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“Can-Do” Statements for a Diverse Japanese Teacher Pipeline: Let’s Widen the Funnel!

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ACTFL’s Position Statement expresses its commitment to “Diversity and Inclusion in World Language Learning” through goals such as supporting access to equitable learning opportunities for all, reflecting diverse perspectives within and beyond the language field, and developing a teacher workforce that reflects the students in our classrooms today (ACTFL 2019). The survey by Mori, Hasegawa, Park, and Suzuki (this volume) and subsequent discussion at the Association for Asian Studies roundtable begins to connect the Japanese language education field and the American Association of Teachers of Japanese (AATJ) to these important goals. The survey results and summary provide us with an enlightening look into the beliefs and experiences of 355 current Japanese-language educators. Their responses highlight realities, perceptions, and some misconceptions which we can and should address both individually and as a field. For this article, I would like to focus on the lack of diversity among Japanese-language educators and how we might begin to address it.

In the United States, there are already recognized issues with diversity in the teaching profession. The U. S. Department of Education (2016:1) reported that as of 2011–12, 82% of teachers in K-12 education were white, although only 51% of their students were white. By 2024, 56% of students are projected to be students of color; however, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) notes that only 25% of those earning undergraduate degrees and certificates from colleges of education as of 2018 were people of color (2018:4). The ACT, one of the two common college entrance exams in the United States, published “The Condition of Future Educators 2015” report. According to ACT (2016:4), of the 1.9 million students taking that college entrance test in 2015, only



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5% were interested in becoming future educators, 70% of them white; only 783 students in total intended to major in a foreign language (2016:10). In each of these reports, we see small percentages of students on their way to educational careers and even fewer pursuing language education. Of those, very few will actually become Japanese teachers. The road to becoming a teacher in the United States is often referred to as a pipeline, ideally one allowing a constant flow of teachers into the profession. The pipeline for L2 Japanese teachers, however, more closely resembles a funnel. The large, diverse population of U. S. students entering our elementary schools each year funnels down to a tiny trickle of L2 Japanese teachers by the time they arrive in the workforce.

As Mori et al. (this volume) note, the issues specifically related to the lack of diversity among Japanese-language educators include “pragmatic constraints, on the one hand, and ideological issues, on the other” (291); solving either set of issues presents challenges. Moreover, in the survey, the opinions expressed are from a small portion of the tiny percentage of the population who have already overcome the hurdles to becoming Japanese-language educators. It would be a fascinating, albeit impossible, task to survey *every* student in the United States as they progress from kindergarten to college graduation in order to determine their reasons for not pursuing careers in education, world languages, and Japanese teaching in particular.

There is obviously much work to do, but there is much we *can do* to improve the situation. Many factors influence the number of L2 students who ultimately become Japanese educators. We are not able to address all of these factors, of course, but, as a field, if we identify the factors we *are* able to influence and begin to target those, we can make a difference. The teachers surveyed by Mori et al. (this volume) were clearly affected by opportunities presented to them as they pursued teaching positions and by their perceptions and experiences once they were hired. Similarly, opportunities, perceptions, and experiences influence our future potential Japanese teachers in the K–16 funnel right now. We must address each of these areas in order to begin to widen the pool of potential Japanese teacher candidates.

I have attempted to capture those opportunities, perceptions and experiences in a list of “can-do statements” from the perspective of the student, beginning in kindergarten and continuing along the K–16 continuum. The National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages (NCSSFL) and the American Council on the Teaching of

Foreign Languages (ACTFL) collaborated on the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements (2017) in order to illustrate the path to language proficiency for learners. In that same spirit, the “can-do statements” below illustrate the path to becoming a Japanese teacher. A negative answer to any one of these statements might cause a student to leave the potential L2 Japanese teacher pipeline. A preponderance of negative answers is the reason for the tiny trickle of teachers coming out of the current funnel.

This exercise is not meant to be a discouraging one. For each “can-do statement” below, there are actions that we can take as individual teachers, as schools, as groups of colleagues, or as the Japanese-language field as a whole to impact a more positive outcome. As you read, consider how each of us could change a “can’t do” into a “can do” for the students who are our potential future Japanese L2 teachers.

I can take Japanese.

- I can start Japanese in kindergarten (or very early) in my urban/suburban/rural elementary school.
- If not in elementary school, then I can start taking Japanese in middle school or at least in my high school.
- I am allowed to take Japanese (or any language), even if my grades/test scores, etc., are not so good.
- I believe that Japanese would be easy, interesting, and worthwhile for me to learn, and so do my parents.
- I have heard that Japanese classes are interesting and fun and that you really learn to *speak* Japanese.

I can succeed in learning Japanese.

- I can sense that my teacher believes I can learn Japanese, regardless of my race, gender, sexual orientation, or native language.
- I can relate to the materials used in the class because people who share my background are represented in the clipart, pictures, and examples my teacher uses.
- I can participate successfully in Japanese class because the teacher supports Japanese language use with rich visuals, gestures, and contexts.
- I can get the gist of authentic Japanese texts, videos, etc. even though I don’t understand every word because my teacher has given me strategies to do so.
- I can share my interests in Japanese class (music, sports, etc.).

- I can use real-world Japanese in lots of different contexts and have many opportunities to practice in class.
- I can use Japanese with native/heritage speakers and I have had opportunities to try.
- I can read and write in Japanese because my teacher uses many different methods to help me learn characters.
- I can always improve in Japanese because my teacher gives me feedback that helps me learn.
- My Japanese teacher has a good relationship with my family; they support my learning together.
- I have “fallen in love” with Japanese language and culture by the time I finish the equivalent of high school Level 2 (after this, I’ll need lots of motivation to stick with it and learn all that *kanji!*).

I can continue to upper levels, study Japanese in college, and even become a Japanese Teacher.

- My teachers have helped me to believe I can attain high levels of proficiency.
- There is an AP Japanese class at my school and I believe I can pass the test.
- I can see a path to studying Japanese in college and my teachers have shared it with me.
- I can see a path to becoming a Japanese teacher (upper levels at the school, higher education opportunities) and my teachers have shared it with me.
- I can see a path to studying abroad in Japan and my teachers have shared it with me.

I can succeed in college-level Japanese and study abroad.

- I can find a college or university within my budget that offers Japanese.
- When I arrive in college, I can receive credit for the Japanese that I have already studied; therefore, I am already on my way to upper levels.
- I am supported and encouraged to continue my study of Japanese, including assistance and resources if I am struggling at the upper levels.
- I can access paths to study abroad in Japan, with timing and costs that are manageable for me.

- When I study abroad, I have a positive experience that motivates me to continue studying.

I can become a Japanese teacher.

- My state has a pathway to licensure in Japanese (Mori et al., this volume, 287).
- I can be supported in pursuing K–12 licensure through my college or university.
- I can see a path to becoming a Japanese-language professor at the university level.
- I believe that becoming a Japanese-language educator would be a fulfilling profession.
- I can support myself at a reasonable level on the salary offered to Japanese teachers (Mori et al., this volume, 287).

I can get a job as a Japanese teacher.

- There are positions available teaching Japanese at the level(s) at which I am interested.
- My educational experience and licensure (if applicable) have prepared me for the positions that are offered.
- The administrators and colleagues doing the interviewing and hiring believe that L2 Japanese teachers can be as effective as L1 Japanese teachers.

I can keep a job as a Japanese teacher.

- There is support for me as a new L2 Japanese teacher, such as mentoring, professional development opportunities, etc.
- There is support for me as a new L2 Japanese teacher among the other faculty at the school.
- My L1 colleagues recognize and respect my Japanese ability as an L2 speaker. (Mori et al., this volume, section 3).

Let's take a few of these statements and consider how we might effect a more positive outcome for students. For example: *I believe that Japanese would be easy, interesting, and worthwhile for me to learn, and so do my parents.* As teachers, we can convince students and parents that Japanese is not so difficult as they might imagine by inviting them to observe lessons or participate in a class themselves. We can spark their interest by offering *anime* nights, *origami* clubs, etc. and introducing them to English

speakers who have learned to speak Japanese. As a professional organization, we can produce posters, videos, and websites that promote Japanese language learning as fun, interesting, career-building, and absolutely do-able.

Let's practice with another statement: *When I arrive in college, I can receive credit for the Japanese that I have already studied; therefore, I am already on my way to upper levels.* As high school teachers, we can ensure that the next teacher has accurate information about the students he/she is receiving, even if it means a personal phone call or letter to the university Japanese professor. At high schools, we can promote the use of tests such as AAPPL, STAMP, Advanced Placement (AP) as well as the Seal of Biliteracy to ensure that colleges and universities are aware of students' abilities. As a professional organization, we can provide conference sessions and virtual chat spaces to encourage vertical articulation of K-16 and promote recognition of standardized language assessments and the Seal of Biliteracy at higher education institutions.

Each of these statements should be unpacked, as in the examples above, to determine where we might flip a *can't do* to a *can do*. Teachers may do this exercise alone or, ideally, with groups of colleagues, local stakeholders, and local, state, and national Japanese educator organizations. As these "can-do statements" illustrate, there are multiple points at which students may fall out of the L2 Japanese teacher pipeline. Elimination of these obstacles will require time, effort, planning, and collaboration. We can draw inspiration from the knowledge that addressing these obstacles will widen the funnel of L2 students who may become Japanese teachers and have a positive impact on diversity in our field. We *can do* it, and we must.

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