguments about how to live. This work leads to detailed writings (about life) and helps students understand their own selves a little better. In the second semester, they then scrutinize how they should live in the context of their village and family. (Kokubun, 1935, 33)

Most DLW teachers were not seeking socialist revolution per se, but rather a social awakening to liberate the oppressed from the mental concepts that enslaved them. As one Akita teacher, Fukuyuki Sakamoto, emphasized in 1936, more than simply propagating “strange” (i.e. Marxist) ideas, what teachers needed to do was to help students overcome a curriculum centered around obedience, filial piety and injunctions to “behave better.” Instead, it was incumbent for teachers to help students grasp the “feudal” inequalities of a village society that created “slave-like” tenant-farming (Sakamoto, 1936, 18-19). In response to Sakamoto, a colleague in neighboring Iwate Prefecture, Atsushi Yoshida, recommended the liberating potential of *bildung*. Two decades before Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer would revitalize similar ideas in the Frankfurt School (Horlacher, 2016, 104-107), Yoshida urged teachers to cultivate a “romanten-ism” -- as opposed to romanticism—to assist children in their *bildungsroman*-like coming of age. While admitting that it might ultimately be up to “social science explanations” to solve the “present problems of the capitalist-era agrarian village,” (21) Yoshida argued that teachers should help children recognize the reality of village life and address the pressing issues of their communities. A “romanten-ism”-centered education was about developing “a foundation for life” (*seikatsudai*) but with a very different meaning than the market-based, human capital “life skills” that Anglo-American models would emphasize in ensuing decades. To Yoshida, education had to cultivate within all students a “warm collective empathy” (20) capable of helping students redress the unfairness of their current situation. As with Kokubun, Yoshida believed this process was based on a probing cognizance/recognition (*ninshiki*) actively engaging the reality of the world. As he continued:

By the means of your students’ attitudes towards the reality of village life moving forward, they can develop a means of gaining life skills. As you have said, the child’s family situation is undeniably a problem with the father; but the child’s cognizance/recognition of this situation determines how they can deal with it. Through this attitude – through this approach to life -- they will learn abilities to live out their lives, and this is what we must consider (as teachers). (Yoshida, 1936, 21)

To be sure, in a movement as wide and varied as DLW, not all participants were as openly iconoclastic and subversive of conventional norms as Kokubun and Yoshida. Scholars have noted how leading DLW educators, including Kokubun, made strategic accommodations with prewar authority and its policy initiatives (e.g. Tsuda, 1986, Funabashi, 1994; Kokuni, 2005). Nonetheless, DLW discourses are noteworthy for the extent that these liberation dis-

courses endured even into the so-called “dark-valley” era of wartime Japan. Former Yamagata elementary school teacher and DLW leader Toshitaro Murayama, for example, reminded teachers at the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War of the importance of writing-based criticism in developing a “correct eye” to understand students’ own experiences and thus “liberate themselves from the cover of ‘common sense’” and “child psychology-based romanticism.” By 1939, Murayama was even advocating against assigning war-related composition topics, arguing that such activities risked cultivating an overly emotional “wartime manner.” (Murayama, 2004, 295, 308). This resistance did not come without cost. Wartime officials came to view many DLW instructors as agents of communist infiltration. Between late 1940 and 1941, as many as 300 DLW-affiliated teachers (cf. Otokuni, 2013, 52) would be arrested -- one of the largest mass-incarceration events of wartime Japan. Indeed, Murayama and another Northern Education leader, Ko Sasaki, suffered eventually fatal health problems arising from the poor conditions of their imprisonment.

In the postwar period, DLW teachers such as Masao Iwama and Shushiro Kato similarly emphasized education’s liberationist power through teacher unionism. In the case of a 1948 teacher’s union strike in Akita, DLW leader Taiun Hanaoka explicitly merged iconoclastic pedagogy with politics. His planned strike was not a simple walk-out per se, but rather an administrative seizure of prefectural schools. Students were empowered to organize their own “student conferences” and “debate” different proposals for an “education revival,” as well as present any demands they had to prefectural authorities. (Hanaoka, 1971, 97-99). Inspired by the success of the 1951 best-selling collection of DLW student works from a northern rural farm village, *Mountain-Echo School*, DLW pedagogy was also appropriated by postwar intellectuals such as Kazuko Tsurumi, into a broader “life-writing circle” movement that facilitated left-leaning labor protests throughout the rest of the 1950s (Bronson, 2016).

3. DLW’s Pedagogy of “Intent Observations”

Kokubun’s practice of “daily life study” and Yoshida’s call for “romanten-ism” were not simply calls for student self-analysis but also part of a broader critical epistemology. In contrast to the American-influenced progressives of the New Education (*shin kyoiku*) movement, DLW adherents downplayed the importance of pure education *experience* per se, and instead emphasized the central importance of actively and correctly *seeing* the world through cultivated practice. Scholars such as Taro Ogawa (1966) and Zenichi Ouchi (2012) have already noted the ways that DLW pedagogues expanded upon Miekichi Suzuki’s earlier injunction to record life “as it really is” and thereby subjectively constitute the lived reality of their worlds. Through the movement’s early ties to proletarian realism (Nakauchi, 1970), moreover, this emphasis on *seeing* increasingly assumed a critical subject-positioning. While the 1930 “Second Declaration” of the leading DLW journal, *Tsuzurikata Seikatsu*, has conventionally been seen as a turning point in DLW’s growing emphasis on life-based education over composition-centered education (Hiraoka, 2011, 25), it also marked a change in *how* students were supposed to learn. Simply “encouraging” students to *experience* things was not enough; “autonomous lives” had to come from a deeper ability to “grasp the truth of life” through “intent observations” (*jitto kansatsu site*). As the Declaration explained:

The education world is always encouraging students to do things, (but) it does not lead students to focus on reality or help students become better able to live in their own reality. (As such) isn't education impotent? In the end, isn't education impotent! It should be the central duty of the young educators of Japan to develop in students the skills and power to grasp the truth of life. To be able to grasp the problems of living in society and the reality of children's daily lives, we must make intent observations and understand the underlying principles that operate upon it and let children grasp them too. In order to establish true autonomous lives, this is both the ideal and the method. As colleagues of this movement, we believe that writing is the central subject of life education, and it is through empathetic writing education that we aim to create the means and principles of life education. (Tsuzurikata Seikatsu Dojin, 1930, front-matter)

At the very moment that U.S. educators were embarking on an “Eight-Year Study” to scientifically prove the superiority of progressive education methods (Kliebard, 2004, 178-186), DLW was doubling down on teacher-guided, observatory, truth-grasping pedagogy.

At first glance, this focus on an observation-based educational process seems suspiciously like the long-standing Herbartian object-learning didactics that would have been familiar to any prewar graduate of a Japanese normal school. Yet DLW teachers, particularly those associated with the influential “northern education” strand of the movement, further imbued this discourse with the hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey, specifically through a commitment to developing a holistic, active “apprehension” (*Verstehen*, translated as *rikai*, 理会) of the world. As propagated by two of its most influential theorists, Michio Namekawa and Ko Sasaki, these northern teachers spent the 1930s elaborating the 2nd Declaration's emphasis on intent observation into an explicit pedagogy of critical analysis. The very conceptualization of “life skills” began to differ from contemporary liberal, Anglo-American discourses by drawing upon the German ontological dualities of *Sein* (“to be”) and *Sollen* (“ought to be”). Grasping the ideal “truth” of the world became itself a morally informed act: true “apprehension” of the “living nature of existence,” therefore, could only begin when one was first willing to interpret the world through how it “ought” to be. Written expression was not simply an act of recording reality but was itself a deeper reading and recreation of reality along ethically informed lines. In developing students' apprehensive powers in concert with the symbol-based forms (*keisho*) of writing and expression, students facilitated a “sympathetic creation” that could forge larger moral communities of understanding, and ultimately of action. As Namekawa emphasized in his 1934 monograph introducing Diltheyan hermeneutics to Japanese language teaching:

When people are asked to see the world “as it exists,” it is not a question of seeing existence per se but of working to also see the world as it *should* exist....To truly apprehend (*rikai*) existence, it is by grasping the possibility of the unity of “being” with “ought to being.” It is only when this is accomplished, that we can begin to truly apprehend the living nature of existence. Through this unity and development of expression and written symbols we can read symbols and intuitively grasp the underlying forms (*keisho*) themselves. As Dilthey explains, apprehending (*verstehen*) is the act of re-creation, or as Shiramura further explains it is an act of sympathetic creation. Expressed words are therefore not externalized symbols of ideas but rather the final form of those

ideas' (shared) development.... (Namekawa, 1934, 42-43)

As Namekawa elsewhere argued, applying moral “values” and a “critical eye” to daily life writings were ultimately interlinked. It was only through “rigorously interrogat(ing) ideas” that the “eternal issues” of survival could finally overcome the “banal life ideas” and “careless attitudes” that have plagued humanity:

Whatever the era, problems with survival, problems with sustaining/creating life are an eternal issue for the human race. In that sense, I must say that writing education renders a great service by rooting learning in these eternal issues. It is rooted therein through emphasizing thoughts about life through the discourses of these forms (*keisho*), and indeed this is the most desired outcome. But at the same time, we cannot propagate empty, banal life ideas through blind actions and careless attitudes. It is here that a critical eye, strict analysis and interrogation of life must also be added.... In order to rigorously interrogate ideas and content of life, we must therefore place emphasis on life research. In other words, through expression and research of the rawness of life itself, we inevitably must consider the values pursued and human character of this life. (Namekawa, 1930, 39-40)

After Namekawa moved to Tokyo in the early 1930s, Sasaki continued this exploration of Diltheyan thought. At the very height of his educational influence in 1935, Sasaki devoted his keynote address to the Northern Japan National Language Education Alliance (*Kita Nihon Kokugo Kyoiku Renmei*) to the issue of turning the “lecture-stand hermeneutics” of Dilthey into a “life hermeneutics” applicable to DLW practice. Noting the importance of teachers engaging in the “hermeneutics of reading,” Sasaki further arranged for Japan’s leading scholar of educational hermeneutics, Junpei Ishiyama, to speak at the organization’s second conference in Sendai (Sasaki, 1982, 229). With so many prominent figures in DLW pushing this critical approach to education, it is not surprising that rank and file DLW teachers recognized the importance of this hermeneutical method -- but with much greater ambivalence. In a 1932 *Northern Education* column designed for comic relief, “The Ventilation Room,” one reader complained about the extent that Diltheyan ideas were being forced down their throats: so much so, that he worried that they might start defecating them if they weren’t careful. (Ito, 1932, 59). While this “joke” showed that not everyone was enthusiastic about this Diltheyan turn, the fact that it was a source of shared mirth demonstrates how widely they were engaging with these ideas. To many DLW practitioners, education had always been political, but, through these epistemological innovations, DLW was also developing a radical criticality that would have been likely been unimaginable among contemporary *Geisteswissenschaftliche* counterparts in Nazi Germany. It was only after the end of World War II that the thinkers of the Frankfurt school would inject similar philosophical critiques into German education circles (Horlacher, 2016, 95-99).

DLW’s emphasis on the pedagogy of “intent observations” also explains why many in the movement came to clash with other education movements, most notably the American-inspired, “scientific” progressives of the Educational Science Research Association (*Kyoiku Kagaku Kenkyukai*, hereafter ESRA). Kazuya Taniguchi (2017) has documented the extent to which ESRA leaders such as Kiyoo Tomeoka and Mantaro Kido advocated for a pragmatic,

American-modeled social studies curriculum throughout the 1930s. This point of emphasis inevitably put them at odds with Sasaki and the northern strain of the DLW, culminating in the so-called “Life Education Debates” of 1937-1938. Although Tomeoka and Kido never criticized Sasaki’s use of hermeneutics directly, they expressed skepticism over what they saw as the “northern education” movement’s pretentious philosophizing. Writing in the influential education journal *Education* in 1937, Tomeoka attacked these DLW educators’ pedagogy as the conduct of “cow pasture academy” teachers who at best engaged in “literary appreciation” or, at worst, encouraged unmitigated “sentimentalism.” Reflecting the attitudes of his social efficiency counterparts in North America, he further criticized the way DLW pedagogy distracted from the ultimate goal of education: efficiently providing for a “minimum level” of knowledge, “thinking abilities” and “investigative skills” capable of “securing a mass-based life” (Tomeoka, 1937, 60-61). This divergence over education methods reemerged in the postwar period as well. When Occupation reformers imposed an unadulterated version of U.S.-style progressive curriculum reform in 1947, Kokubun lambasted it for its overemphasis on “child psychology” at the expense of “humanistic love” (Kokubun, 1947, 14). In particular, he worried that such an approach would prove unable to provide a “developed sense of justice” that could “resist old-style (i.e. prewar) education,” by turning “young teachers into technicians of education.” Revealingly, Kokubun reiterated the need to cultivate children’s “ability to think critically and logically” (15) “through the use of daily life writing (that) help[ed] students describe the contradictions of capitalism and feudalism of the farm village (20).” Or as DLW activist Shozaburo Ueda more bluntly put it, U.S.-inspired, “play-based free education” approaches had been easily coopted by a prewar authoritarian regime that ultimately left the Japanese people little different from “fascist slaves” (Ueda, 1948, 36).

4. DLW and the Decentering of Modern Education Discourses

Global awareness of DLW also forces scholars to de-center conventional models of education development. In line with Keita Takayama’s (2011) injunction against reducing Japanese education trends to simple dichotomies of “universal” (American-based) innovations versus “particular” (Japanese) traditions, a broader study of DLW suggests a more complex and dynamic model of educational change. DLW’s critical, observatory approach to education was not simply mimicry of Anglo-American models or xenophobic rejection thereof, but rather a creative process responding to specific historical contexts. At minimum, DLW problematizes the hackneyed, dichotomy of “East-West” conflict versus imitation, by reasserting the multi-polar, agency-imbued, nature of educational change.

The very fact that the DLW movement was a grass-roots phenomenon led by educators from the geographic periphery of Japan further suggests a creative discourse that went beyond simple mimicry or resistance to metropolitan norms. To be sure, not all DLW figures came from the rural hinterlands, nor did all of its leaders (e.g. Yoshibeï Nomura, Takajiï Imai) see their work as fundamentally opposed to broader prewar “New Education” discourses. Nonetheless, the widespread emergence of dozens of sustained practitioners’ networks from heretofore “backwards” parts of Japan –particularly the Tohoku region of northern Honshu, Hokkaido, and the San’in region –is striking for a nation well-known for its high level of educational centralization. These educators might have still seen their efforts as part of the

larger Japanese national project, but their marginalized self-image accentuated pedagogical innovation. Explicitly rejecting what they saw as the passive, “arms folded” nature of elite “liberal” education, DLW proponents felt the urgent need to develop an active pedagogy that cultivated a “righteous attitude” (*tadashii shisei*) devoted to helping students “achiev(e) control over their lives” and establish “raw ambitions.” As the organizational “plan” (*sekkeizu*) of the DLW-affiliated Northern Japan National Language Education Alliance summed up in 1935:

It is a clear fact that except for the colonies, no other part of Japan has been as culturally ignored as north Japan; nor has the steely oppressiveness of feudalism, with its corresponding modes of production, been allowed to continue in its raw form (as here). Moreover, [even] in this harsh environment, this region of muddy, dark streams, we all equally have a “life foundation” (*seikatsudai*). It is only upon an education based on a righteous attitude thereto that true education and enlightened guidance may be grasped and established. Moreover, because of this, we educators of northern Japan are conscious of the fact that we can only contribute to all of Japan by actively and systematically raising children up (in this way). In order to cultivate in our students this righteous attitude towards their “life foundations,” we cannot simply observe the facts of a child’s life and sit back contemplatively, with arms folded. We must enter the muddy waters and go right up to the exposed children. More than ever we must throw away pointless liberalism; we must help them in achieving control over their lives quickly and establishing their raw ambitions (*iyoku*). (Kita Nippon Kokugo Kyoiku Renmei, 1935, 1)

Moreover, DLW de-centers assumptions based on educators’ socio-economic and educational status. Certainly, not all DLW leaders were from humble backgrounds and not all participants from better known prewar movements, such as the progressive New Education movement, were cosmopolitan elites. Even so, the biographical contrasts in the respective movements’ leadership are striking. Whereas the best known “New Educators” of the prewar period – such as Masataro Sawayanagi, Motoko Hani, and Kuniyoshi Obara—either came from relatively well-off families (Sawayanagi, Hani) or had opportunities to regularly interact with foreign educators (Obara), the life circumstances of northern DLW leaders were quite different. Kokubun’s father was a struggling barber, Sasaki’s family made their living with a combination of farming and fishing, while Murayama’s family could not even provide for an education beyond higher elementary school (Otokuni, 2013; Sasaki, 1982; Murayama, 2004). Namekawa was the one prominent northern DLW leader able to go beyond a prefectural-level normal school education, but he was the exception that proved the rule. He ended up teaching at one of the leading “New Education” schools in Tokyo, Seikei Gakuen (Namekawa, 1934). Whereas Sawayanagi and Obara were able to command enough resources to invite prominent overseas educators such as Helen Pankhurst halfway around the world (Kobayashi, 2004, 5), for example, educators associated with the DLW’s northern movement were famously kept afloat by the excess proceeds from one of the founding members’ tofu shop (Hoppo Kyoiku Dojin Konwakai, 1979). Many leading New Educators also became presidents of imperial universities (Sawayanagi) or founded their own schools (Obara, Hani), and thus regularly encountered prominent university professors, industrialists and government bureaucrats who shaped national education policy. Although some DLW leaders would begin

to regularly interact with education researchers – particularly those affiliated with ESRA—in the late 1930s, similar access to those in power would not be realized until after the war. The fact that DLW was an educational movement comprised of regional educators of more modest means also meant that they had the ability to network and develop the movement to unprecedented size. With numbers of DLW participants in the general neighborhood of ten thousand or more, a not insignificant proportion of the total elementary school teacher population would have been familiar with its basic approaches.^{iv}

Given DLW teachers’ relatively modest backgrounds, class tensions lurked below the surface when DLW engaged educators from other pedagogical movements. Contemporary reports noted the personal disconnect between the younger rural practitioners who would form the core of the emerging DLW movement, and the more conventionally progressive figures of the early DLW, such as long-time proponent Haruo Chiba (1930, 52-54). Similar status bias might have also had a role in the 1937-1938 Life Education Debates. As noted above, the sneering, dismissive way that the Tokyo-based psychology professor Tomeoka characterized northern DLW pedagogy as the work of “cow-pasture academy” teachers – and the acrimonious counter-attacks by northern stalwarts (e.g. Kato, 1938; Takahashi, 1938) it elicited – testify to how pedagogical differences could devolve into something intimately personal. Although DLW teachers remained relatively better off than the families of their students, they were intimately aware of the bleak, abiding poverty that informed the daily existence of their students. As seen above, they contrasted their own iconoclastic approach to the “pointless” methods of “liberal” progressive educators in order to help students better “control” their own lives and embrace their “raw ambitions.” Commenting on a daily life essay of an adolescent female student wanting to become a midwife over the objections of her family, for example, Ko Sasaki praised the “extraordinary” openness (literally, “lie-free facts”) of the student for recognizing her desire not to spend the rest of her life as a farmer. At the same time, he lamented the “gentle” tendency of more moderate teachers who – by simply focusing on the technical “skills of expression” of a student essay — avoided the “important duty” of teaching students about “ways of living,” and the “serious tragedies” and “deep contradictions” omnipresent in rural Japanese life. As he concluded, simply looking on at students’ struggles in an administrative, supervisory capacity was not enough; at minimum, teachers had to use their classroom to develop students’ “thought processes” and to help them engage society more effectively (Sasaki, 1935, 41-42).

Ironically, the very “backwards” nature of DLW teachers’ normal school education also put them in a better position to approach education from fresh perspectives. Unlike their elite prewar counterparts such as Tomeoka or Sawayanagi, DLW’s educational authority did not derive from privileged access to the latest trends and developments in Anglo-American education discourse. Indeed, DLW teachers’ very familiarity with the supposedly obsolete ideas of Herbart arguably better prepared them to embrace the critical, *Geisteswissenschaftliche* tradition embodied by the ideas of Wilhelm Dilthey. As such, DLW teachers had the space to coolly and skeptically interrogate overseas discourses that education elites could not. Thus even in the postwar period, as prominent Tokyo-based educators such as Tetsufumi Miyasaka (1950) and Kenji Kitaoka (1949) actively supported the implementation of U.S.-based guidance approaches practices to better “adjust” (*tekio*) students to the socio-economic status quo of the 1940s and 1950s, DLW would only more loudly advocate for an education of social amelioration and moral-based ideas of justice.

5. Epilogue and Conclusion

This essay has outlined the reasons why prewar DLW should be better known by an international audience. The paper has reiterated the “liberatory” parallels of DLW to critical pedagogists such as Paolo Freire, while also noting the ways this discourse continued to resist the “lies” of state authority well into the wartime period. Moreover, through an exploration of the philosophical ideas of Michio Namekawa and Ko Sasaki, this paper makes clear that DLW’s critical pedagogy was not a historical accident. It was rather a manifestation of an emerging emphasis on the pedagogy of “intent observations” that drew clarity from the hermeneutical approaches of European thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey. Given Dilthey’s central importance to the development of early 20th century German “humanistic sciences,” it is also not surprising that DLW would have striking parallels – with its emphasis on the need for critical consciousness to examine existing power structures, on its goal of achieving greater student “control” and autonomy over their own lives -- to the later education theories of Horkheimer, Adorno and Heinz Joachim Heydorn (Horlacher, 106-110). Finally, through an examination of the marginal status of DLW leaders, particularly in comparison to the luminaries of the prewar New Education movement, the paper shows how DLW pedagogy was infused with an urgency, even stridency, rarely seen in other large-scale education movements. As seen from the organizational “plan” of the Northern Japan National Language Education Alliance, the movement was painfully aware of their peripheral status, yet they were able to invert such perceived oppression into an expanded emphasis on life guidance itself.

As an education movement emphasizing the liberation of the individual, a critical eye towards society, and the valorization of the contributions of heretofore marginalized communities, DLW could prove a useful reference to a 21st century education world increasingly less sure about the validity of the late 20th century neo-liberal, technocratic models. The fact that it rose (and ultimately declined) within the context of an education system so stereotypically directive and centralized as Japan, and the fact that it exhibited characteristics with intriguing parallel to other parts of the world, also suggests that broader, transnational inquiry might be worth considering in the future.

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Notes

- i To be fair, not all English-language historians of Japanese education have ignored DLW. Benjamin Duke's (1973) reference to prewar DLW and its relationship to postwar Japanese teacher unionism is likely the earliest discussion of DLW in English. Gerald Figal (1996), Jordan Sand (2006) and Adam Bronson (2016) have also touched upon DLW in their research, although their interests have focused more on DLW as a literary genre and not as a pedagogical discourse per se.
- ii In using the term "progressivism," this essay is treating it as a contingent, historical discourse. As Herbert Kliebard (2004) has noted, 20th century American progressivism was not a fixed body of ideas or practices, but a negotiated, contested construct. David Tyack (1974) has further laid out the ways that progressivism's "administrative" emphasis on psychological development and social efficiency increasingly overshadowed other, "pedagogical" concerns. In specific regards to the Japanese context, "progressivism" has commonly been equated with the New Education (*shin kyoiku*) movement of liberal educators particularly inspired by the works of Dewey and other early 20th century pragmatic educators. (Yamasaki, 2017, 1-2)
- iii Saburo Imano (1980, 2) has noted that the organizational journal for the Northern Education movement popular in Northern Honshu, *Northern Education*, had a circulation that ranged between 500 and 1800 copies. Its sister periodical, publishing student works based on the Northern Education method, had a circulation of about 3000 copies. Given that copies of *Northern Education* were frequently used by multiple colleagues at one school, the number of teachers who adhered to Northern Education ideas and practices in some capacity was likely at least two to three thousand. Similarly, another "northern" approach to DLW, the Hokkaido Writing Education Alliance, published a journal, *Hokkaido Bunsen*, that printed as many as 20,000 copies per month (Ebihara, 1975, 526). In contrast, the longest-lived Shizuoka DLW journal ranged from an estimated 300 to 500 copies per issue, while the largest collection of student works associated with the Tottori-based *Hakusei Education Association* centered around teachers from 51 area schools (Sasai, 1981, 312, 271). On a national scale, Hiraoka (2011, 26) has noted the popularity of *Kansho Bunsen*, a monthly compendium of student compositions taught by DLW methods. At its height it was used by 5000 elementary school teachers throughout the country and distributed to over 400,000 students. The two dozen or so national and regional DLW organizations documented by Nakauchi (1970, 773-816) likely saw a total number of practitioners who engaged in DLW pedagogies range from at least the high thousands to low tens of thousands.
- iv For reference, the number of elementary school teachers in Japan peaked in 1940 at 287,000 (SCAP, 1952, 363).