

## Reading the Air: School Ethos and Teacher Identity in Japan

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## Reading the Air: School Ethos and Teacher Identity in Japan

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### Abstract

This paper explores the concept of tacit knowledge in Japanese education by examining the traditional cultural practice known as *reading the air*. Three key elements that constitute this tacit way of knowing, as well as a type of traditional community as its potential birthplace, are introduced to illuminate the foundational epistemological perspectives that sustain this practice. The paper explores the self-sacrificing teacher image as part of the school ethos and examines the role of the teacher community both as a gatekeeper of this knowledge and as a foundation that reinforces the notion of what is given. The paradoxical nature of teachers' worldviews, caught between individual concerns and established practices, is illustrated through examples of contemporary teacher identity and the custom of long working hours. By linking the challenges teachers face, this paper highlights the need to critically examine how these cultural logics perpetuate teacher overwork and hinder systemic change despite policy interventions. Finally, it emphasizes the significance of examining teachers' tacit knowledge arguing implicit yet impactful dimensions of the teachers' knowledge system may be overlooked to understand the fundamental challenges for teachers in the contemporary era of globalization.

### Key words

School ethos, teacher identity, tacit knowledge

## Introduction

Reading the “air” or “*kuuki*” (the air) “*wo yomu*” (to read) is a type of tacit and non-verbal communication commonly used in Japan to understand the hidden and unspoken knowledge shared within the circles. It requires people to pay attention to small cues and signs so they can understand the unspoken knowledge. A closer meaning of an English phrase could be “reading the room.” Similar customs arguably exist in countries like Germany, Korea, and the U.S.; however, none of those cultural practices fully explain what reading the air really means (Ito, 2002). It is said that individuals typically have limited control over the type of air generated (Yamamoto, 1977). Instead, it tends to arise naturally from the dynamics of their relationships with others (Emura, 2019). Thus, for people in Japan, air is regarded as a “superpower” (Yamamoto, 1977) or a “monster” (Reizei, 2012; Yamamoto, 1977) that could not simply be explained as a part of cultural hegemony and ideology (Ito, 2016; Yamamoto, 1977). It is as “a judgemental criterion with extreme power to dominate peoples' minds” (Yamamoto, 1977, p. 22), a “climate of opinion” (Ito, 2016), a “premise” (Suzuki, 2018), or “vague codes” (Monoe, 2020) that has served as a critical culturally-based knowledge and social system to understand cultural norms and societal expectations (Koukami, 2009; Yamamoto, 1977).

The idea of the air in education never occurred to me until I started re-narrating my teaching experiences to non-Japanese audiences after starting the Ph.D. program at the University of Minnesota. I realized that I often referred to the air to explain my challenges as a school teacher in Japan, which doesn't make sense to people unfamiliar to Japanese culture, and stumbled upon how to articulate what it was that I was reading in education. I realized my challenges were rooted in this particular way of knowing in education, which is tacit, cultural, hidden and unspoken in many ways. This paper is motivated by the idea that the air and its

reading in education has a significant impact on the quality of education as well as teachers' well-being. To raise awareness of the impact of tacit knowledge in educational contexts in Japan, and other countries where similar custom is practiced, this paper poses the central question: How is the practice of reading the air connected to teacher identity and contemporary educational issues in Japan? Thus, this paper is an attempt to understand its relationship between the traditional way of knowing through reading the air, and the ways in which the climate of schooling is shaped both by the identities of Japanese teachers and contemporary educational environments.

To address this question, this paper first outlines its theoretical framework, situating reading the air within scholarship on tacit knowledge in education. It then explores reading the air through the lenses of empathy, spirituality, and the concept of absolutization, as well as through the traditional notion of society specific to the Japanese context, framing it as a culturally situated practice. Finally, the paper analyzes how this practice intersects with teachers' professional ethos and contemporary challenges, including long working hours and the tendency to accept existing conditions as given.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

This study examines the Japanese practice of reading the air through the concept of tacit knowledge, which I argue is especially prominent among teachers. To understand how unspoken knowledge shapes teachers' professional practices and perceptions to contemporary educational challenges, this paper aims to conceptualize reading the air as a culturally-based knowledge system that guides how teachers perceive expectations, understand responsibilities, and exercise agency within school organizations.

Polanyi's (1966) foundational insight that "we know more than we can tell" underscores

how professional practice relies on embodied, experiential, and situational knowledge rather than through explicit rules and instructions. In educational research, scholars have emphasized that teaching is a profession deeply grounded in such tacit forms of knowledge. Elbaz (1991), for example, characterizes teachers' knowledge as nonlinear, holistic, imbued with personal meaning, and largely tacit, developed through everyday interactions rather than formal instruction. Thus, teachers' capacity to draw on this tacit knowledge in their daily practice constitutes a core component of professional expertise, significantly contributing to the professionalization of teaching (Guerriero, 2017).

Tacit knowledge plays a significant role for teachers in navigating their roles and commitments by interpreting societal expectations and role attachments that are rarely made explicit and that have been historically constructed. These expectations are embedded in daily routines, interpersonal interactions, and organizational norms, functioning as what Stigler and Hiebert (1999) describe as "cultural scripts" that guide practice without being formally taught but implicitly learned through cultural activities such as teaching and learning. Anyon's (1980) work on the hidden curriculum similarly illustrates how teachers play their role in transmitting and enacting their own knowledge beyond the written curriculum including unspoken rules, expectations, and subtle power dynamics. In the same vein, reading the air can be understood as a form of tacit knowledge through which teachers interpret subtle nuances and cues in school settings to navigate their professional roles and responsibilities.

Despite the paucity of research on the impact of reading the air on teachers, Pierre Bourdieu's (1980) concept of habitus provides a useful lens for understanding how individuals unconsciously embody dispositions shaped by social structures. In educational contexts, these dispositions are enacted and reproduced through everyday practice as educators bring their

habitus into the school system (Kudomi, 1992). By conceptualizing reading the air as a culturally situated form of tacit knowledge, this study highlights how traditionally embedded ways of knowing influence teachers' professional identity and contemporary educational issues in Japan.

### **What is reading the air?**

In Japan, tacit knowledge is traditionally valued highly as a polite, respectful, and socially appropriate manner of engagement. Specific communication characteristics include such as “an indirect and digressive communication, use of few words, reliance on contextual cues, avoidance of the use of personal names, respect for long silences, and waiting politely until the other person has stopped speaking before taking turns” (Nishimura et al., 2008). These nuanced and ambiguous communication patterns guide individuals in understanding expectations, enabling them to avoid offending or disrespecting others through direct communication.

Reading the air is one of the most prominent communication skills to respond to this expectation. Hamaguchi, Kumon, & Creighton (1985) noted that the fundamental characteristics of Japanese collectivism are “role attachment” and “receptive diligence,” an attitude to commit themselves to play the role with intense effort. The sense of the self in Japan is regarded as a “relational actor” (Hamaguchi et al., 1985) and “a social entity whose meaning is intimately linked to relationships with others and to the situation one is in” (Cousins, 1989), making Japanese more susceptible to social influence from significant others (Yuki, 2023). By understanding the unsaid, people deliberately secure their understanding of the self and significant others to construct their worldview. The *seken*, a native notion of network (Kurihara, 2007), is one of the particular forms of traditional social circles people are sensitive about. The details of this notion of society (*seken*) will later be discussed as a possible context where the concept of air is generated.

Teachers are no exception to those who are subjected to the air, perhaps as they also shape it. Despite a significant literature gap indicating whether teachers are active readers of the air in schools, there is an abundance of literature showing that a specific atmosphere is present in the current school system, distinctively among teachers, and that teacher identities are susceptible to it (Isemoto, 2018; Katsuno, 2012; Kudomi, 1992, 1995, 2003, 2007; Ruth, 2016; Takashima, 2011; Yamada & Hasegawa, 2010; Yufu, 2010).

To further understand the function of reading the air and its impact on teachers in Japan, below I will briefly describe the three key essences of what makes the air darwin on: empathy, absolutization, and spirituality, as well as the notion of given grounded in the Japanese traditional notion of society, *seken*, as the possible birthplace of the air.

### **Empathy (kanjyo-inyu)**

Expressing sensitivity to others' feelings is an essential social skill in Japan. For example, "*omoiyari*," a Japanese term meaning to feel for others, is regarded as a critical social skill to be nurtured at a Japanese preschool (Tobin et al., 1989). When it comes to reading the air, empathy merely means just feeling for others (Vinton & Harrington, 1994). It means explicitly an attitude to project one's belief or expectation outside of one's mental picture as a credible truth or fact (Yamamoto, 1977; Suzuki, 2018). The literal translation of this type of empathy is called "*kanjyo*" (emotion) "*inyu*" (to transplant), which means an attitude to feel others' emotions exactly the same way they are feeling (Yamamoto, 1970). As the Japanese sense of self is not one direction but it demands to be mutual (Lebra, 1992), it requires individuals to be attuned to what others expect of them in a given context. For example, Koiwa (2023) says when someone at a meeting asked you if the room was cold, the air you needed to read was whether you should adjust the room temperature or not, and whether you think the room is cold or not is secondary.

Hence, reading the air carries a risk of feeling compelled to prioritize others' psychological needs over one's own especially if there is a power imbalance. This relationship between the self and others, grounded in empathy, is particularly critical when considering teachers' educational practices in schools. What an individual teacher perceives as fair or ethical may not always be recognized as such in a context where one is expected to consider the perspectives of others beyond personal beliefs. In these situations, teachers often regulate their own judgments by prioritizing perceived collective expectations, a process through which self-restraint and self-sacrifice become normalized as appropriate professional conduct.

### **Absolutization (zettaika)**

This idea of absolutization is particularly important to understand Japanese teachers' challenges in adopting critical thinking on traditionally recognized educational practices in contemporary educational settings. In connection with empathy, the notion of absolute truth implies that what one empathizes with becomes the only truth one is willing to accept. This is a key attribute of reading the air, as epistemic certainty that the knowledge one perceives is appropriate within a given context is essential for motivating and sustaining the practice itself.

Such a stance further reinforces normative pressure to show respect to others, positioning conformity not only as socially desirable but also as ethically appropriate. In a context of Japan where group harmony is paramount in the relational dimensions of people's lives, showing empathy through the lens of absolutization helps maintain relationships with care and respect. People who read the air are in fact described as "considerate, conformist, and responsible for the maintenance of harmony" (Jung et al., 2023, p. 351). In contrast, perceiving themselves as having disrupted group harmony leads to self-doubt or a sense of embarrassment (Komiya & Tudor, 2016, p. 338).

The risky tendency of such belief systems to be applied in modern society is that it gains full credit from people of the inner circle despite a seemingly lack of legitimate analysis, making it difficult to build constructive discussion and potentially leading to destructive consequences (Yamamoto, 1977), especially in political settings (Ito, 2006). Yamamoto introduced the example of a World War II vice-admiral's fatal decision, which killed over 3,000 lives despite foreseeable consequences. The vice-admiral reportedly answered that the decision was the only choice allowed by the air (Ito, 2002; Yamamoto 1977). However, based on Hidaka and Kosugi's (2012) argument that people only read the air when their views differ from those of dominant others, the admiral's personal decision might have been different, yet he could not voice opposition to what he perceived as the absolute truth in the given context.

Despite such knowledge being shared invisibly, questioning and adopting a critical perspective on what people consider appropriate becomes especially difficult in such circumstances. Those who are poor at reading the air are regarded as “selfish, uncommunicative and uncooperative” (Jung et al., 2023, p. 348). Like the admiral, who could have made a different decision but instead sacrificed many lives, people, including teachers, may make problematic choices by reading the air. Therefore, understanding what kind of absolute knowledge teachers are seeking in the contemporary educational settings and examining the impact of contributing to such belief systems, whether actively and passively, is crucial, especially in today's society where social, educational, and cultural values are shifting dynamically.

### **Spirituality (rinzaikan)**

Understanding or accepting implicitly shared knowledge may appear less credible to people who are unfamiliar with this practice. In many European countries, though not

completely, spiritual belief has been either historically banned or naturally extinguished mainly by the introduction of Christianity (Koukami, 2009; Suzuki, 2018; Yamamoto, 1977). In Japan, spirituality is still practiced broadly from funerals to weddings including many other traditional and spiritual customs and ceremonies found in different places including corporates and schools (Kawano, 2021; Koukami, 2009; Reizei, 2012). Nakayama (2019) reports that spirituality is linked with moral education in Japanese schools, highlighting how ethical and spiritual values are often taught together and embedded in everyday classroom practices.

Reading the air becomes incomplete without spirituality because it requires the capacity to perceive and engage with what is not immediately visible or even unable to articulate verbally. Civil rituals, Kasulis (2002) argue “are somatically acquired through the acculturation process” (p.127). Interestingly, spirituality makes such knowledge not always codifiable, even for those who access it. When asked what it is that they are reading, people often find themselves unable to articulate it, despite navigating it in practice (Kasulis, 2002; Koukami, 2009; Monoe, 2020; Yamamoto, 1977). However, spirituality also enables people to sense that this knowledge exists within an intimate circle, even though it remains indistinguishable to those who are not part of that circle. Hence, spirituality is a cultural attribute through which people recognize that there is knowledge to be read beyond personal belief, even though they cannot articulate it.

### **School ethos and the role of teacher community**

This section explores the traditional ethos of Japanese schooling, which has been preserved despite significant societal changes since the emergence of modern education more than 200 years ago. It examines the fundamental role of the teacher community in maintaining and reproducing the image of the self-sacrificing teacher as part of the tacit professional knowledge that teachers are expected to internalize and sustain in contemporary educational

contexts.

### **Self-sacrifice teacher image**

Ethos is a concept interchangeably used with the idea of “spirit,” “ambiance,” “atmosphere,” and “climate” (Allder, 1993). It is a product of culture (Solvason, 2005) that can be found somewhere in the social system or an institution, including school (Allder, 1993; Smith, 2003; Solvason, 2005). Similar to the idea of reading the air, school ethos is difficult to formally document but emerges from school members' intention, interactions and behaviors (Donnelly, 2000, p.137).

The Japanese traditional school ethos for teachers is described as self-sacrifice (Kudomi, 1995; Takashima, 2011). It originated from the historical background that the teachers' professional image was politically created around 1920 (Kudomi, 1999) to establish a high social status of teachers as a project of “governmental professionalism” (Beck, 2008). The teachers, most of them samurai warrior class descendants at the time, were considered to be the core driving force for the educational reform that aimed to establish “the new Japan as a modern state like those of the West” (Kimura & Iwata, 2007, p.21). With a lack of public school systems except for private feudal clan-owned schools for samurai warriors and temple-owned schools for tradesmen and farmers (Yanagisawa, 2015), the successful establishment of a modern schooling system was a big political and educational mission for the new government. (Kimura & Iwata, 2007). By drawing on premodern Confucian trust-based master–student relationships, they constructed teaching as a “sacred” profession to elevate its social status, thereby reinforcing a hierarchical school system grounded in teacher authority and student obedience (Kimura & Iwata, 2007).

The teacher image started to shift dramatically in the 1970s due to Japan's high economic growth which changed people's lifestyles and educational demography accordingly (Kimura & Iwata, 2007; Kudomi, 1999). Compulsory education has extended from six years in elementary school to nine years in junior high school, resulting in a remarkable decline in students' willingness to study causing different modes of "escape from learning" (Kimura & Iwata, 2007). Teachers' authority and trust started to diminish with an increasing number of students' misbehavior in class including bullying, truancy, school violence, and so on (Kudomi, 1999). People started to see education as a private service, rather than a sacred occupation, according to the growth of private companies that provide educational services such as *juku*—cram schools for preparing entrance examinations and remedial (Kimura & Iwata, 2007). Accordingly, the neo-liberalistic trend of educational reform since the mid-1980s such as the introduction of a teacher evaluation system and a new school management system affected the ways teachers work more on individual basis (Kimura & Iwata, 2007), gradually collapsing by promoting competitive concepts based on liberalization and diversification (Kimura & Iwata, 2007; Kudomi, 1999; Takashima, 2011).

### **Seken and the notion of given**

Interestingly, however, such drastic social transitions did not seem to have a similar degree of impact on the types of ethos teachers pursue at school as most teachers still believe teaching "requires a spirit of self-sacrifice" (Kudomi, 1994, 1999). Such indication of an unchanged teacher image, despite the rapid societal change, might be due to the Japanese teachers' circle, often described as a "closed field." Historically, Japanese teachers have engaged in limited social interactions outside the profession, with marriages and friendships primarily

formed within teacher networks. These networks have been supported and reinforced over time through the collective teacher identity and occupational culture (Kudomi, 1992, 1999, 2017).

This form of teacher community is similar to a traditional Japanese closed community native to Japan, known as *seken*, which has long functioned as a foundational social structure since the seventh century (Kurihara, 2009). It refers to “the appearance of the total network of social relations that surround an individual” and “conveys the corresponding cultural norms and values that function to regulate social behavior, and hints at how such relations and behavior are maintained” (Kurihara, 2009). It is different from the Western concept of “society,” translated as *shakai*, which was introduced to Japan in 1877 (Abe, 1995). The use of the term *seken* is still popular in contemporary Japan. Many people find that they still situate both modern and traditional notions of societies simultaneously (Abe, 1995; Nakada, 2018; Sato, 2001). This suggests that contemporary teacher communities may still be shaped, at least in part, by the relational logic of *seken* rather than solely by the modern notion of society. Unfortunately, however, the *seken* ideology has not gained full academic attention and its implication on education remains unclear.

Koukami (2009) arguably claims that this traditional form of society plays a significant role in generating the air. He argues that although the traditional form of society no longer exists, people’s mentality remains situated within *seken*, leading them to seek traditional norms and expectations in given contexts much as they did in the past. As individuals navigate the diverse possibilities available in modern society, negotiating between these options and the sense of absolute truth signaled by reading the air becomes increasingly challenging. The practice of reading the air, as a result, becomes more frequent and normalized in today’s society. Questioning the status quo becomes especially difficult because, through the other two elements

that constitute the air, empathy and spirituality, individuals become aware, even before raising a question, of the potential consequences of creating tension with others and the vulnerability required to do so. If one's thoughts are already aligned with the air, there is no need to read it proactively. One reads the air precisely because one's ideas differ from it (Hidaka & Kosugi, 2012), and in doing so, seeks to avoid such conflicts. Teachers' relatively closed community has likely contributed to sustaining the school ethos across generations, as teachers have embodied the self-sacrificial image as a professional virtue, and that has become the tacit knowledge for teachers to read.

Notably, it is critical to understand that this traditional form of society has long been regarded as a given (Abe, 1995), and is still today to some extent including for teachers. The notion of given matters because it suggests that individual efforts to actively construct the society might be undermined by the established practices and dominant discourse. Kasulis (2002) also noted that people seemed apathetic in Japan for the change as some of the "natural" conditions are regarded as givens, echoing the broader tendency among Japanese people to view larger social structures as unchangeable.

Depending on the degree to which teachers situate themselves in this culturally-based knowledge, critically understanding issues and reflecting educational practices would then become extremely challenging. Kariya (2022) indicates that the notion of given prevents teachers from questioning a new education led by educational reform. He argues that most discussions focus on how to understand and implement the new ideas, rather than questioning their foundational assumptions or the values they promote. Difficulties to question larger discourse or established practice at school are also reported by Kudo (2018), a former school principal who became well known in Japan through various educational reforms such as abolishing homework

and exams. He claims that school activities have already lost sight of their original purpose as the means are prioritized over the ends, highlighting the difficulties to challenge what is “normal” in school. The idea that Japanese people internalize their knowledge system including a concept of society and school ethos is of critical importance when thinking about Japanese education and teachers' worldviews. Understanding teachers' challenges at the epistemological level would contribute to a better understanding of the fundamental root causes of their professional dilemmas.

### **Paradox of teacher identity and habit of overwork**

The next section examines contemporary educational issues for teachers, particularly how Japanese teachers' culture of self-sacrifice and the notion of given are expressed in the contemporary teacher identity and the custom of long working habits. I revisit the question posed at the beginning of this paper: How is the practice of reading the air connected to teacher identity and contemporary educational issues in Japan? I argue that tacit knowledge or what I refer to as the air is generated and shared within the teacher community, signaling teachers to uphold the traditional teacher image of being a devoting teacher. As they navigate the demands of contemporary society that is more individualistic and transnational than traditional form, teachers face more tension and challenges by pursuing the air.

### **The notion of given and teacher identity**

Despite the school ethos of self-sacrifice that contemporary teachers seemingly pursuing, recent literature suggests, a new shift of teacher identities to be more individualized with a shift in teachers' self-images (Katsuno, 2012; Kudomi, 2003; Takashima, 2011; Yamada & Hasegawa, 2010). It suggests the sign of a weakened or divided form of the teacher circle (Yamada & Hasegawa, 2010; Kudomi, 2003), in which the self-sacrificing

image is no longer a positive construct for teacher identity but rather becomes an obstructive factor for the stabilization of teacher identity (Yamada & Hasegawa, 2010). A noteworthy claim about current teacher identity is what Hasegawa and Kudomi (2006) called “a strategy of dualism,” a mechanism to maintain the professional identity by dividing it into two dimensions of “stable” and “disturbed.” A stable professional identity is built on a positive sense of fulfillment, well-being, and successfully building a good relationship with students. The disturbed professional identity is based on a negative sense of their own teaching, doubts on educational beliefs, and difficulties that they feel they can not cope with (Hasegawa & Kudomi, 2006). According to their comparative study in 2004 and 2005 on teacher identity, while in Korea, Sweden, and the U.S, teacher identity is reported to be susceptible to the disturbing elements, Japan showed the most developed dualizing strategy. They delineate their professional responsibilities from the difficult school situations they perceive as the given, which is out of their control, similar to the way of understanding their worldview they use for the traditional notion of society. Katsuno (2012) also reports a similar tendency to regard educational challenges as the given in shaping teacher identity.

The notion of a given demonstrated in contemporary teacher identity underscore that teachers still situate themselves in traditional notion of teacher community and potentially reading the air generated within the teacher circle. As Yamada and Hasegawa (2010) indicated, while this strategy of dualism helps sustain the current teacher identity, it discourages teachers from solving existing problems and has them stick to the status quo. Stable teacher identity is a combination of self-evaluation and recursive positive evaluation from others (Giddens, 1991) and unbalanced teacher identity could lead to a teacher burnout. For teachers in Japan, collegial support has long been a critical aspect of stable teacher

identity development. Although current teachers prefer to solve issues more on an individual basis, collegiality is still a major element to support their identity and prevent from being burnout (Kudomi, 2003). Given the gradual shift in understanding the school ethos and teacher identity, such dualism may affect the quality of education, not only by constraining its capacity to evolve in response to changing societal demands, but also by undermining teachers' well-being through the internalization of conformity, potentially leading to discrimination or marginalization of those who deviate from the regulation of the air.

### **Sacrificial work hours**

One major issue for teachers in Japan is unhealthy working habits and environments that promote long voluntary working hours, and their mental health issues associated with such working behavior. Self-sacrifice through engaging in unpaid overtime functioned as invisibly articulated knowledge and as air to be read by teachers whose role as a “sacred vocation” has been historically legitimized (Matsumoto et al., 2026). One survey showed that over 57% teachers in Japan worked past the *karoshi*, death by overwork threshold line amid the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Okubo, 2020). With more than half of teachers engaging in long working hours that could potentially kill their lives, the increasing number of teachers taking leave for mental health reasons has become a significant factor contributing to the teacher shortage (Naruiwa, 2024).

In 2019, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) introduced guidelines to limit teachers' overtime to 45 hours per month and 360 hours per year (MEXT, 2019). While the government encourages teachers to limit excessive working hours, the average working hours for teachers remains more than 88 hours (The Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training, 2024). Existing literature on Japanese teachers' overwork that attributes this

to school culture, collegiality or conformity among teachers (Kudomi,2003; Kimura et al., 2020). However, I agree more with Yufu (2010) who called this teachers' behavior "pathological phenomena for teachers" (p.23) that they choose to work late without any identifiable oppressor in the room, and they eventually find it impossible to opt out from problematic situations.

Many teachers perceive long working hours as an expected norm and feel guilty if they do not comply (Naruiwa, 2024). The understanding of people feeling guilty, led by empathetic concern and the spiritual way of knowing apparently motivates teachers to engage in overwork, regardless of the legitimacy of such actions. Additionally, working late symbolizes the act of self-sacrifice and is regarded as ethically appropriate within the moral framework of Japanese teachers. Criticizing the practice of teachers' overwork or not conforming to this invisibly required practice may be regarded as an unethical act as a professional teacher, and could be defined as "selfish, uncommunicative and uncooperative," a person who is poor at reading the air (Jung et al., 2023, p. 348). This may help explain why certain educational reforms fail to achieve their intended outcomes. Policy implementation that overlooks teachers' epistemological foundations is unlikely to function effectively in practice.


Similar to the case of teacher identity, where teachers navigate paradoxical situations between their individual concerns and reliance on the teacher community, overwork practices also involve a tension between prioritizing personal time and well-being versus engaging in voluntary long working hours. Urakawa (2018) suggests that a vicious cycle emerges when teachers' devoted and passionate attitudes toward education lead them to engage in endless tasks, ultimately resulting in burnout and mental health challenges. In 2023, MEXT reported the highest number of teachers who took the absence of leave for mental health reasons (MEXT, 2024). The increasing number of teachers taking leave of absence from schools due to mental

health issues could be a sign of teachers conforming to these expectations at the expense of their own well-being.

The implications of such tacit and culturally embedded knowledge systems and their impact on teachers' lives demand further investigation. Teacher burnout and mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, are a worldwide concern (OECD, 2025), but their relationship with teachers' tacit ways of knowing remains unclear. Overwork culture and unspoken professional norms are not unique to Japan, and comparative inquiry may reveal parallel structures operating under different cultural and social conditions.

### **Conclusion**

The air could possibly present in various contexts and the idea of reading would possibly be viewed as vague and unresolved. My intention in this paper is not to resolve the air or to define it in this paper but to discuss how this concept of the air has a role in Japanese society in such a way that it is present in education. My interest is in understanding when the air is implicated in Japanese schools, how it is linked with teacher identity and policies, despite being viewed as a cultural and social element, that is many things. You may find that reading the air is similar to the notion of cultural norms or traditionally shared sets of beliefs that are omnipresent in any type of society, which can be considered one type of the air. My intention is not to argue the different types of cultural values people hold in society and in the field of education but to understand the dominant and recursive pattern of thought that people, including teachers, access both intentionally and unintentionally to proceed with educational activities in schools, and the repercussions of such a culturally-based knowledge system in the contemporary era of globalization.



Developing strategies to relativize the notion of the air and other forms of tacit knowledge is essential for advancing this research. One possibility to relativize such “Japaneseness” could be teachers’ comparative and international experiences (Shibano, 2018) as if I only became aware of the presence of the air in education once I was no longer under its influence. Teachers with international teaching experience tend to realize a different and often exclusive atmosphere when they come back to their working school from abroad (Morimoto, 2011). Understanding teachers’ challenges at the epistemological level through comparative lenses would contribute to a better understanding of the fundamental root causes of their professional dilemmas.

Revealing how teachers' complicated epistemological worldviews shape their tacit or hidden knowledge system under global neo-liberal and neo-conservative pressures on social, political, and educational aspects contributes to the field of Comparative International Education (CIE) in Japan and globally. As mentioned earlier, similar customs to reading the air exist globally, and so as the notion of *seken*. For example, Kurihara (2009) indicates that Western sociological and psychological theories of *habitus*, social fact or *superego* have theoretical proximity to *seken*. Tan (2015) reminds us, attention to the epistemological foundations of belief systems allows comparativists to understand why certain indigenous beliefs come to be privileged over others (p. 197). This effort also highlights the CIE’s effort to challenge the historical legacy of “othering” non-English speaking countries to advance scholarship in the postcolonial era (Takayama et al., 2017). By uncovering the invisible belief systems of teachers in Japan, my research provides critical insights into how underlying epistemological assumptions shape teacher knowledge.

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