

Reimagining Japan and fighting extremism with the help of a superhero: A teacher's tale

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Across Europe, teachers face the challenge of educating against extremism and xenophobia. This is no less the case in Japan, which commonly self-identifies as a homogeneous nation and where in recent years society has seen the growth of an ethno-nationalist extreme-right movement that exploits the myth of homogeneity. Populist and nationalist political leaders take advantage of such sentiments to boost their own power. Such politicians are all too willing to suggest that there is space for xenophobic and far-right ideas within a democratic nation state. Populist discourses have a direct impact on the young, leaving them vulnerable to the extremist, racist opinions that are ubiquitous online.

In this article, we present the work of one teacher who is actively encouraging students to reimagine the nation state as cosmopolitan and inclusive of diverse people, cultures, and perspectives (Osler and Starkey, 2005; Appiah, 2006) by deconstructing national myths and revealing the fluid nature of both national borders and political allegiances. By engaging in such work, we suggest that he is fighting extremism. In the lesson we present in this article, he does this with the help of a character from a popular TV series – *Ultraman* – which features a range of superheroes. Before turning to our teacher, whom we call Mr Ogawa, we provide some background on Japan and its demography and on conceptions of homogeneity, minorities and rights. We also discuss the growth of hate speech and xenophobia, and recent political and educational initiatives that appear to give greater emphasis to a potentially exclusive national belonging.

Japan: a homogeneous nation?

Japan's contemporary self-image as a mono-ethnic nation state was developed after World War Two. The country distanced itself from a pre-war ideology as a multi-ethnic state (Oguma, 1995), which had suited an earlier era of imperial expansion. Twenty-first century Japan's ethnic diversity is not very visible and has been largely ignored by the authorities. There are no readily available statistics on ethnic minorities, as the census and other large-scale surveys do not include questions on ethnicity. Instead, the numbers of non-national residents are recorded. In 2015, 2.23 million foreign residents were registered, comprising 1.8 percent of Japan's population (Statistics Bureau, 2016).

The so-called 'foreign' or non-national residents include a substantial group of *zainichi* Koreans: ethnic Koreans whose families have been resident in Japan for several generations but who in past decades were not eligible to claim Japanese nationality through naturalization processes. Today they assert their Korean identity by retaining their Korean nationality, as dual nationality is not a permitted option. Effectively, these residents, many of whom are third- or fourth-generation in Japan, exercise a non-national but de facto citizenship (Chung, 2006). Nevertheless, *zainichi* Koreans may experience direct and indirect discrimination that prevents them from fully practising their citizenship on the basis of equality. The number of foreign nationals resident in Japan cannot be used as a proxy for estimating the size of the ethnic minority population, since there are also ethnic minorities that hold Japanese citizenship. These include naturalized ethnic Koreans and other minorities. The full size of the ethnic minority population in Japan is estimated to

be between 3.7 and 4.8 per cent (Okano and Tsuneyoshi, 2011).

Schooling and the nation

Although there are substantial numbers of ethnic minority children, ethnic diversity has been underplayed in public education. Sato (2007) points out that various educational initiatives with a global dimension, such as English teaching and Education for International Understanding (EIU), have not created a curriculum space for recognizing multiple identities or for promoting broader cultural tolerance. EIU has the potential to be practised flexibly, but official guidelines stress ‘internationalization’ and enabling competitiveness in a global market. The emphasis is on understanding different cultures – typically the three Fs: food, fashion and festivals, which is likely to reinforce the concept of fixed identities – rather than on skills for cosmopolitan citizenship, challenging injustice or critically examining the concepts of the nation and nationhood. Moreover, Tsuneyoshi (2007) suggests that the image of a mono-ethnic nation and an exclusive Japanese national identity is reinforced through social studies textbooks in which non-Japanese citizens are portrayed in contemporary society solely as unproblematic ‘visitors’ who symbolize Japan’s internationalization. Reference to ‘foreigners as permanent members of Japanese society is almost non-existent’, with Koreans and Chinese appearing solely as historical groups that were invaded or colonized and ‘linked to [past] human rights abuses and discrimination’ (Tsuneyoshi, 2007: 38–9).

Since World War Two, explicit displays of patriotism have been a sensitive issue: they are commonly associated with the country’s militaristic past and the former imperialist era. In the post-War period, Japanese ‘national history was reconstructed to be consistent with universal values of modernity, democracy, and pacifism’ (Kawaji, 2011: 58), exemplified by the peace city of Hiroshima and creating what

Kawaji refers to as the ‘freedom to forget’ the difficult past (*ibid.*: 72). Yet this approach to history sits uncomfortably with the post-War nationalisms that developed in neighbouring South Korea and China, which emphasize past struggles against colonial aggression. Japanese state schools have often been arenas of ideological controversy about whether the national anthem and national flag have a place in school. Such controversies have regional as well as national repercussions.

In recent years there have been a number of attempts by political conservatives to promote patriotism in schools. In 2006, the Fundamental Law of Education was revised and ‘fostering patriotism’ was added as one of the purposes of education. From 2018, moral education will become a compulsory special subject, to be taught by homeroom teachers who will not be required to have a teaching certificate or specialist knowledge in the field. It emphasizes discipline and patriotism but makes little reference to diversity. Moral education can serve a variety of purposes, including efforts to counter bullying and racism, yet there are concerns that government-led moral education promotes uncritical respect for and obedience to authority. Watanabe (2014) criticizes the new initiative, arguing instead for an education for global citizenship that will foster multicultural respect and tolerance.

Challenging hate speech

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that all children under the age of 18 have the right to human rights education (HRE), specifying the aims of education as:

- the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations
- the development of respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the

country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own

- the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin
- the development of respect for the natural environment (UN, 1989: Article 29).

Minimally, this implies an education that is intercultural, democratic and addresses principles of equity and justice. Nevertheless, while agreeing that human rights are universal, we recognize that the universal principles underpinning human rights are applied in specific cultural and political contexts. It is to this issue that we now turn.

In 2014, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination demanded that Japan enact legislation to tackle hate speech against ethnic minorities (Johnston, 2015). According to Ito (2014) the rise of xenophobia is caused by a sense of ontological insecurity and deprivation widely shared in contemporary Japanese society, fuelled by government policies and populist political leaders. The neo-nationalist Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara has repeatedly made xenophobic remarks that target those from former East Asian colonies. Members of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's cabinet have a nationalist and conservative political stance, with some even criticized for being photographed with far-right and neo-Nazi groups. In other words, recent expressions of hatred against minorities, largely targeted at ethnic Koreans, are not simply a grassroots mobilization: they are something for which government leaders need to take responsibility (*The Economist*, 2014).

Xenophobia also impacts on children. Ethnic schools for Korean children have experienced racist attacks by far-right groups. While far-

right extremism threatens minority children as potential victims of racial harassment, it also damages children from the mainstream who may be involved as offenders and perpetrators. One notorious example was of a 14-year-old girl who participated in a racist demonstration led by a far-right group. She was reported as chanting with a loudspeaker, calling for the 'massacre' of Koreans. A video of this episode was uploaded onto YouTube (IMADR, 2013).

Such political developments impact on schools. We consider how one teacher is responding.

Introducing 'Mr Ogawa'

Mr Ogawa teaches social studies at a junior high school in Nara, in the Kansai region of western Japan. Nara was the ancient 6th-century capital rooted in feudal traditions. It left a negative legacy of socioeconomic disadvantage that affected former outcaste communities (*buraku*), a legacy that continued long after feudalism and outcaste status were abolished in 1871. This led within the city to the development of a strong tradition of human rights education (HRE), designed to challenge injustice and empower the disadvantaged.

Ogawa is in his late 50s. He recalls his life-changing experiences as an HRE coordinator in a rural local authority prefecture in Hiroshima during the 1990s. There he met children from deprived communities and 'realized the reality of injustice for the first time'. He tried his best to meet individual students' learning needs and initiated a number of activities, including introducing a class to personal development and self-understanding, and organizing various events to engage the local community. Mr Ogawa explained: 'It was a turning point in my career: my current professional beliefs are based on experiences with those [Hiroshima prefecture] students.'

Ogawa's current school has a special focus on UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). One ESD goal is societal transformation, as acknowledged by the

Aichi-Nagoya Declaration on Education for Sustainable Development, which emphasizes:

the potential of ESD to empower learners to transform themselves and the society they live in by developing knowledge, skills, attitudes, competences and values required for addressing global citizenship and local contextual challenges of the present and the future, such as ... making decisions in the face of uncertainty, and understanding the interconnectedness of global challenges and responsibilities emanating from such awareness.

(UNESCO, 2014)

The school's experimental status affords teachers the flexibility to introduce special initiatives alongside the national programme of study. Activities are guided by the school's guiding principle: 'To build a culture of peace in the minds of students.' HRE and peace education are embedded throughout the formal curriculum and also addressed in various extra-curricular activities. Annual peace meetings are organized by students in connection with

Teaching plan

Theme	Content and resources
Introduction: living together with difference	An anti-terrorism demonstration in France (shortly after the Paris terror attacks in 2015) A question from Anne Frank
Identity struggles and borders	A superhero's dilemma Okinawan identities
Multiple identities	A Bosnian student studying in Nara (and known to the class)

The class begins with Anne Frank's question: 'Why, oh why, can't people live together peacefully?' Mr Ogawa observes: 'We've got a difficult topic today. So let's get help from a superhero, Ultra Seven.' Ultra Seven (ウルトラセブン *Urutora Sebun*) is perhaps the best-known superhero from the *Ultraman* TV series. His creator and scriptwriter Tetsuo Kinjo is noted for his perspective as an Okinawan.

their study of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. At the time we visited, students were preparing to visit Okinawa, which – controversially – hosts more than half of the US troops based in Japan. In 1945, 100,000 civilians perished in the Battle of Okinawa.

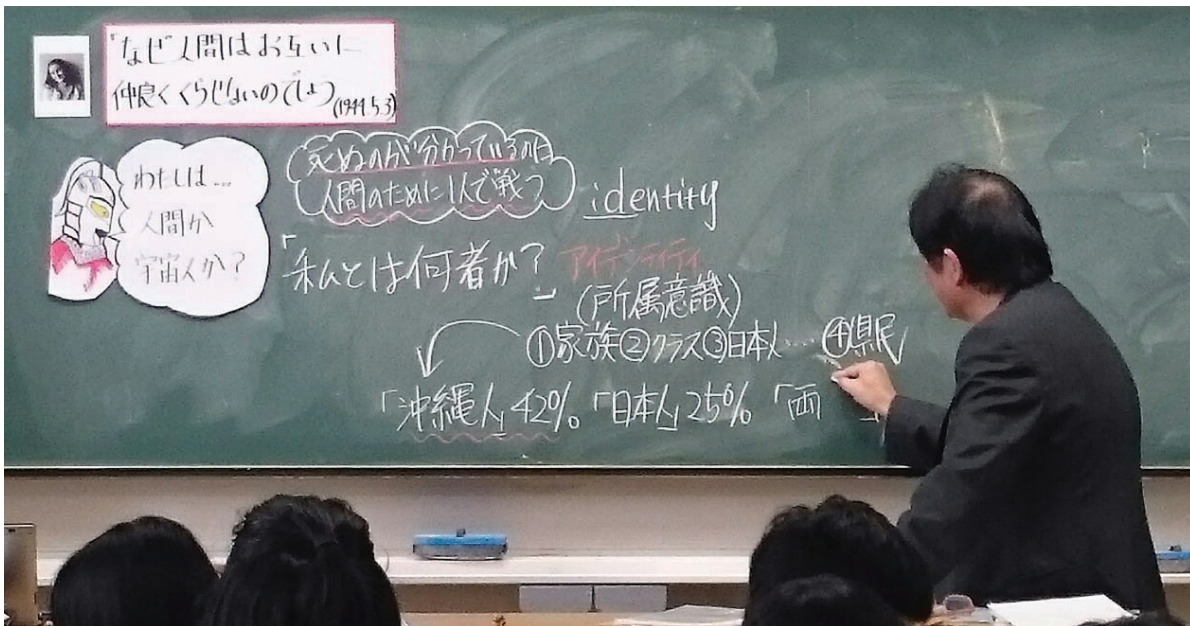
Mr Ogawa acts as homeroom teacher to 40 Year 1 students (aged 13–14 years). All are Japanese nationals from local communities. His major responsibility is to teach social studies (history, geography and civics). He has also developed an overarching curriculum that includes social studies, moral education and extra-curricular activities, within a framework based on 'education for cosmopolitan citizenship' (Osler and Starkey, 2005), which relates directly to the ESD principles of human rights, democracy and peace.

Reimagining Japan in a geography class

During our visit, we observed Mr Ogawa teaching geography to his homeroom class, as part of the students' preparation for visiting Okinawa. He sought to incorporate elements of moral education into this lesson.

Identity

Ultra Seven is a superhero from outer space but he spends his daily life as a human member of a special garrison. As Ultra Seven he fights to protect humans when they are attacked by monsters. Mr Ogawa explains to his students: 'He's been worried for a long period of time. He wonders "Who am I? Am I Ultra Seven the alien or am I a human?"' Ultra Seven struggles with two identities: that of a human and that of an alien. He wonders why he is risking his



life to protect humans who don't fully accept him. As the story reaches a climax, Ultra Seven reveals his identity: 'In the final episode, he tells his colleagues that he is an alien, before departing to engage in a desperate battle against a monster.'

Ogawa makes the link between Ultra Seven's multiple identities and those of his students. He asks:

How do you say 'Who am I' in English? [no responses] It's called *i-den-ti-ty*. In the last class, I asked you: to what do you have a sense of belonging? 'Family' was mentioned most frequently, then 'homeroom class', thirdly 'Japanese', followed by 'global citizen'. Prefectural identity came last – only two pupils mentioned it. But there is a prefecture where a local identity comes before being Japanese. Guess where? Okinawa.

Borders

Mr Ogawa presents his class with the results of a survey completed by Okinawa citizens in 2007: 42 per cent identify themselves first and foremost as Okinawan. Just 25 per cent identify as Japanese and 30 per cent say they are both Okinawan and Japanese. Ogawa goes on to briefly discuss the 1945 Battle of Okinawa in

which so many civilians died. Okinawa was of strategic importance to the Japanese Imperial Army since the battle gave commanders time to prepare for the anticipated US invasion of Japan proper. The army's concern was with protecting mainland Japan, rather than Okinawa. He asks: 'Don't you think there is an idea underpinning this that Okinawa is different from Japan?' He connects Ultra Seven's struggles as an alien, fighting on behalf of humans, with those of Okinawan civilians in a battle fought on behalf of mainland Japan.

Hope and idealism

The class ends with discussion about whether students share Anne Frank's contention that, at heart, people are good: 'It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.' A student raises his hand: 'I think she was right because no one is born a terrorist. A terrorist is just an innocent baby when he's born. So people are good at heart. There must be many things around him that make him a terrorist.'

Discussion

By drawing on the identity struggles of a superhero, Mr Ogawa is able to capture his students' imaginations, linking Ultra Seven's internal and physical conflicts both to their own lives and to those of real-life Others, communicating the concept of complex, flexible identities (Ong, 1999) and citizenship as multiple belonging (Osler and Starkey, 2005).

Using the history of Okinawa, Ogawa invites the students to consider the nation as a political, social and historical construct. He challenges the concept of static borders, encouraging them to see the fluidity of national borders across time and to recognize territorial claims as a potential cause of both identity and power struggles. As they prepare to visit Okinawa, he tells his students that Ultra Seven's creator was born there and that Okinawa was once an independent kingdom of Ryukyu, only becoming part of Japan in the 1870s. In encouraging students to look critically at national identities and borders, Mr Ogawa is moving onto sensitive political ground.

Another distinct feature of Ogawa's class is his emphasis on caring. The lesson focuses not only on political concepts – identities, borders – but on fostering a caring attitude towards those engaged in struggle. The Japanese concept of human rights (*jinken*) gives particular emphasis to caring. After students explore Okinawans' identity struggles, they are encouraged to extend their thoughts to other groups, such as *zainichi* Koreans and children with a double Okinawan and American heritage.

In addressing Anne Frank's question and discussing how they can live together peacefully both in society and in the community of the classroom, students come forward with a range of proposals, including: 'Try to understand others' struggles and take action' and 'support each other and try to learn about others.'

In Japan, caring is a commonly adopted approach in HRE, placing emphasis on an

emotional commitment to addressing injustice and the development of caring attitudes to others, especially those who suffer. This conception of rights is close to what Noddings (2013) characterizes as 'an ethic of care'. Ultimately, Ogawa aims to build a classroom and contribute to the creation of a society in which all feel included. For him, teaching is part of a moral endeavour in which justice and care go hand in hand.

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