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Education and Risk: The Application of Risk Society Theory to the Study of Education Systems in Europe, America and Asia

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Abstract

German sociologist Ulrich Beck's concept of 'Risk Society' has recently been applied to the study of education systems in Western countries. The application of this concept can be classified into the following five categories: (1) 'Risk' as a positive concept in education; (2) 'Risk' as a negative concept in education; (3) Risk, individualization and education; (4) Risk, globalization and education; and (5) Risk, neoliberalism and education. This paper is divided into two parts. Part I discusses Risk Society theory and education under the above five categories in the case of the USA and Western Europe (the West) drawing on the recently published work of several sociologists and anthropologists. Part II is concerned with a discussion of the same five categories in the case of Japan. While there are certainly similarities in the way the debate on education reform is framed, the transformation of social issues into individual problems that one often finds in Western countries is not so evident in Japan with teachers, parents and education bureaucrats still preferring to see problems through the lens of group responsibilities and traditional relationships between young people and their adult superiors.

Introduction

I did not realise it at the time but I was first introduced to the notion of 'the risk society' in a pub in Deptford, East London in 1988. I went there to see Tony Allen, a stand-up comedian who was well known on the 'alternative comedy' circuit that was making its mark in British popular culture at that time. During his act, Allen remarked how shocked he was by the Chernobyl disaster two years earlier. He then told the audience that immediately after the event he read a newspaper article that claimed the chances of another similar disaster were 'a million to one.' A few months later he found a different article that stated the odds as being '20,000 to one.' He pondered the discrepancy and wondered which one was correct. Then a thought occurred to him: "even if it is 20,000

to one, it's got to be worth a fiver [a five pound bet.]" So he telepohoned the Bookmakers William Hills and talked to their 'special bets' department. He asked what odds they would give him for 'another Chernobyl-style disaster in Europe in the next twenty years.' The man he spoke to on the telephone was not sure how to deal with this inquiry so he said he would consult his superiors and then call back. An hour or so later he did call back to report that William Hills could not give odds on a nuclear accident because it invovles 'human suffering'. Allen said "does that mean you don't take bets on any event that involves human suffering?" The man told him that that was indeed the case. Allen replied with the comment, "but that can't be right; you gave nine-to-four odds on Margaret Thatcher winning the last general election!"

Tony Allen's response to the Chernobyl disaster shows a (probably unwitting) application of the Risk Society paradigm for two reasons. Firstly, it involved rational attempts to analyse the probability of a future event. Secondly, this event was a potentially catastrophic disaster that was entriely the product of man-made technology. Scholars of Risk research describe Chernobyl as "the most spectacular" in a series of accidents in the 1980s that illustrate the "centrality of risk in contemporary societies" (Adam, Beck and Van Loon 2000: 33). Other catasrophic man-made disasters of that period were Bohpal (1984) and the wreck of the Exxon Valdez (1989). Widespread public concern about events like these helped to boost the salience of Ulrich Beck's book *Risk Society* when it was published first in German (in 1986) and then in English (in 1992). The aim of the present paper is not to investigate catastrophic accidents, but to pursue other dimensions of Risk Society theory, and in particular how they can be applied to education policy. One feature under investigation here is the tendency for individuals and institutions in postindustrial nations to attempt to make rational calculations about the future costs and benefits of their present actions. It will be shown that this tendency is encouraged by government policy that wants to shift responsibility for many kinds of educational outcome from state insitutions to individuals and private institutions. In this context, when people talk about risks they are talking about the inevitable uncertainty of future events. The calculation of odds of future events – whether they are horse races, general elections, nuclear disasters, or a given football player biting an opponent during a particular international tournament– is one rational way to try and gain some control over what has not yet occured. Another way to gain some control over future events is to assess risks as carefully as possible and then put in place policies that can prevent bad things happening before they do. The education systems of various advanced countries have increasingly been involved in trying to

‘manage’ risks in various ways. In this paper we will begin with an examination of the application of Risk in education in Western Europe and the United States. Then we will move on to explore how this theoretical approach can be applied in Japan.

Part I, Risk and Education in Europe and North America

We will start by examining two contrasting conceptualisations of risk, the positive and the negative.

I. 1. ‘Risk’ as a Positive Concept in Education in the West

One notion of ‘Risk’ that is often featured in discourse on both the theory and practice of education is the positive idea of risk as something to be embraced and celebrated. Following the growth of the ‘health and safety culture’ that took place in advanced capitalist countries of the West towards the end of the Twentieth Century, combined with a well-documented decline in physical activity among children and young people, a backlash took place in some circles in the early years of the Twenty-first Century that emphasised more traditional forms of physical adventure and risk-taking. One manifestation of this backlash was the extraordinary success of *The Dangerous Book for Boys*, published in 2006 in the UK and USA (Iggulden and Iggulden 2006). The contents included directions on how to build a tree-house, how to fish with only a hook and a line, and how to find true north using a watch. The art-work in the book, including the cover was deliberately designed to evoke Victorian-era publications such as *Boys Own Paper* which had extolled the masculine virtues of activities like exploration, adventure and sport. The marketing campaign for *The Dangerous Book for Boys* very successfully appealed to a nostalgia for a time when boys matured into men by facing physical hardship and risk. Many parents clearly believed that this publication could be an antidote to the computer game and ‘couch potato’ culture that threatened their children with moral as well as physical slothfulness.

The positive conceptualisation of risk is not confined to potentially dangerous physical exertions. In their discussion of ‘Education and the Risk Society’, Bialostok and Whitman make the following remarks about risk as something to be embraced because of its positive educational value.

> In the same vein as taking 'good risks' in order to make an economic profit, classroom teachers may encourage the student to willingly take risks in order to 'profit' in learning – to test an emerging, vague and ambitious learning hypothesis. Risk is required in order to make approximations to acquire new skills, knowledge and concepts. (Bialostok and Whitman 2012: 1)

This approach is explicitly encouraged in the guidelines for many curricula in selective schools or private shools that serve an elite or exclusive community.

Risk-taking as a positive concept can also be linked to another controversial notion in education discourse: 'creativity'. British educational studies scholars, Eastwood and Ormondroyd argue that "certainly one major theme surrounding creativity is the necessity to take risks on several different levels" (Eastwood and Ormondroyd 2005: 41). By definition, any creative act, whether it is the creation of a work of original art or the setting-up of a new scientific experiment, involves a step into the unknown with the ever-present possibility of failure and disappointment. Thus a very supportive environment is required if young people are going to embrace the challenge of trying out new ideas. In a study of adolescents from affluent backgrounds in California, anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath examines the security provided by family, school and 'intimate strangers,' and how this "enables them to grow up without having to deal alone with any consequences that might follow from their actions" (Heath 2012: 289). When this is combined with extensive experiences of 'deliberative discourse' (i.e. patterns of exchange of information toward the future) provided within their households and among their friends, the result is a group of young people who have learned to come up with new ideas without a fear of the failure which will inevitably sometimes occur (*Ibid.*). This could be one explanation for why America's west coast is the cradle for world famous entrepreneurs like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs.

There are clearly ethnicity, class and gender dimensions to all the cases of 'positive risk' discussed above. What does Steve Jobs have in common with the Victorian schoolboy devoted to 'the great outdoors' and a life of adventure? They are both white males who are the products of relatively privileged backgrounds, and they are both citizens of global powers. Is the successful adoption of the positive risk model only possible in a privileged educational background? What about working class or ethnic minority children who engage in risky activity? What about women and girls? If activities involving the breaking of school rules and challenging authority are conducted by non-privileged groups, the chances are that they will not be labelled as something

positive. This leads sociologist Andrew Hope to the inevitable conclusion that "risk consequences are interpreted through social, cultural and political processes" (Hope 2005: 14). This topic will be returned to in the next section.

It is not only children and young people who can embrace the positive aspects of risk-taking, teachers also are often required to be their own 'risk managers'. Eastwood and Ormondroyd point out that in popular culture in the West, the 'good teacher' is often portrayed as someone who is very risk-taking. They cite as examples popular films like *Dead Poet's Society, Dangerous Minds, Good Will Hunting* and *Mr Holland's Opus*. (Eastwood and Ormondroyd 2005: 41). The teachers in these films use creative and controversial methods to challenge the children and young people in their care, and often take risks with their own professional careers in the process. Even more ordinary and less dramatic examples of risk-taking and creativity, such as trying out a new lesson plan or re-designing a syllabus expose the teacher to the possibility of failure if things do not go according to plan. There is an educational equivalent to famous acronym NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) which is NOMO (Not On My Offspring), and refers to the understandable reluctance of parents to allow their children to be the targets of experimental pedagogical techniques. In addition, recent trends in the West for the monitoring of an individual teacher's 'performance', i.e. the test scores of the students they teach, mitigate against risk-taking for teachers due to the fear that they too will suffer a negative appraisal. One example of this is the OFSTED regime of school inspections in the UK. A balance clearly needs to be struck between the necessity for the development of improved educational methods and the requirement that current pupils not have their learning put in jeopardy. The responsible creativity of teachers is something to be encouraged, not inhibited.

I. 2. 'Risk' as a Negative Concept in Education in the West

A second tradition in educational discourse on risk is concerned with undesirable future outcomes and how they can be avoided or coped with. As Bialostok and Whitman rightly comment, this kind of discourse is the one with which the public is more familiar.

> While risk has different shades of meanings, from the way that it is clearly and frequently linked with loss, injury and disadvantage (and the disadvantaged)

> the more frequent public interpretation of the noun and verb 'risk' is synonymous with some potential form of negative outcome, danger or peril (Bostok and Whitman 2012: 2).

Within educational discourse it is common to come across particular groups of children or young people who are defined by the relevant government agencies as being 'at risk', i.e unless some kind of successful intervention is carried out, they will probably grow up to a life of poverty, welfare dependency or crime. Advanced nation states can be expected to deal with this threat in the same way they deal with other potential hazards of the 'Risk Society', they will try to solve the problem before it becomes a problem. But in so doing, they perpetuate the image of certain groups in society posing a threat to the nation as a whole. They also place the blame for failure (educational or otherwise) on the individuals within those groups.

Early Childhood Education scholar, Michele Buchanan notes that three broad categories of discipline contribute to the construction of this kind of risk in education: (1) medical and public health disciplines; (2) child welfare and social policy; and (3) child psychology (Buchanan 2012: 122). The expert knowledge that is produced by these disciplines is used to identify children 'at risk' at as early an age as possible, and then inform a process of early intervention designed to "inoculate children against school failure and dependency on state welfare" (Buchanan *Ibid.*). Proponents of this kind of approach argue that it provides good value for money for the tax payer. Gest and Davidson, for example, point out that a "benefit-cost analysis of a prevention program involves *monetizing* (assigning a dollar value to) all costs and all benefits of a program." (Gest and Davidson 2011: 449 – emphasis in original). The modest funding of an intervention program when a child is young will be more than paid back by savings to the tax payer when that child grows up to be a productive member of society rather than a delinquent or a dropout.

Buchanan and others, however, have pointed out the problems with this kind of approach. Although it is hard to criticise programmes that help children and their families cope with very real educational and health problems, the necessity for 'early identification' inevitably requires a large degree of surveillance and systemative screening by state agencies. Furthermore it is rational to concentrate surveillance and screening on those populations that are statistically likely to have more 'at risk' children than others. The unintended consequence of this is that it helps create whole populations

that are considered 'at risk.' One example of this is the Head Start programme in the United States that offers preschool assistance to children from families who are deemed to be 'at risk' because of low socio-economic status. Behind this kind of programme is the "widespread belief that if we fix young children we can solve social problems" (Buchanan 2012: 124). This diverts attention from institutions or systems (at both national and global levels) that create inequality and perpetuate poverty, and puts the responsibility for failure (in education as in other areas) on the shoulders of the individual. 'At risk' labels stigmatise certain groups and make it seem that their problems are their own fault. Policies of early intervention also illustrate one of the contradictions at the heart of education policy in the risk society: the simultaneous emphasis on the nurturing of the resilient individual alongside the *de facto* treatment of children and their parents as "vulnerable and fragile instead of capable" (Brunila 2012: 453).

The category of children who are considered to be 'at risk' overlaps to a considerable extent with those who pose 'a risk' to other children, teachers and society at large. Children who drop out of school or fail to achieve a minimum education are not only destined to be poor themselves; they are also more likely to be tempted to a life of crime. Here, the aim of government policy is to stop crime *before* it happens. This is not a new idea. Sociologist, Simone Bull refers us to the following claim made by the (U.S.) National Education Association in a document published in 1931. "Crime will be virtually abolished by transferring to the preventive processes of the school and education the problems of conduct with police courts and prisons now remedy when it is too late" (Bull 2005: 78). Advances in science and medicine combined with the unquestionable benefits to all of preventing young people embarking on a life of crime has reinforced "a risk rhetoric that has developed in such a way as to suggest that risk calculations are devoid of moral judgement and are mere objective facts" (Bull 2005: 81). This reinforces the tendency outlined above to shift the blame for crime and poverty away from macro systems onto individuals and families, especially those in 'at risk' populations. Buchanan notes how it also legitimizes intervention by state agencies into the lives of children, with or without the permission of their parents or guardians:

> Acting on our youngest children to manage risk represents a shift in thinking about the public and private identities of these children. This shift presents an interesting challenge to traditional ideas that young children are, first and foremost members of families and communities. Does membership in a group

> that poses a threat to society imply that those children be given a public identity and become the business of public and professional authorities? (Buchanan 2012: 135-6).

Beck and others have discussed how in many areas of life (the provision of pensions to take one example) the advent of 'risk society' involves the withdrawal of the state from the private affairs of its citizens. In education and childcare, however, it is possible that the opposite might be happening. This can also be seen in the extension of Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) to schools. CCTV is "increasingly used throughout the education system as the surveillance revolution sweeps across the world. The importance of such surveillance lies in the social construction of youth as both 'at-risk' and a source of risk." (Bull 2005: 89).

The close surveillance of children can gain widespread public support when incidents of youth violence are given extensive coverage in the media. Dan Gardner is one commentator who is very persuasive in making the case that emotional responses to risks that are in actual fact very remote can be turned into political pressure to increase surveillance and monitoring of both children and adults. In the US, after the shocking murder of a teacher and twelve students in Columbine High School on April 20, 1999 parts of the media reacted "as if civil war had broken out inside every school" (Gardner 2008: 218). Public funds were shifted from the normal kind of educational expenditure to metal detectors, security cameras and armed guards. Actually in the year 1997-98 the average American student had a 0.00006 per cent chance of being murdered at school (Gardner 2008: 217). Although it was a terrible tragedy for those involved the Columbine massaccre was not large enough to change this statistic significantly. However, the emotions of shock and fear that many people experienced when they saw the images of the massacre continuously broadcast on TV were more powerful than the intellectual ability to coldly calculate the statistics. This is a familiar occurrence for those who have made a study of the role of the media in the Risk Society and is known as 'risk amplification' (Pidgeon, Kasperson and Slovic 2003). The result was efforts accross the country to stop a similar event happening again anywhere. "The term *lockdown* moved from prison jargon to standard English as it became routine to conduct drills in which students imagined armed maniacs in the halls" (Gardner 2008: 218-9).

A similar effect could be observed three years later in the UK when two ten-year old girls were murdered in the village of Soham, Cambridgeshire. The murderer was a

caretaker in a nearby school who, it transpired, had a record of sex offences (including underage sex offences) from a different police jurisdiction. One of the consequences of this tragedy was the Bichard inquiry (2003-4) into child protection which recommended nation-wide background checks into anyone applying for a job that involved working with children. The shocking murder of two young girls helped to bring about a national system that – it was hoped – would stop similar crimes happening. This is exactly the kind of response one expects from the 'risk society'; efforts by authorities to stop terrible events *before* they happen. As a result of legislation that followed the inquiry anyone wanting to work with children in the UK, including volunteers, had to undergo a 'Criminal Records Bureau' (CRB) background check before they could be trusted to do so. Not every volunteer was willing to undergo the expense and inconvenience of having a CRB check, and so as an unintended consequence of the new rules, many youth club and school club events that relied on the efforts of volunteers (often parents) had to be stopped. One tragic incident in one part of the country resulted in a new framework of legislation that adversely affected activities involving children throughout the nation. This kind of out-of-proportion resonse is to be expected in the 'risk society'. Public authorities – spurred on by the media – see it as their task to try to prevent anything bad from ever happening to children and young people. They are set the impossible target of reducing negative risk to zero.

I. 3. Risk, Individualization and Education in the West

Simone Bull argues that the increased intervention, screening and surveillance by state agencies discussed above may "indicate a loss of confidence in parents' and schools' abililty to exert control [over children] by existing measures" (Bull 2005: 89). In traditional socieites children were the responsibility of the family and the nearby community. If the evolution of 'risk society,' as presented by Beck, is a transformation that undermines these kinds of traditional connections, then it should not be surprising that the family and the neighborhood play less of a role in the social control of youngsters. In this kind of society the adult individual is supposed to have fewer connections to traditional social institutions like family, locality or class (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). But what about the child who has not yet become a fully-formed, autonomous individual? The official goal of education policy in the risk society is to nurture strong individuals who can 'stand on their own two feet.' According to the early-intervention approach outlined above, parents who, for one reason or

another, are deemed to be not up to this task must be replaced. The state, therefore reserves the right to intervene if "parents fail to provide proper management [of their children]" (Bialostok and Whitman 2012: 27). Brunila adds that the focus of this intervention seems to on "working towards an ideal individual who is flexible in accordance with the needs of the economy" (Brunila 2012: 460). Thus we have the paradox of the state simultaneously encouraging individual citizens to act independently while reserving the right to intervene in the private affairs of those families that are deemed to be failing in their duty to nurture the next generation of rugged individuals.

I. 4. Risk, Globalisation and Education in the West

In addition to the increased process of individualization, for Beck the development of the 'risk society' also went hand in hand with the process of globalisation. There are two main ways in which globalisation has had an impact on education in developed nations since the 1980s. Firstly there has been a significant increase in cross-border migration of students at the higher education level, and secondly, nation-states have become increasingly concerned to compare the results of standardized tests and other measures of educaitonal performance with other nations. Sociologist of Education, Kariya Takehiko has refered to the first of these as a site of 'real' global competition, while the second is 'imagined' (Kariya 2014). Both of these processes have, by necessity, involved a heightened awareness of risk on the part of policy-makers, administrators, teachers and students. They also open up national educational institutions to new forms of risk, i.e. the risk that they will be seen as under-performing when compared to those of other countries.

In the U.S. in 1983, a landmark report on education was published. Entitled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform* it was comissioned by Terence Bell, Ronald Reagan's Secretary for Education. It took the concept of an individual chid being 'at risk' and extrapolated it to the whole nation. The inadequate education of the nation's children could be directly linked to increased vulnerability of the entrire nation-state in the face of intense global competition. The following two extracts from the report make clear the linking of educational performance with national security.

> If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have

> viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge.[1]
>
> The world is [now] one global village. We live among determined, well-educated and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with ideas. . . . . The risk is not only that the Japanese make automobiles more efficiently than Americans and have government subsidies for development and export. It is not just that the South Koreans recently built the world's most efficient steel mill, or that American machine tools, once the pride of the world are being displaced by German products. It is also that these developments signify a redistribution of trained capability throughout the globe. Knowledge, learning, information and skilled intelligence are the new raw materials of international commerce (quoted in Bialostok and Whitman 2012: 21).

Over the years since the publication of this report, it became commonly accepted in all corners of the world that educational standards and economic prosperity were strongly linked, and that competition between nations in the field of educational standards was inevitably linked with economic competition. It became common-place for education ministers in all developed nations – as well as in developing ones – to talk about the risks involved in being left behind in this global competition. This process inevitably brought about a rise in the production of 'objective' statistics that could be used to compare one nation's education system with another.

Since 2002, the year when it opened a separate Directorate for Education, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) has become a significant actor in the field of education, mostly due to the periodical production of such statistics and related reports. It gathers data on the education systems of member states and publishes results in order to encourage countries to borrow successful ideas and methods from each other, and to reform those parts of the system that are 'underperforming'. It operates on the assumption that "a broad consensus exists on many aspects of the policy requirement for a globalizing world economy" (quoted in

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[1] This is a reference to the Sputnik crisis in the U.S. that followed the successful launch into orbit by the Soviet Union of the first mad-made satellite in October 1957. The fear that the Soviets were ahead of America in science and technology led the U.S. government to increase spending on education, especially sicence and engineering.

Rizvi and Lingard 2006: 251). The OECD's advice has no legally binding power, and so the enthusiasm with which governments and elites in so many different countries embrace its reports, especially its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, indicate that, at least in recent years, it has been providing fuel for many domestic agendas each of which has its own dynamics. In particular the notion that educational 'quality' and 'performance' can be measured and compared across borders has become an OECD orthodoxy that has been picked up globally.

The increased global mobility of students can be seen as encapsulating both the positive and negative aspects of risk. It is also a further illustration of how social status can affect the ability of an individual to embrace the postive and avoid the negative, since those with more economic and social capital are better able to take advantage of this kind of opportunity.

I. 5. Risk, Neoliberalism and Education in the West

Bialostok and Whitman argue that the use of the terminology of 'risk' exploded in education circles in the U.S. in the 1980s as part of "the emergence of a neoliberal 'regime of truth' that produced and emphasized risk discourses" (Bailostok and Whitman 2012: 20). In this case, the risk of individual under-achievement or failure at school was extrapolated to the fear of nation-wide mediocrity and decline encapsulated in *A Nation at Risk*.

'Neoliberalism' is a concept (or a set of related concepts) that grew to prominence in western nations at around the same time as the concept of the risk society, i.e. at a time when modernity and industrialism (in its Fordist mode) were entering their mature (or 'late') stages and there was considerable uncertainty about what would follow. Neoliberalism advocates shrinking the role of the nation-state and applying models of organisation and incentives from the private sector to state bureaucracies. According to this theory the 'consumers' of public services – in the case of education, students and their parents – should have far more choice than they are allowed in the typical mid-twentieth century model of monolithic public bureaucracies. This approach to the reform of state bureaucracies became known as 'New Public Management' (NPM). Slogans that outline its ten objectives for government reform are listed below.

NPM's Ten Government Objectives

1. Catalytic Government: Steering Rather than Rowing
2. Community-Owned Government: Empowering Rather than Serving
3. Competitive Government: Injecting Competition into Service
4. Mission-Driven Government: Transforming Rule-Driven Organizations
5. Results-Oriented Government: Funding Outcomes, Not Inputs
6. Customer-Driven Government: Meeting the Needs of the Customer, Not the bureaucracy
7. Enterprising Government: Earning Rather than Spending
8. Anticipatory Government: Prevention Rather than Cure
9. Decentralized Government: From Hierarchy to Participation and Teamwork
10. Market-Oriented Government: Leveraging Change Through the Market

(Osborne and Gaebler 1992 cited in Denhardt 2007: 145-6)

There are clear links between certain items on this list and the 'risk society' paradigm as it is applied to education. Item 8, 'Anticipatory Government' is certainly connected with the tendency, discussed above, to try to 'solve' youth problems of delinquency and educational under-achievement *before* they become entrenched adult problems, i.e. when the children in question are still very young. Also, the notion contained in objective 2 that government should 'empower' rather than 'serve' is closely connected to that part of the risk society paradigm that sees individuals becoming their own 'risk managers' rather than relying on the paternalistice protection of the 'nanny state' (if the mixed-metaphor of the 'pater' and the 'nanny' can be allowed for the moment.)

Criticisms of NPM as it is applied to public education overlap to a considerable extent with the criticisms discussed above over the increasing use of 'risk' terminology in education and childcare, particulalry as it is applied to 'at risk' individuals and groups. Critics point out that while the notion of 'empowering individuals' looks good on paper, the ability of a given individual to make use of the government services offered to him or her will vary greatly depending on the resources, status, educational level, social capital etc. of the individual concerned. In the 'risk society' those who are unable to play the system well (for whatever reasons) will be judged as being the authors of their own failure.

Part II, Risk and Education in Japan

We will now move on to the case of Japan to analyse the extent to which the trends and developments outlined in Part I of this paper apply here. For this purpose Part II will be organised into the same five sub-categories as Part I.

II. 1. Risk as a Positive Concept in Education in Japan

If the fathers who purchased copies of *The Dangerous Book for Boys* for their sons in the UK and the USA were worried about contemporary youth lacking in the urge to go to the 'great outdoors' and experience some adventure, then some commentators in Japan in recent years have also been worried about a lack of toughness and 'dering-do' among the male members of the younger generation. Discussion in the media of *soshoku danshi* [herbivore men] and the increased marketing of beauty products to young men along with the popularity of a *subesube* [smooth and hairless] style among salarymen seem – on the surface at least – to indicate a turn away from adventure and out-door risk among Japan's urban majority (LeBlanc 2011).

For conservative commentators like influential cartoonist Kobayashi Yoshinori this lack of machismo among young men is a sign of contemporary Japan's moral malaise. In his best selling *manga* collection *sensoron* [Analects of War] published during the 1990s, Kobayashi contrasts the heroic masculine soldiers of wartime Japan with the effeminate weaklings he sees around him today. His cartoons suggest a connection between the feminization of young men and other social ills (Clifford 2004). In order to save Japan from further decay Kobayashi uses his *manga* to call for the 'waking up' of patriotism and national pride in today's youth. Although he is openly nostalgic for the days of empire, Kobayashi's ideal image of a fighting man (which appears frequenlty in the pages of *sensoron*) is quite different from the Victorian hero of the British *Boys Own Paper*. As Rumi Sakamoto points out, the Japanese heroes (*eiyu*) of *sensoron* are ordinary, anonymous characters doing their duty and sacrificing their lives to protect their homeland (Sakamoto 2008). Although certainly patriotic (and usually openly racist to anyone non-English) the heroes of Victorian adventure yarns were rugged individuals who were painted as being far from ordinary. Also, from the point of view of risk theory, while the Victorian hero was clearly a risk-taker who positively welcomed risk and danger, the ultimate hero of Kobayashi's work – the *kamikaze* pilot – represents the negation of risk since the essential component of risk, uncertainty about the future, is

absent in a warrior who is going to certain death. Kobayahi's nostalgic patriotism celebrates conformity and obedience. He wants today's boys to be physically tougher and more masculine, but his vision of an ideal Japan is far removed from the kind of 'Risk Society' described by Beck and others. He would probably welcome this conclusion since he blames many of Japan's present ills on the infusion of too much Western culture including individualism (Clifford 2004).

We will now move the discussion on to examine risk in the school curriculum. An example of the adoption of risk as a positive concept in Japan can be found in the International Baccalaureat (IB) Primary Years Program (PYP) of Nagoya International School (NIS) located in the suburbs of Nagoya, a large city in central Japan. The 'learner profile' for the month of February 2014 was 'Risk taker.' The explanation sent out to parents of this term went as follows: "Students who are Risk-Takers have the daring to try new things. They try to solve problems in a lot of ways. They have the bravery to tell people what they think is right." [From the NIS E-bulletin for February 2014].

The above example, taken as it is from a private international school, is representative of only a small fraction of the total number of schools in Japan. There have been clear signs, however, since at least the 1980s, that many education reformers would like to push the majority of Japanese schools in the direction outlined by the above quote. Thomas Rohlen, an anthropologist with a long experience of Japan, wrote in 2002 about the frustration many Japanese people had with the slow pace of change:

> The atmosphere in Japan . . . . . is one of near desperation to transform society from a highly articulated and disciplined, but cautious, one into a more flexibly loose and innovative one. (Rohlen 2002: 181)

One of the main themes discussed by reformers during the 1990s and 2000s concerned the concept of 'yutori' education (Tsuneyoshi 2004, Cave 2011). 'Yutori' Education can be translated as 'more relaxed education' or 'education with elbow room'. The concept is a response to the concerns that grew in the 1970s that there was too much stress, pressure and rigidity in the education system (Schoppa 1991: 49-50). The background to this was the growing sense that Japan needed to reasess its postwar emphasis on economic growth at all costs, and focus more on quality of life issues. Reforms were put in place to reduce the compulsory content of the curriculum and allow for more flexibility and choice for both teachers and students. They would be allowed and even

encouraged to try out new things; to take risks. However, optimists who thought that the Japanese education system might be turning a new leaf were dissapointed. Partly as a result of the 'PISA Shock' (that will be discussed below) the most recent curriculum reforms, introduced from 2010 onwards, have completely reversed the cuts in the compulsory curriculum that had been introduced ten years earlier and taken away much of the room for experimentation and risk taking.

II. 2. Risk as a Negative Concept in Education in Japan

A high value is placed in Japan upon conformity and consensus. Teachers throughout the education system are concerned to help children learn how to work as members of a group and to conform to the norms of society. It is highly probable that these widely-shared beliefs have helped keep youth crime and delinquency to very low levels when compared to the USA and the UK (Metzler 2003: 221). Every effort is made to keep children in the formal education system if that is at all possible. In cases of serious crime, children are removed from regular schools and placed in Juvenile Training Schools. Here the 'risk society' trait of preventing young criminals being allowed to develop into hardened adult criminals is evident. However, in the case of Japan it is harder to make the case that this is a recent development. One Western expert on this kind of special school in Japan puts down the low recidivism rate of its graduates to the intense effort and care put into reintegrating them back into society (Metzler 2003: 248-9). In Japan young people who are 'at risk' are not treated as the isolated individuals that are found in the West. That is unless they voluntarily remove themselves from society by becoming 'shut in' or *hikikomori* - a phenomenon that has posed serious problems for educational authorities and welfare agencies (Saito 2013).

Another negative risk that is of concern to teachers and parents in Japan is the risk of serious injury or death resulting from accidents at school, a risk that is far higher in Japan than comparable Western countries. In particular, many people are very concerned about the very poor safety record of school judo in Japan. Between 1983 and 2011, there were 114 recorded deaths and 275 very serious injuries of children in secondary school judo class or club activities. By way of comparison researchers were unable to find one case of a fatal accident in school judo in the USA, the UK or any Western European nation in the same period. Although some parents of victims have pushed for prosecutions where they believe criminal negligence or other wrong-doing has occurred,

public prosecutors in Japan have so far refused to act. In 2006, Japan's prime minister, Shinzo Abe oversaw the revision of the 1947 Fundamental Law of Education to emphasise traditional 'Japanese Values.' As one direct result of this, traditional martial arts (usually judo) became compulsory in junior high schools in 2012, thus increasing the number of children exposed to risk of injury or death. To address the great concern over this matter, parents and activists set up the Japan Judo Accidents Victim Association. Their aim is to reduce death and injury in school judo classes and club activities.

The discourse over the safety of school judo exemplifies an ongoing conflict between traditional values and liberal values in education in Japan. Traditional values stress discipline, obedience to authority, and conformity to the ethos of the group. Liberal pressure groups campaign for children's rights, more choice, diversity and respect for the individual in schools. The picture is made more complicated by the fact that another strand of conservatism is campaigning for the school system to be reformed in order to nurture the risk-taking entrepreneurs and innovators they believe the stagnant economy requires – reforms that also require more flexibility and choice. Shinzo Abe's own party, the Liberal Democratic Party, contains politicians of both conservative tendencies; i.e. those who want more discipline and obedience, versus the neo-liberals who want more initiative and creative thinking.

II. 3. Risk, Individualization and Education in Japan

One of the chief justifications for the education reforms that were proposed in the 1980s and 1990s was the argument that Japan needs a freer educational environment to nurture creative self-starters and risk-takers, a view well summed up in the 1996 Report of the Central Council on Education (*Chūkyōshin*), the government's main advisory body on education (Monbushō 1996). This report was full of references to the need for personal autonomy (*jishusei*), independent decision-making (*shutai-teki handan*) and individuality (*kosei*). In common with their colleagues in other ministries and agencies, education bureaucrats faced the challenge of how to help Japanese people and institutions cope with the economic and social transformations of the 1990s. The decline of the domestic large-scale manufacturing industry combined with changes in fundamental social institutions like the family accompanied the gradual shift to a post-industrial society. Beck argues that this process inevitably results in a rise in

‘individualization’: “the individual is becoming the basic unit of social reproduction for the first time in history” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001: xxii).

Ulrich Beck developed his theories of Risk Society and Individualization primarily by studying German society. He has mapped the post-war history of Germany into three phases – which have clear parallels in the post-war history of Japan.

1. **Phase One (immediate post-war reconstruction).** The need to rebuild after a disastrous war fostered a spirit of hard work and cooperation.
2. **Phase Two (1960s – 1980s).** The creation of wealth came to be something that was taken for granted. Political freedoms developed and radiated into overall society.
3. **Phase Three (1990s – 2000s).** This phase is the period of ‘global risk society.’ There is a return to uncertainty and the fear that the prosperity that had been taken for granted could now collapse. Public trust in national institutions is eroded.

According to Beck the rise of ‘individualization’ is accompanied by the shattering of the historic alliance between capitalism, the welfare state and democracy. But there is evidence that individual young people in Japan are responding to these challenges in different ways to youth in the West. In the earlier discussion of positive and negative risks in the Japanese education system I argued that the transformation of social issues into individual problems that one often finds in Western countries is not so evident in Japan with teachers, parents and education bureaucrats still prefering to see problems through the lens of group responsibilities and traditional relationships between young people and their adult superiors. Sociologist William Bradley, in his research into attitudes to risk among university students in Western Japan in 2003-5 found that many respondents had a positive attitude to risk-taking themselves but thought their friends were more risk averse (Bradley 2012: 273-4). One intriguing possible interpretation here is that many young Japanese people have internalised the image of Japan as a risk averse country.

In 1998, the controversy surrounding an incident in a high school near Tokyo brought into sharp relief the tensions that exist between efforts to provide an education more suited to current economic and social realities and conservative forces that reject the abandoning of traditional norms**.** Tokorozawa Senior High School in Saitama Prefecture

had long had a tradition of nurturing liberal values in its students. It is one of the very few state secondary schools in Japan not to have a school uniform. Students were encouraged to have an input into school events and to not always rely on adult authority. The school ethos embodied the qualities of personal autonomy (*jishusei*), independent decision-making (*shutai-teki handan*) and individuality (*kosei*) that were being promoted by educational reformers. However, for Japan's conservative politicians and opinon makers, these qualities were clearly supposed to be confined to the economic sphere where they would contribute to the revitalisation of Japan's economy. In 1998 when the students stepped into the realm of politics they soon found that independent decision making was to take second place to obedience to authority. In that year the students organised an entrance ceremony that did not include the flying of the national flag (*Hinomaru*) and the singing of the national anthem (*Kimigayo*) and many of them boycotted an official ceremony organised by the school principal (following strict orders from Saitama board of education) that did include reverence for those national symbols (Aspinall and Cave 2001). The incident drew the attention of the national media during the Spring and Summer of 1998 with newspapers and commentators on the Left supporting the students, while those on the Right were highly critical (including some calls for the school to be closed down). This incident illustrates the problems inherent in education policy that tries to encourage individualism and risk-taking in one sphere of life (economic activity) while preventing those habits extending into other areas (for example, political protest).

II. 4. Risk, Globalisation and Education in Japan

Ulrich Beck holds that the current stage of global capitalism is genuinely new, and that the nation-state is having its power and authority eroded at a time when there is nothing to take its place (Beck 1997). At this time a "globally *disorganized* capitalism is continually spreading out. For there is no hegemonic power and no international regime either economic or political" (Beck 1997: 13). Nation-state institutions as well as individual citizens are thus placed in a position where previous certainties and traditional sources of security are under threat. This is why the rise of globalization is accompanied by the rise of the Risk Society. The global financial crises that followed the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008 have contributed to the trends that Beck and others spotted in the 1990s.

Japan was affected by these crises as much as anywhere else. Japanese people found that traditional sources of security – male lifetime employment, secure pensions, established gender roles and so on – were under threat. Added to these internal sources of risk and uncertainty, the Japanese government in its official statements contributes to perceptions that Japan occupies a precarious place in the world. This is nothing new: the Japanese government's international education policy statement in 1994 described the inherent dangers of the international environment:

> The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War were expected to bring peace and stability to the world. In actuality, however, there have been numerous outbreaks of economic friction and ethnic conflicts. *The international situation surrounding Japan is harsh.* [Emphasis added] (Ministry of Education 1995: 193)

This harshness means that Japan must, at the same time that it is striving for 'mutual understanding' with other nations, also "make an active international contribution in keeping with its international status". This phrase is expanded on shortly after by a reference to increased efforts to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of its Official Development Assistance (ODA). Unstated but clearly implied by this kind of language lies the conservative political agenda of promoting Japan as a 'normal' country in the world i.e. one that can have a political and diplomatic international role in keeping with its economic power (Samuels 2007: 124-27). Promoting such a policy is not normally the business of education bureaucrats, but throughout Japan's post-war history conservative efforts to encourage patriotism and revive militarism have had an impact on a very broad range of policy areas, including education. If Japanese children read stories of war heroes and historic military adventures in the style promoted by cartoonist Kobayashi Yoshinori then they may be more likely to support a more robust Japanese foreign policy when they grow up. Similarly, if they form an impression, when young, that the world that surrounds Japan is an essentially threatening place then this may also influence their future views of security and defence.

If the outside world is seen as a scary place, then it makes sense to bolster the nation's defences at every level. The nation's borders must be defended not only from potential military or terrorist threats but also from insidious threats to Japan's culture and national essence. Here we can make use of Takehiko Kariya and Jeremy Rappleye's study of educational transfer across borders and their terms *permiology and immunology*. In

Japan, as in other nations there is a “highly selective opening to the ‘world’; *permeability* conditioned by and subordinate to internal policy discourses and influence from abroad ‘framed’ according to domestic political proclivities.” (Kariya and Rappleye 2010: 45). The nationalism of Japan’s ruling elites in the political world, bureaucracy and business caused the dominant response to the challenges of globalisation to be one of defending Japanese national identity rather than embracing cosmopolitanism. This has been shown in the policies to make compulsory an increase in respect for the national flag and anthem, and by nationalist language in the revised Fundamental Law of Education of 2006. Kariya and Rappleye comment on this matter as follows.

> Rather than ‘imagining’ say, what changes Japanese society would need to undergo to transform itself into a place to welcome immigrants or attract the best and brightest students and scholars worldwide, the discourse on educational reform has been largely dominated by a belief in the need to strengthen Japanese identity and love of country. Operating under the surface usage of the term ‘internationalization’ we find not the anticipated *permeability* but an *immune* response along Japan’s cultural-cum-political borders (Kariya and Rappleye 2010: 45).

I have written elsewhere about the negative effect of this approach on study abroad policy in Japan where there has been a stagnation in the numbers of students going into and out of the country (Aspinall 2013: Chapter 7). In language education policy, this emphasis on protecting national identity from foreign contagion is illustrated by the continued use of the Japanese term *kokugo* (literally ‘national language’) to denote Japanese language as it is used by and taught to Japanese citizens. This is contrasted to *nihongo* (‘Japanese language’) the term used when the language is taught to foreigners. Katsuragi notes that this is a symbol of the ruling elite’s modernist ideology, which is out of step with what is really happening in Japanese society. He notes that in the government re-organisation of the central bureaucracy in 2001 which included restructuring the agency in charge of language policy, an opportunity to replace *kokugo* with *nihongo* was missed (Katsuragi 2011: 212-13). Efforts to introduce English language education at a younger age have also been resisted by those who see it as a threat to the proper and thorough learning of the national language at the primary school level (Aspinall 2013: 70-75). Government efforts to protect Japanese children from the dangers of external threats can be seen as part of a strategy of managing globalisation: an effort to reap the benefits of globalisation without succumbing to its perils.

Another feature of the globalisation of education is the increased tendency for national governments to compare the 'performance' of their education system with that of others. We have already discussed the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform* which surveyed various studies of American schools and sparked a major debate on academic underachievement. About twenty years later a very similar debate took place in Japan. It followed the 'yutori education' reforms that culminated in a new, reduced curriculum and the introduction of a five day school week in 2002. Echoing complaints made in America in 1983, conservatives in Japan claimed that the progressive reforms were having the effect of lowering educational standards. In December 2004 the results of the 2003 PISA survey were released. At first sight it looked like the 2003 survey showed a decline in the position of Japanese students compared to other nations. Japanese students fell from 1st in the world in 'mathematical literacy' to 6th, and from 8th to 14th in reading literacy. Many Japanese newspapers used these figures to show that there was a crisis in Japanese education and that 'yutori education' reforms were a failure. But was that conclusion a fair reflection of the actual figures?

A closer analysis of the PISA figures actually shows that the coverage of the 2003 results by much of the Japanese media was highly misleading (Takayama 2008). There are four main ways in which the media distorted the actual data.

1. The newspapers failed to explain to their readers the lack of statistical significance of some of their conclusions. For example if the results for 'mathematical literacy' of 2000 and 2003 are compared there is actually no statistically significant change in the performance of Japan's students.
2. Some of the newspapers that made such a fuss of Japan 'dropping' several places between 2000 and 2003 failed to mention the very important fact that the Netherlands and Hong Kong, two of the five countries that outperformed Japan in reading and maths in 2003 were *not* included in the 2000 survey.
3. It is true that the performance of Japanese students in reading declined slightly between 2000 and 2003. However, this is *not* a new development. Ministry of Education officials have been worried about a delcine in reading since the 1980s. In other words the decline of reading *predates* the 'yutori education' reforms and therefore must be due to other factors.
4. The 2003 PISA survey found low academic motivation among Japanese students compared to students in other countires, and this was something that was picked on

by the media. However, this also was not a new development. In fact one of the purposes of the 'yutori education' reforms was to try to do something about this problem by promoting more flexible and creative approaches to school education.

It can be seen from the above that the impression given to the public by the media about the 2003 PISA results – something which is now known as the 'PISA shock' – was highly misleading. The agenda of much of the media was to try to create the impression that Japan was a 'nation at risk' due to the 'yutori education' reforms of the 1990s and early 2000s. Conservative critics who attacked the 'yutori' reforms actually made extensive reference to the 1983 American document *A Nation at Risk*, and they repeated some of the language of that document when they attacked Japanese policy. For example they wrote about 'a rising tide of mediocrity' and the danger that the educational skills of the next generation will be inferior to the present geneartion (Takayama 2007: 433). This criticism has forced the Ministry of Education into a complete U-turn of educational policy.

The debate surrounding the 'PISA shock' can be regarded as another example of 'Risk Amplification' something that can happen when a significant part of the media can cover a particular 'crisis' in such a way as to make the danger seem far more real than it actually is (Pidgeon, Kasperson and Slovic 2003). An objective view of the data shows very small differences in Japan's PISA results between 2000 and 2003. However, many in the media decided to build up a false sense of crisis in order to force a U-turn on the 'yutori education' reforms. They created the myth of the 'PISA shock'.

II 5. Risk Neoliberalism and Education in Japan

In section I. 5 above we discussed the 'neolibearal' application of organisational models taken from the private business sector to state bureaucracies from the 1980s onwards. This reform model became known as New Public Management (NPM) and was especially popular with governments in the US and UK. The scholar of comparative politics, Keith Nitta has written about how Japanese bureaucrats were sent to these countries during the 1990s and came back with enthusiastic reports on the efficacy of the new methods. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) and the Management Coordination Agency (MCA) were converted to the NPM reform agenda and, along with private business lobby groups, tried to persuade the Ministry of

Education to reduce the 'over uniformity' of the system (Nitta 2008: 113-16). In response to this pressure, modest measures were introduced to hold schools and teachers accountable for results. This conforms to the NPM notion of 'Results-Oriented Government'. The MOE had more leeway to introduce this kind of change due to the decline in power of the teachers' unions and their political allies since the 1980s. However, proposals to loosen regulation and allow schools to meet goals innovatively were not followed through with concrete changes (Nitta 2008: 183-84). The NPM idea of 'Empowering Rather than Serving' was not acted upon in the case of education reform (in spite of some impressive rhetoric). Thus, in the case of the Japanese education system, the shift of responsibility from state bureaucracies to individuals and private-sector organisations that is predicted by Risk Society theory has only partially taken place. The centrally-run, mostly uniform state education system is still very much in place in Japan.

Conclusion

The publication in 2012 of *Education and the Risk Society: Theories, Discourse and Risk Identities in Education Contexts* edited by Steven Bialostok, Robert Whitman and William Bradley was an important event in the development of Risk Society theory. Except for the chapter by Bradley, the contributors to that book focused on risk society and education in western countries. The present paper is concerned with applying some of the insights from that book to education in contemporary Japan. Due to the similarity of their stages of economic development, often described as 'postindustrial', Japan has many things in common with Western Europe and North America. The education systems of all these nations are highly influenced by the notion that they are 'at risk' if they fail to compete with other countries in achieving certain 'standards' that are more and more defined by international tests like PISA. Also, the debate surrounding the reform of administration and school management is strongly influenced by New Public Management doctrine. However, there are differences too. The transformation of social issues into individual problems that one often finds in Western countries is not so evident in Japan with teachers, parents and education bureaucrats still prefering to see problems through the lens of group responsibilities and traditional relationships between young people and adults. In addition, the risk-averse approach to change that is usually found among Japan's education bureaucrats and school managers means that, compared to Europe and North America, education reform has been slow and incremental. There

are serious questions that need to be asked as to the suitability of the current system to prepare young adults for the challenges brought by economic and social transformation at home and abroard. Are Japan's youth being properly prepared for the Risk Society?

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