

The appointment of *minkanjin kouchou* (“private citizen principals”) in Japanese public schools

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Introduction

In April 2000, two schools in Tokyo became the first public schools in Japan to have principals appointed who were not professional teachers but people whose careers hitherto had been outside the world of education. The appointment of these *minkan jin* (literally “private citizen”) marked the start of a system that was hoped would generate positive changes in Japan’s public education system. By April 2004 education authorities around Japan, 26 in all, had recruited 58 of these so-called *minkanjin kouchou* (private-citizen school principal)¹. This paper will provide an overview of the workings of the *minkanjin kouchou* system, including the selection and training of new principals. The rationale for the appointment of private citizens and the views of those critical of the system will then be reviewed. Finally, case studies will illustrate the reforms being implemented by *minkanjin kouchou* at two schools in Japan.

An overview of the *minkanjin kouchou* system

A revision to the School Education Law (*gakkou kyouiku hou*) that came into effect in January 2000 paved the way for the appointment of *minkanjin kouchou*. Previous to the revision only those with a teacher’s license, 18 years teaching experience and 3 years of serving as *kyoutou* (vice-principal) could be employed as a principal in public- sector elementary, junior high and senior high schools². The revision stipulated that the appointment of people not meeting these two conditions could be made when it was deemed “necessary for the management of the school” (Hiroshima Prefecture homepage). Although those selected should be judged by the appointive body (the local board of education) to have qualifications comparable to that of a “professional” principal, no restriction is made concerning the occupational background of *minkanjin kouchou*.

The selection process

Most of those who are presently *minkanjin kouchou* were initially recommended by local business groups

(*kiezai dantai*). Following recommendation, candidates are interviewed by the board of education, and may be required to submit an essay, before the final selection is made. Recently, selection by general application (*ippan boshuu*) has been adopted by several boards, and it is predicted that this will become the more usual selection method (Hiroshima Prefecture homepage).

The majority of *minkanjin kouchou* that have been appointed are in their 50s and have previously held managerial positions in the private sector. Their occupational backgrounds are varied and include trading, banking, sake brewing, distribution, construction, electric power and the media (Iwate Nippo homepage).

Training

The *minkanjin kouchou* system was brought to the public's attention in an unfortunate way when Keitoku Kazuhiro, the principal of Takasugi Elementary School in Hiroshima Prefecture, took his own life on March 9, 2003. Keitoku had been sub-manager of the Tokyo branch of Hiroshima bank and was brought in to work as a principal in March 2002. Stress caused by overwork contributed to his death; just before his suicide Keitoku was putting in an average of over seven hours overtime a day (Hiratate,2003). The Hiroshima board of education has been criticized not only for placing unreasonable demands on him, but also because he was able to take his seat in the principal's office after receiving only two days of training. Apparently, the board considered that someone who had held a position of such responsibility in banking could take over the reins of a large school with only minimal preparation (Asahi shinbun homepage).

Following Keitoku's death, the board of Education in Hiroshima extended the training period to six months and boards in other prefectures have followed suit. Aichi prefecture's first *minkanjin kouchou*, Suzuki Naoki, was given six months of training before he took up his post in April 2004. Unusually, perhaps uniquely, for a *minkanjin kouchou*, Suzuki was not new to the school environment having worked as a teacher for eight years before starting a career at Toyota. Suzuki commented that half a year may have been a "little too long" for him, but felt that this amount of time was the minimum necessary for those who are lay people in respect to the education system (Interview with Naoki Suzuki, July 27,2004).

A survey by MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) of seventeen acting *minkanjin kouchou* found that most believed training should be hands on preparation for the reality of school administration. In this respect they emphasized the value of being trained by the incumbent head teacher of the school at which they will take up their post (Gakkou unei,2003).

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Even for those who have been on the front line of industry, school can present new challenges and stresses. A relevant and effective training program of sufficient length is therefore vital for the success of the system.

Rationale for the appointment of *minkanjin kouchou*

MEXT states that the appointment of *minkanjin kouchou* has four aims: to make schools more open, to develop trust (between who is not specified), to stimulate creativeness and innovation, and to lead to more effective school administration (MEXT homepage). These aims, however, are rather general and require further explanation. This section will examine why their appointment was deemed necessary.

The public education system in Japan is often described as being like *nuruma yu*, or lukewarm water, meaning that it lacks dynamism and enterprise. The introduction of *minkanjin kouchou* has been trumpeted as a way to “blow in a gust of fresh air” to change the culture of what is considered to be a *heisateki* (insular) institution and, more practically, to encourage efficient management in schools (Ogawa,2003).

An internet opinion column called *kyoiku genba zakkai* (The feelings of someone actively engaged in teaching) details some of the criticisms leveled at teachers in public schools. Because of the security of their civil servant status, they are often accused of being *amai* (having it too easy) compared to those in the private sector. There is also a view that, insulated in their own little world, teachers lack both *shakai joushiki* (a sense of what the real world is like) and humility; the lack of the latter resulting from their intoxication on the honorific term “*sensei*”(teacher), which they hear from their first day in the classroom. Appointing a principal with experience of the world beyond the school gates is regarded as a step towards changing the distinct culture of public schools and thereby the attitude of the teachers.

The desire of MEXT to improve the management of schools was a more pragmatic reason to introduce the *minkanjin kouchou* system. It was expected that the business practices the new principals brought with them would help make the system of school administration more efficient and less ad hoc, while the adoption of other tenets of corporate administration such as performance targets and personnel evaluations would raise the level of teaching.

In addition to administration and management expertise, each *minkanjin kouchou* brings other transferable

skills that can benefit the school. Endo Masayoshi, a *minkanjin kouchou* in an elementary school in Mie Prefecture, comments that his ability to promote group spirit and team work, developed while supervising the construction of power stations in South East Asia, has proved “equally important in running a school” (asahi shinbun “MYTOWN AICHI” homepage). Another principal, Abe Masaaki, has brought a “hard skill”, English fluency, to his high school in Tokushima Prefecture. Graduate studies at Yale and a long career working in finance in the United States gave him an awareness of the importance of English. Since his appointment he set about overhauling the way English was taught at his school, incorporating more practical and discussion-based lessons into the curriculum (Ohayo Tokushima, 2003).

There are other reasons for entrusting schools to *minkanjin kouchou*. Firstly, it complements a general policy of decentralizing school administration and establishing a more autonomous and independent system away from central control. Secondly, it is a way to attract a shrinking customer base; to prosper in an era when demographic trends are leaving an ever smaller pool of school-age children, it is important for one school to distinguish itself from another. Someone who is well-versed in marketing strategies and the value of a “unique selling point” may be more able to attract pupils. A third reason relates to calls for more accountability and transparency in big organizations, including schools. With their customer-is-king philosophy, *minkanjin kouchou* will be motivated to promote the participation of parents and pupils in the running of the school, introduce evaluation of teacher’s performance and generally make schools more open and responsive to the needs of the users.

Criticism of the *minkanjin kouchou* system

The appointment of *minkanjin kouchou* has met with criticism from the teacher’s union and other sections of the educational establishment (Iwate Nippo). There is concern as to whether people without any teaching experience are really qualified to head a school or adapt to its distinctive customs, as well as doubts over the suitability of using management principles from commerce to administer a school³.

Ogawa Yoshio, a veteran head teacher, suggests, tongue in cheek, that despite having no experience of working in the financial sector, he could quite easily change careers and assume the position of bank manager in his local bank; this would no doubt help to “blow a gust of fresh air” into the ailing financial system (Ogawa, 2003). Ogawa criticizes Hiroshima’s board of education for doing something akin to this by bringing in a bank manager, Keitoku Kazuhiro, to run a school. Keitoku took his own life a year after his appointment. While extolling Keitoku as a “martyr” for standing up to teachers who opposed the

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singing of the national anthem at school ceremonies, he dismisses the notion that experience in, and intricate knowledge of, the education system need not be prerequisites for the job of head teacher.

Managing a school, Ogawa stresses, is not an easy option or a step-down from management in a company. In a school, the principal and vice-principal are responsible for all teachers and staff while a company comprises a management hierarchy (general manager, assistant, section chief, subsection chief, etc.) to which responsibility is delegated. Principals also face more restrictions (such as a lack of real power to decide their teacher's pay and promotion), imposed by the board of education and MEXT, than most managers in private companies.

Because administration of a school and a company are fundamentally different, the premise that skills can successfully be transferred from one to another is flawed. In fact, Ogawa considers it a ploy to scapegoat "professional" principals by proposing that "able amateurs" will somehow solve the problems of an education system "devastated" by reforms such as the five-day week school system, and *yutori kyōiku* (education free of pressure) (Ogawa, p26). He asserts that there are enough teachers with the necessary management skills who aspire to become heads without having to bring in outsiders.

There are also those who point out that while companies make products or provide services for a profit, an important function of education is *ningen keisei* (character building). Kamei (2002) asserts that it requires a philosophical mind, forged from years of observation and contact with children, before one can really understand how best to achieve this aim.

Opposition to the system has also come from those who accept that there is a need for a new kind of school management, but stress that bringing in people from other occupations is not the answer. An example of an alternative approach, suggested on an internet site (*kyōiku genba zakkān*), is to select teachers for school management posts at a younger age. At present, by the time teachers are promoted to the position of principal they are usually in their late 40s or early 50s, an age when people are inclined to "start counting down to retirement". With the end of their careers in sight, they are liable to remain, or become, conservative and risk-averse. If teachers deemed to have management potential were selected and trained at an early stage in their career, it would be possible for them to assume the post of principal while still in their 30s and early 40s. Much of the training of these management-track teachers could, it is suggested, be done at graduate school, perhaps in the form of a master's degree in education administration. The implementation of such a system would produce a new generation of school principals with

management skills, the vitality of (relative) youth and the time to develop professionally and gain experience. Such a change would follow the example of the United States where school administration is generally treated as distinct from hands on teaching and principals are first and foremost professional managers.

Evaluation of the system to date

With the *minkanjin kouchou* system still in its infancy it is too early to assess the impact, if any, it has had on the education system as a whole. There has, however, been some positive evaluation of the first intake of the new principals. A MEXT survey carried out in 2003 found that five out of the six boards of education it questioned considered that the appointment of *minkanjin kouchou* had “met expectations” while the other, Tokyo, responded that expectations had been exceeded (*Gakko unei*, 2003). Hiroshima, the prefecture that has led the way in adopting the system, reported positive trends such as the formulation of clear educational targets and improved team work in schools with *minkanjin kouchou* (Hiroshima Prefecture homepage).

Focus on two *minkanjin kouchou*

To gain a clearer idea of the way in which *minkanjin kouchou* can affect change in their individual schools, the last section of this paper will focus on the activities of two principals: Fujihara Kazuhiro of Wada junior high school in Yokohama and Suzuki Naoki, principal of Kakujogaoka senior high school in Aichi.

Fujihara Kazuhiro

The *minkanjin kouchou* who has probably received the most media coverage is Fujihara Kazuhiro. He assumed his post at Wada junior high school in April 2003, the first *minkanjin kouchou* to be appointed by the Tokyo board of Education. In his previous life at the company Recruit Fujihara earned the nicknamed “super salary man” and he is the author of numerous popular business books. He is now hailed as the “Gon⁴ (Ghosn) of the education world” because of his exciting management style and innovative reform (Saho, 2004).

In his book, “*minkan kouchou chugaku kaikaku ni nozumu*” (A private-citizen principal grapples with junior high school reform), and on his homepage (www.yononaka.net) Fujihara has disseminated his views

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on what he considers to be shortcomings in the education system and the reforms that are needed. At Wada junior high school his ideas are being realized in various ways. The weekly *yononaka* class (the world about us class) is one such example.

As well as pupils who take the *yononaka* class as an optional subject, parents and others from the local community are invited to participate. The class aims to relate what pupils have learnt in regular lessons to the real world. One lesson in February 2004, for example, was about entitled *okane to jinsei to jibun no kankei* (money, life and you). A report of this class in the magazine AERA describes how the enigmatic Fujihara used games to teach the children about financial matters (Saho, 2004). Other *yononaka* classes have involved a "new-half" (transsexual) discussing discrimination and the town major leading a role play game to help children understand the workings of local government.

Apart from the didactic value, the *yononaka* classes provide a chance for teachers, parents and others to meet and exchange ideas, thereby making the school more accessible to and involved with the local community. Fujihara hopes that by promoting openness and accessibility a more trustful relationship will develop between the school and its users.

To finance the *yononaka* class and other projects, the budget from the board of education is supplemented by the Wada Community Fund that Fujihara established, and into which go the fees he receives for articles, lectures and TV appearances done in his capacity as a *minkanjin kouchou*.

Fujihara's presence in itself has given Wada Middle School a unique selling point, important at a time where schools need to compete for a dwindling number of children. More significantly, his appointment brought a vocal proponent of educational reform in to the system and generated the opportunity to influence change from the inside.

Suzuki Naoki⁵

Suzuki became head of Kakujogaoka high school in April 2004, the first *minkanjin kouchou* in Aichi Prefecture. Prior to his appointment he worked for over twenty years at *Toyota Jidoshoki* (Toyota Industries Corporation) where he reached the position of section chief of the personnel department. Suzuki's recommendation by a local business group, and his ultimate selection for the post, was due in part to his experience in the area of staff training and development. Another factor influencing his selection was

the fact that for eight years between graduating from university and starting his career at Toyota he had worked as a high school teacher. Suzuki feels that his teaching experience, albeit gained over two decades ago, certainly eased the transition from industry to a public high school.

Suzuki had only been principal for three months at the time I interviewed him for this paper; too short a period to initiate many new projects or implement reforms. He does, however, have a clear vision for the school, one based firmly on his previous management experience and the philosophy of Toyota.

Toyota's worldwide reputation for quality and reliability has been attributed to a number of management principles that are studied in MBA courses throughout the world and disseminated in numerous business books. Suzuki was eager to explain how some of the principles of Toyota management, or the Toyota Way, could be applied efficaciously to school administration.

A key principle which underpins the effective running of the production line at Toyota's factories is the Just in Time system, which dictates that only the necessary parts be supplied only at the time they are needed and only in the required amount. Such a system reduces waste and develops profitable, lean manufacturing. Adapting it to the school environment could make the learning process more efficient; teachers give pupils only that knowledge or information that is needed, at the time it is needed and in the amount that is needed. Likewise, pupils should be encouraged to gear their studying, or indeed non-academic practice, to be less wasteful.

Another core principle of the Toyota Way is *jidoka* (自動化⁶), or automatization, that is accompanied by a defect detection system which automatically or manually stops the production operation whenever an abnormal or defective condition arises. Any necessary improvements can then be made by directing attention to the stopped equipment and the worker who stopped the operation. Applying this principle to a school setting would put the onus on teachers and staff to be vigilant for signs of trouble within an otherwise routine process and to proactively offer suggestions for improvement.

The Toyota Way seeks *kaizen*, or continuous improvement. Everyone in the company works to identify and eliminate *muda*, or waste in all areas, including the production process. In addition, measures which have been implemented in the interest of *kaizen* must be constantly monitored and, if necessary, changed soon after their implementation⁷. Suzuki hopes to create a school environment where teachers, staff and pupils will be part of a process of continually setting and achieving increasingly higher targets in the interests of

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kaizen.

The principals of the Toyota Way have been adopted successfully by companies worldwide, but Suzuki points out that the existing culture in schools may hinder their implementation. The time it takes for teachers to respond to a proposal, for example, is generally much slower than in a company. Teachers also tend to be less proactive, waiting to be told what to do rather than suggesting ideas. Suzuki considers that part of the reason for the relative unresponsiveness of teachers is an internalized fear of failure. In contrast, at Toyota the workers are imbued with what Suzuki calls a "frontier spirit" which encourages risk taking; the philosophy there is "mistakes can always be rectified with a comeback".

In explaining what he regards as his main role, Suzuki offers the metaphor of a *chawanmushi*, a steamed egg custard dish served in a lidded pot. Rather than leaving the dish and letting the steam dissipate, it is important to lift the lid and release the steam while the dish is hot. Similarly, he needs to ensure that the teacher's motivation and creativity can be utilized rather than being allowed to "cool".

As well as a management philosophy, Suzuki has brought with him business expertise and contacts that can be of practical benefit to the pupils. As someone with experience of interviewing numerous job candidates at Toyota, he is well qualified to give his graduates advice on taking interviews. Business connections carried over from his previous career can help to secure work for high school leavers while his involvement with the Toyota rugby team led to the wife of a New Zealand rugby player coming to teach an after-school English conversation club.

Like Fujihara at Wada Middle school with the *yononaka* class, Suzuki has initiated projects that teach "real world" skills and foster independence. One such project involved a group of students being given responsibility for opening and running their own Sri Lankan restaurant in town. A Sri Lankan chef taught the basics of the cuisine while a consultant from a major bank was invited to give students business advice. Another initiative involves selecting students who have passed a state examination (related to the handling of dangerous chemicals) to teach the examination course to other pupils and adults.

An important part of Carlos Ghosn's strategy for dragging Nissan out of the quagmire was making the employees acutely aware of what would happen to the company and their jobs if certain changes were not achieved. Suzuki agrees that installing this sense of urgency or *kikikan* can help accelerate change, but feels that such pressure would not be appropriate for his teachers who are already working extremely hard.

Nevertheless, he is concerned that delaying necessary changes could have deleterious effect on the school. In table 1, Suzuki has identified factors that could produce a worst case scenario for the school and the measures needed to prevent this occurring. A comparison is made with the main factors that led to Nissan's dire situation before Ghosn's arrival.

Table 1⁸

	(1998)	April 2005 (projected worst case scenario)	
	The 5 factors that caused Nissan's precarious position	The 5 factors that could potentially cause Kakujogaoka high school's worst case scenario	Measures that need to be taken
1	Neglecting the fundamentals of profitability.	Failure to specify clear academic and development targets which set out what children should have achieved academically and developmentally after a specified period of time. Similarly, failure to set targets for academic and career counseling.	Individualized academic and career guidance. Increase in employment rate for graduates.
2	Disregard for the customer.	Lack of a forum for pupils, junior high school teachers and parents to air their opinions.	Be receptive to demands of future users. Liaison with junior high schools.
3	Complacency and lack of a "sense of crisis" among management and staff.	Insufficient attention given to economic trends and changes in the employment situation.	Employment guidance.
4	Detrimental effects arising from the absence of team play.	Inadequate communication between the four school departments.	Coordinated inter-departmental lessons.
5	Lack of a long-term vision.	Each academic year is a repeat of the past. The school has not indicated what kind of institution it is striving to become.	Establishment of clear, yearly targets.

Conclusion

It is not yet clear whether the *minkanjin kouchou* system represents the start of a new kind of school

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management or a form of shock treatment, a temporary measure to get schools on the right track, with the role of a *minkanjin kouchou* not dissimilar to that of a consultant called in to help an ailing company. In the short-term at least, it appears that an increasing number of these principals are likely to be appointed, but the long-term success of the system depends greatly on the selection process; someone with vision, vitality and the ability to adapt to a new environment could be a catalyst for positive change. Choosing the wrong person, however, may be deleterious to the school. If suitable people are selected and then trained effectively, it is likely that some schools will flourish under this new form of management. However, even with such successes, questions are likely to remain as to whether the area of education, in which so much of what happens cannot be quantified, can best be reformed by people whose careers have been concerned with profits and other tangible results.

Notes

- 1 “Out-of-field school principal” is a snappier term for *minkanjin kouchou* suggested by Paul Tanner.
- 2 Besides these preconditions, candidates for the position of principal must also pass a written test and an interview. Applicants are required to be under 58 years of age.
- 3 Some of the trends in management practices that the *minkanjin kouchou* are expected to introduce into schools have been already abandoned by certain companies in Japan. For example, Fujitsu, one of the first companies to introduce performance based evaluation of its employees, has reported a fall in staff motivation due to the setting of over-ambitious performance targets (Tsunoda, 2004). It is interesting to note that a commentator discussing political interference in the British education system on The Learning Curve, a BBC Radio 4 programme, pointed out that “fads” like performance related pay are often introduced into education by bureaucrats at precisely the point where they are discredited in industry (BBC Radio4 homepage, October 5, 2004). This comment may be pertinent to Japan’s present situation.
- 4 “Gon” is the moniker the Japanese media has given Charles Ghoson, the Brazilian-born French citizen of Lebanese descent and president of Nissan Motor Company. Under His leadership a virtually bankrupt company with some ¥2 trillion of debts and a damaged brand was restored to health in under three years (Rowley, 2003)
- 5 The information in this section is based on an interview with Mr Suzuki on July 27, 2004.
- 6 In Japanese, the ideogram for automatic is composed of the Chinese characters for self+moving+ization (自動化). Suzuki explains the concept of “person-regulated automation” by changing the conventional ideogram for automatic to 自働化. Here the second character 働 is composed of an extra radical which represents a person; hence, automization with human regulation.
- 7 The set kanji phrase *choureibokai* 朝令暮改 literally means changing in the evening an order or directive that was given in the morning. It is generally used to admonish inconsistent behaviour or a lack of principle. The phrase, however, is in harmony with the principle of *kaizen* and Suzuki uses it to exemplify the Toyota philosophy.
- 8 Translated from a table provided by Suzuki Naoki.

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