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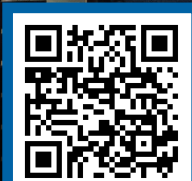
Department of
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Japanese Studies



In the Shadow of a Mountain: A Community School Coordinator and the Politics of Survival in Rural Japan

A hybrid *u:japan* lecture by Greg Poole

Thursday
2026-05-28
18⁰⁰~19³⁰



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Japan's Community School (CS) system was established through the 2004 amendment to the Local Educational Administration Act (地教行法), with a revision in 2017 that accelerated expansion to over 20,000 schools nationwide by 2024. How has this CS initiative been appropriated as a survival strategy by local communities struggling demographically? What is the role and lived experience of the key actor in this scheme, the designated coordinator and facilitator of 'community-school collaboration activities'? These two questions underpin this paper, a preliminary report on an ongoing ethnographic research project in a community field site in a rural area of Kansai.

In 2018, the PTA in a local community, Yamakage-sato (YKS, pop. ~2,600), spearheaded a grassroots mobilisation to successfully secure CS designation for the local school, YKS Primary School. The district is made up of both a traditional mountain village and a planned hilltop development facing demographic pressures typical in rural Japan. The threat of 'consolidation review' (i.e., the closing of the school) became a platform for civic action, a defensive mechanism that subverted the original Ministry (MEXT) intention of CS as a site for

'educational improvement'.

In 2019, I began coordinating with local residents and the former principal of YKS Primary School to develop a programme of 'community engagement' with undergraduate students from a university in the neighbouring city. This has led to a longitudinal relationship with YKS Primary School and in particular, since the beginning of more formal ethnographic fieldwork last year, my key interlocutor, the 'coordinator', Yamada-san.

From this embedded positionality, what is emerging is that two policy tropes — *kyōdō* (協働, collaboration) and *chiiki* (地域, community) — function as sites of contestation where 'official meanings' are reworked by local actors, who in turn introduce a third narrative: *sonzoku* (存続, survival). As coordinator, Yamada-san's multifaceted, diverse, and undercompensated role in the CS scheme is an affective labour, a gendered care work that, as our conversations deepen and my observations sharpen, is beginning to shed light on the multivocality of these keywords. The case of YKS shows how the purpose of a CS can be reframed from 'educational reform' to 'community survival'.



Gregory S. Poole is currently a professor of social anthropology at the Institute for the Liberal Arts, Doshisha University, Kyoto. Greg's area of research focuses mostly on topics within the anthropology of education and his books include four co-edited volumes, *Teaching Japan: A Handbook* (co-edited with Ioannis Gaitanidis, 2024, Amsterdam University/Japan Documents); *Foreign Language Education in Japan: Exploring Qualitative Approaches* (co-edited with Sachiko Horiguchi and Yuki Imoto, 2015, Springer), *Reframing Diversity in the Anthropology of Japan* (co-edited with John Ertl, John Mock, and John McCreery, 2015, Kanazawa University), and *Higher Education in East Asia: Neoliberalism and the Professoriate* (co-edited with Ya-chen Chen, 2009, Brill), as well as a monograph, *The Japanese Professor: An Ethnography of a University Faculty* (2010, Brill).

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