

STANDARDIZING GLOBAL EDUCATION: TEACHER AGENCY, SCRIPTED CURRICULA, AND NEOLIBERALISM IN ENGLISH-MEDIUM INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

This critical literature review examines the relationship between scripted curricula, teacher agency, and educational commodification within English-medium international (EMI) schools in Japan. As international schools increasingly operate within competitive educational markets, commercially produced curriculum packages are often adopted to promote consistency, accountability, and institutional legitimacy. Drawing on critical pedagogy, theories of neoliberal educational reform, and Bourdieu's theory of capital, the review analyzes scholarship related to international schooling, curriculum standardization, and teacher professionalism. Three interconnected themes emerged from the literature: market-driven curriculum standardization, the impact of scripted curricula on teacher agency and professionalism, and the role of curriculum in educational commodification and social reproduction. The findings suggest that while scripted curricula may provide consistency and support institutional quality assurance, they can also constrain professional autonomy and position teachers as implementers rather than curriculum makers. Furthermore, curriculum packages often function as forms of symbolic capital that enhance institutional prestige and marketability. Although teachers frequently adapt and reinterpret prescribed materials to meet local needs, their professional agency remains shaped by broader market and accountability pressures. The study contributes to ongoing discussions regarding neoliberalism, teacher professionalism, and the future of international education in Japan.

Keywords: English-medium international schools; teacher agency; scripted curriculum; neoliberalism; curriculum standardization; educational commodification; international education; Japan.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

English-medium international (EMI) schools in Japan have expanded considerably over the past two decades as increasing numbers of families seek educational pathways associated with English proficiency, international mobility, and access to globally recognized universities (Bunnell, 2016; Hayden & Thompson, 2013; Matsumoto, 2023). Once established primarily to serve expatriate communities, many international schools now recruit large numbers of host-nation students and market themselves as providers of elite global education. Through discourses of internationalism, global citizenship, and academic excellence, these institutions position English-medium education as a valuable resource for families seeking competitive advantages in an increasingly globalized world (Kanno, 2003; Kubota, 2011; Tanu, 2017).

The growth of international schooling in Japan reflects broader transformations occurring across educational systems worldwide. Scholars have argued that neoliberal reforms have increasingly reshaped educational institutions through processes of marketization, privatization, accountability, and competition (Apple, 2012; Ball, 2012; Giroux, 2014). Within this context, schools are expected not only to educate students but also to compete for enrollment, demonstrate measurable outcomes, and maintain attractive institutional brands. Educational programs, curricula, and pedagogical approaches consequently become important marketing tools for attracting families and distinguishing schools from competitors in expanding educational markets (Ball, 2012; Bunnell, 2016; Hayden & Thompson, 2013).

One consequence of these developments has been the growing reliance on commercially produced and highly standardized English as a medium of instruction curriculum packages. Often developed by private educational companies and marketed as research-based solutions, these scripted curricula promise consistency, quality assurance, and efficient implementation across diverse educational settings (Popham, 2012). Such curricula may be particularly appealing within rapidly expanding international school sectors where schools seek to maintain instructional consistency while employing teachers from diverse professional and cultural backgrounds. However, critics argue that these approaches may constrain teacher agency, reduce professional autonomy, and transform educators into implementers of externally designed programs rather than curriculum makers capable of responding to local contexts and student needs (Apple, 2012; Eisner, 2002; Freire, 1970; Greene, 1995).

These tensions are particularly visible within Japan's emerging population of for-profit EMI schools. As competition among schools increases, curriculum packages are often marketed to teachers and parents alongside promises of innovation, global competence, and future success. In some cases, curricular products become central components of institutional branding strategies, functioning not only as educational tools but also as marketable commodities. As a result, curriculum decisions may increasingly reflect commercial priorities alongside pedagogical considerations.

Despite growing scholarship on international schools, neoliberal education reform, and teacher agency, relatively little attention has been paid to how scripted curricula operate within the specific context of the growing number of EMI schools in Japan. Existing research has documented the expansion of international schooling and the marketization of education, yet less is known about how curriculum standardization intersects with teacher professionalism and pedagogical autonomy within these settings.

Drawing on critical pedagogy and theories of neoliberal educational reform, this paper employs a critical literature review to examine the relationship between scripted curricula, teacher agency, and educational commodification in Japan's EMI schools. A critical literature review moves beyond the description and summary of existing scholarship to examine underlying assumptions, identify gaps and tensions, and critically evaluate how knowledge within a field has been constructed (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019).

The paper explores how curriculum standardization functions as both a pedagogical and commercial practice while considering its implications for professionalism, educational purpose, and social inequality. Given the scarcity of research on the current growing Japanese EMI market, this study situates Japan's international schools within broader global debates on

neoliberalism and curriculum reform. The study contributes to critical discussions concerning the future of international education and the changing nature of teachers' work.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 International Schooling and Educational Markets

English-medium international (EMI) schools have expanded significantly across Asia in recent decades, reflecting growing parental demand for English-language education, international curricula, and globally recognized academic credentials (Bunnell, 2016; Hayden & Thompson, 2013). While many international schools in Japan were originally established to serve expatriate communities, the growing number of these schools now recruit host-nation students seeking access to marketed 'elite' educational pathways and future opportunities associated with globalization through the English language (Tanu, 2017).

In Japan, the growth of international schools has been closely linked to broader social and economic changes (Yamada, 2015). At the same time, the rapid expansion of international schools has been accompanied by substantially high tuition costs that often place these institutions beyond the reach of many families, reinforcing their association with educational privilege and social distinction (Matsumoto, 2023; Maire, 2022; Tanu, 2017). English proficiency is frequently marketed as a path to international mobility, career advancement, and access to prestigious universities, making English-medium education an increasingly attractive option for affluent families (Kanno, 2003; Kubota, 2011). Many EMI schools position themselves as providers of global citizenship, intercultural competence, and internationally valued forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Tanu, 2017).

The expansion of international schooling has also intensified competition among schools. Bunnell (2016) argues that contemporary international schools increasingly operate within educational markets where institutions compete for students, resources, and prestige. Consequently, curriculum, accreditation, and institutional branding become important mechanisms through which schools differentiate themselves and attract prospective families (Hayden & Thompson, 2013).

2.2 Neoliberalism, Commodification, and Curriculum Standardization

The growth of international schooling has occurred alongside broader neoliberal reforms that have reshaped educational systems worldwide (Apple, 2012; Ball, 2012; Giroux, 2014). Neoliberalism emphasizes market competition, accountability, efficiency, and consumer choice, encouraging schools to operate according to principles commonly associated with private enterprise. Educational institutions are increasingly expected to demonstrate measurable outcomes while simultaneously responding to consumer demands (McLaren, 2005).

One consequence of these reforms has been the commodification of education. Apple (2012) argues that educational programs, curricula, and learning experiences are increasingly treated as products that can be packaged, marketed, and sold. Within international school settings, curriculum packages often function as indicators of quality and institutional legitimacy.

Standardized curricular products provide schools with assurances of consistency while also serving as marketing tools to present to parents as evidence of educational excellence.

The adoption of scripted curricula reflects this broader trend toward standardization. Proponents argue that scripted curricula support instructional consistency and facilitate implementation across diverse educational contexts (Popham, 2012). Critics, however, contend that such approaches may reduce opportunities for professional judgment and limit teachers' ability to adapt instruction to local contexts and student needs (Apple, 2012; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2014). As a result, curriculum standardization has become a significant point of debate within discussions of educational reform.

Within Japan's expanding EMI school sector, English-language curriculum products are increasingly marketed with promises of innovation, global citizenship, and future success. Curriculum packages may therefore serve not only pedagogical functions but also commercial ones, contributing to the broader commodification of educational experiences and institutional identities (Bunnell, 2016; Tanu, 2017).

2.3 Teacher Agency and Professionalism

Teacher agency refers to educators' capacity to make informed professional decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). Agency is widely regarded as a central component of professionalism because it enables teachers to respond to the unique needs of learners and educational contexts. Rather than merely implementing externally prescribed programs, professional educators are expected to exercise judgment, creativity, and expertise in their instructional practice.

Scholars have expressed concern that increasing levels of curriculum standardization may constrain teacher agency and turn them into automates. Eisner (2002) argues that teaching requires artistry and professional judgment that cannot be reduced to predetermined procedures. Similarly, Greene (1995) emphasizes the importance of teacher autonomy and imagination in creating meaningful educational experiences. From these perspectives, scripted curricula risk positioning teachers as technicians responsible for delivering content rather than as professionals engaged in curriculum-making and reflective practice (Apple, 2012).

Critical pedagogical scholars have raised similar concerns. Freire (1970) criticized educational approaches that position students as passive recipients of predetermined knowledge, arguing instead for dialogical and participatory forms of learning. Giroux (2014) further contends that teachers play an essential role as transformative intellectuals capable of fostering critical consciousness and democratic engagement. Curriculum standardization may limit opportunities for such work by privileging compliance and consistency over professional discretion and contextual responsiveness.

Within international school settings, these tensions may be particularly pronounced. Many of Japan's EMI schools promote creativity, critical thinking, and global citizenship on their websites as central educational goals while simultaneously adopting highly structured curriculum packages designed to ensure consistency and quality control (Hayden & Thompson, 2013; Tanu, 2017; Tikly, 2019). This apparent contradiction raises important questions about

the relationship among standardization, professionalism, and educational purpose in contemporary international education.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by critical pedagogy, theories of neoliberal educational reform, and Bourdieu's theory of capital. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for examining how curriculum standardization may shape teacher agency, professional identity, and educational purpose within English-medium international schools in Japan.

Critical pedagogy offers a powerful lens for examining the relationship between education, power, and social inequality. Freire (1970) argued that education should serve as a process of dialogue and critical consciousness rather than the passive transmission of knowledge. From this perspective, teachers are not simply technicians responsible for delivering predetermined content but intellectuals who actively engage learners in the construction of knowledge. Giroux (2014) extends this argument by suggesting that educators play a crucial role in fostering democratic participation and critical thinking. Scripted curricula, however, may limit opportunities for such engagement by privileging standardization, compliance, and predetermined learning outcomes over professional judgment and contextual responsiveness.

The study also draws upon theories of neoliberal educational reform. Neoliberalism has increasingly reshaped educational systems through marketization, privatization, accountability measures, and competition (Apple, 2012; Ball, 2012). Within this framework, schools operate in ways that increasingly resemble businesses, competing for students, resources, and institutional prestige. Curriculum packages, assessment systems, and educational programs become commodities that can be marketed to consumers as indicators of quality and effectiveness. As a result, educational decision-making may become influenced by commercial considerations alongside pedagogical concerns. Examining scripted curricula through a neoliberal lens allows for an exploration of how market logics influence classroom practice and teacher autonomy within international school settings.

The study further draws on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital to understand how international schools function as sites of social reproduction. Bourdieu argues that educational institutions distribute and legitimize forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital that contribute to the reproduction of social hierarchies. Within international schools, English proficiency, international curricula, and global educational credentials often function as highly valued forms of capital associated with academic success, global mobility, and future opportunities (Kanno, 2003; Tanu, 2017). The adoption of standardized curriculum packages may therefore serve not only pedagogical purposes but also symbolic ones, signaling quality, prestige, and legitimacy to prospective families.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for examining how scripted curricula operate within broader systems of power, marketization, and social inequality. Rather than viewing curriculum standardization as a neutral educational practice, the study considers how it shapes teacher agency, professional identity, and the purposes of schooling within Japan's rapidly expanding international school sector.

Figure 1.

Conceptual Relationship Between Neoliberal Reform, Curriculum Standardization, and Teacher Agency in English-Medium International Schools



Note. This figure illustrates the conceptual relationships identified in the literature review. Neoliberal educational reform contributes to the expansion of educational markets and the standardization of curricula, which in turn shape the adoption of scripted curricula. Scripted curricula influence both teacher agency and institutional branding, contributing to tensions surrounding professionalism, symbolic capital, and educational purpose.

4.0 METHODS

This study employs a critical literature review methodology to examine how scripted curricula shape teacher agency, professionalism, and educational purpose within English-medium international (EMI) schools in Japan (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019). Unlike traditional literature reviews that primarily summarize existing scholarship, critical literature reviews seek to interrogate dominant assumptions, identify underlying power structures, and examine how educational practices are shaped by broader social, political, and economic forces (Apple, 2012; Giroux, 2014; Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019). This approach was particularly appropriate given the study's focus on neoliberal educational reform and the marketization of international schooling.

Sources were identified through searches of Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, and the University of Kansas library databases using combinations of the keywords international schools, English-medium instruction, teacher agency, scripted curriculum, curriculum standardization, neoliberalism, international education, and Japan. Additional sources were identified through citation tracking and reference list searches of influential publications in international education, curriculum studies, teacher education, and critical pedagogy. Consistent with a critical literature review approach, the analysis focused on identifying recurring themes, ideological tensions, and conceptual patterns across the literature rather than cataloging or synthesizing every available publication on the topic (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019).

Overall, approximately 47 scholarly sources were reviewed and analyzed. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, edited volumes, and policy-oriented publications that addressed international schooling, curriculum standardization, teacher professionalism, and neoliberal educational reform. Particular attention was paid to scholarship examining English-medium international schools in East Asia and Japan, as well as theoretical literature concerning educational commodification, social reproduction, and market-oriented reform. While the review was not intended to be systematic, efforts were made to include both foundational theoretical works and contemporary scholarship relevant to the study's focus.

The analysis was guided by critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2014), theories of neoliberal educational reform (Apple, 2012; Ball, 2012), and Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital. These frameworks provided conceptual tools for examining how curriculum standardization functions within broader systems of accountability, competition, and social inequality. Rather than treating scripted curricula as neutral instructional resources, the analysis explored how they shape professional decision-making, teacher autonomy, and institutional practice within international school settings.

The author's professional experience within English-medium and international educational contexts in Japan informed the interpretation of the literature. This experience provided insight into curriculum implementation, teacher supervision, and the increasing influence of commercial educational products within international schooling. At the same time, reflexive attention was maintained throughout the review process to critically examine assumptions and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the literature rather than personal experience (Maxwell, 2013).

As this study did not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, or primary data collection, Institutional Review Board approval was not required. The purpose of the review was not to generate generalizable findings but rather to critically examine dominant trends within the literature and identify tensions surrounding teacher agency, curriculum standardization, and neoliberal reform in contemporary international schooling.

4.1 Data Analysis

The literature was analyzed through critical thematic synthesis (Snyder, 2019; Thomas & Harden, 2008). Following repeated readings of selected sources, recurring patterns, concepts, and tensions were identified across the literature. Particular attention was given to discussions of curriculum standardization, teacher autonomy, educational commodification, neoliberal reform, and international schooling. Initial notes were recorded and compared across sources to identify common themes and areas of disagreement.

As analysis progressed, concepts were grouped into broader thematic categories that reflected recurring concerns within the literature. These themes were then examined through the theoretical lenses of critical pedagogy, neoliberalism, and Bourdieu's theory of capital. Rather than simply summarizing previous studies, the analysis sought to identify how larger ideological and structural forces shaped curriculum practices and professional experiences within international school settings (Grant & Booth, 2009).

Three interconnected themes ultimately emerged from the literature: (1) Market-Driven Standardization and Scripted Curricula, (2) Teacher Agency and Professionalism Under Neoliberal Reform, and (3) Commodification, Social Reproduction, and Educational Inequality. These themes provided the organizational structure for the findings and discussion section and served as a basis for interpreting the broader implications of curriculum standardization as a lens to view the phenomenon within Japan’s English-medium international schools.

Table 1.

Development of Themes in the Literature Review

Recurring Concepts	Intermediate Category	Final Theme
Competition, branding, curriculum packages, and accountability	Curriculum standardization	Market-Driven Standardization and Scripted Curricula
Professional judgment, autonomy, curriculum adaptation	Teacher professionalism	Teacher Agency and Professionalism Under Neoliberal Reform
Prestige, global mobility, exclusivity, symbolic capital	Educational commodification	Commodification, Social Reproduction, and Educational Inequality

4.2 Researcher Positionality

The researcher has professional experience working within international and English-medium educational settings in Japan. This experience provided familiarity with curriculum implementation, teacher supervision, educational management, and the growing influence of commercially produced curriculum products within international schooling. Such experiences informed the researcher’s interest in questions concerning teacher agency, curriculum standardization, and neoliberal educational reform.

At the same time, this proximity to the field required ongoing reflexive attention throughout the study. Consistent with qualitative and critical research traditions, efforts were made to critically examine personal assumptions and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the literature rather than personal experience (Maxwell, 2013). Rather than seeking evidence to support predetermined conclusions, the analysis aimed to engage critically with diverse perspectives concerning curriculum standardization, professionalism, and educational reform.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

This study did not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, or the collection of primary data. Consequently, Institutional Review Board approval was not required. All sources analyzed were publicly available scholarly publications. The study adhered to accepted standards of academic integrity through accurate citation, representation of sources, and critical engagement with existing scholarship.

5.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Market-Driven Standardization and Scripted Curricula

One of the most consistent themes emerging from the literature is the growing influence of market-oriented approaches to curriculum design and implementation within international schools (Bates, 2010; Tikly, 2019). As international schooling has expanded, schools increasingly operate within competitive educational markets where curriculum serves not only a pedagogical function but also a marketing function (Apple, 2012; Ball, 2012; Bunnell, 2016). Curriculum packages are frequently promoted as indicators of quality, consistency, and academic rigor, allowing schools to distinguish themselves from competitors and reassure prospective families.

Within Japan's English-medium international schools, this tendency is particularly visible among newer for-profit institutions serving affluent host-nation families. These schools often purchase proprietary curriculum packages from educational companies and prominently feature them in promotional materials and on school websites (Kim & Mobernd, 2019). In these contexts, curriculum becomes a form of symbolic capital that signals legitimacy, innovation, and global competitiveness (Bourdieu, 1986). Rather than emerging primarily from local educational needs, curriculum decisions may increasingly be influenced by market demands and institutional branding strategies (Hameed & Lingard, 2023).

Proponents argue that scripted curricula provide consistency across classrooms and support teachers with varying levels of experience (Popham, 2012). Standardized materials can ensure coverage of key content and create continuity across educational programs. However, critics contend that these benefits often come at the expense of professional flexibility and responsiveness (Apple, 2012; Eisner, 2002). As curriculum becomes increasingly standardized, opportunities for teachers to adapt instruction to local contexts and student needs may become more limited (Dieudé & Prøitz, 2022).

The literature, therefore, suggests that curriculum standardization functions as both an educational and commercial practice. While schools often justify scripted curricula with claims of quality assurance, these approaches also align closely with neoliberal priorities that emphasize efficiency, predictability, and marketability (Pak et al., 2020).

Market-driven standardization and scripted curricula in international schools thus emerge as practices that are simultaneously pedagogical and commercial. The literature indicates that in competitive educational markets, especially within Japan's for-profit, English-medium international schools, proprietary curriculum packages operate as forms of symbolic capital, shaping institutional legitimacy and branding as much as classroom learning (Bates, 2010; Bourdieu, 1986; Kim & Mobernd, 2019; Tikly, 2019). While advocates highlight gains in consistency, coverage, and perceived quality, these same mechanisms risk subordinating local educational needs and teacher judgment to market logics and neoliberal priorities of efficiency, predictability, and marketability (Apple, 2012; Dieudé & Prøitz, 2022; Pak et al., 2020; Popham, 2012). Collectively, these studies suggest that scripted curricula not only standardize instruction but also reconfigure curriculum decision-making around commercial imperatives, with significant implications for teacher professionalism and educational equity (Ball, 2012; Eisner, 2002; Hameed & Lingard, 2023).

5.2 Teacher Agency and Professionalism Under Neoliberal Reform

A second major theme concerns the impact of curriculum standardization on teacher agency and professionalism. Across the literature, teacher agency is consistently described as a central component of professional practice because it enables educators to make informed decisions regarding instruction, assessment, and curriculum implementation (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015).

However, neoliberal reforms often reduce opportunities for such decision-making by emphasizing accountability, standardization, and compliance with externally developed programs (Ball, 2012; Giroux, 2014). Under these conditions, teachers may become responsible for implementing prescribed content rather than designing learning experiences based on professional judgment. This shift has led many scholars to argue that curriculum standardization contributes to the deskilling of educators and weakens professional autonomy (Stornaiuolo et al., 2023).

Within Japan's EMI schools, these tensions may be especially pronounced. Many institutions publicly promote creativity, innovation, and critical thinking while simultaneously requiring teachers to follow highly structured curriculum frameworks (Patston et al., 2021). This contradiction creates a situation in which educators are expected to cultivate independent thinking among students while operating within increasingly constrained professional environments (Harris & Bruin, 2018).

Despite these challenges, the literature also documents forms of teacher adaptation and resistance. Teachers frequently modify curriculum materials, supplement scripted lessons, and incorporate culturally relevant content to better meet student needs (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). These practices suggest that teacher agency is not entirely eliminated by curriculum standardization but rather negotiated within institutional constraints. Consequently, teacher professionalism remains an important site of tension within contemporary international schooling (Goodwin, 2021).

Overall, the literature portrays teacher agency and professionalism under neoliberal curriculum reforms as a deeply contested and negotiated terrain. Standardization, performativity, and standards-based regimes narrow teachers' roles to compliant implementers of prescribed content, contributing to de-professionalization and redefining professionalism in managerial, technicist terms rather than as informed judgment and ethical responsibility (Crawford, 2025; Ro, 2020). At the same time, research on curriculum reform consistently shows that teachers still exercise curriculum agency by recontextualizing standards, adapting assessment, and working collectively to maintain meaningful pedagogical purposes within restrictive frameworks (Alvunger, 2018; Poulton, 2020; Dinh, 2022). This body of work suggests that, particularly in highly regulated and internationally branded environments, teacher professionalism remains a key site where neoliberal logics are both reproduced and contested through everyday acts of compliance, adaptation, and resistance (Lopes, 2023).

5.3 Commodification, Social Reproduction, and Educational Inequality

A third theme concerns the relationship between curriculum standardization, educational commodification, and social inequality. The literature consistently suggests that international schools function not only as educational institutions but also as sites where social and cultural advantages are reproduced (Bourdieu, 1986; Apple, 2012).

Japan's EMI schools frequently market English-medium education as a pathway to global mobility, prestigious universities, and future professional success (Kanno, 2003; Kubota, 2011; Tanu, 2017). Access to these opportunities, however, often depends on substantial economic resources. High tuition costs and selective admissions practices mean that participation remains concentrated among relatively affluent families. Consequently, the benefits associated with international education are not distributed equally (Ilie et al., 2021).

Curriculum plays an important role in this process. Proprietary curriculum packages often function as symbols of educational quality and exclusivity. Their value lies not only in their pedagogical content but also in what they represent to prospective families (Indah et al., 2024). Curriculum, therefore, becomes a form of symbolic capital that reinforces institutional prestige and market position (Bourdieu, 1986; Indah et al., 2024).

The literature further suggests that globally standardized curriculum models may privilege particular cultural and linguistic norms while marginalizing local perspectives (Shin & Kubota, 2008). In this way, curriculum standardization contributes to broader processes of social reproduction by legitimizing specific forms of knowledge, language, and cultural capital. The result is a system in which educational opportunities are increasingly linked to market participation and purchasing power rather than to democratic access (Pennycook, 2010).

Taken together, this literature portrays international schooling and standardized curricula as key mechanisms through which educational advantage is commodified and social hierarchies are reproduced rather than dismantled. International and internationalized educational programs increasingly function as market goods whose promises of cosmopolitanism, human capital development, and global mobility are distributed unevenly across social groups. Access to these opportunities is often concentrated among upper-middle- and upper-class families through high tuition costs, selective admissions practices, and differentiated educational pathways (Indah, 2024; Maire, 2022). Standardized and globally oriented curricula further operate as forms of institutionalized cultural and symbolic capital, legitimizing particular forms of knowledge, language, and cosmopolitan dispositions as universally valuable while distributing them unevenly through stratified educational markets (Adiyasa, 2025; Igarashi, 2014). Within this context, curriculum standardization and international certification appear less as neutral mechanisms of quality assurance than as central technologies of neoliberal educational reform that link educational opportunity to purchasing power and reinforce existing social, economic, and global inequalities (Barnhart, 2018; Gardner-McTaggart, 2016; Slater, 2015).

6.0 CONCLUSION

The growth of EMI schools in Japan illustrates how broader neoliberal reforms have reshaped contemporary education through processes of marketization, commodification, and curriculum standardization. While scripted curricula are frequently promoted as mechanisms for ensuring consistency, accountability, and educational quality, the literature reviewed in this study suggests that they also raise important questions concerning teacher agency, professionalism, and the purpose of schooling. Within increasingly competitive educational markets, curriculum packages often function not only as pedagogical tools but also as marketable products that contribute to institutional branding and consumer confidence.

Drawing on critical pedagogy, theories of neoliberal educational reform, and Bourdieu's theory of capital, this review examined how curriculum standardization influences educational practice within English-medium international schools in Japan. The analysis identified three interconnected themes: the growth of market-driven curriculum standardization, the challenges posed to teacher agency and professionalism, and the relationship between educational commodification and social inequality. Together, these themes suggest that curriculum decisions are increasingly shaped by commercial and institutional priorities alongside pedagogical concerns.

The findings also highlight an important contradiction within many international school contexts. While schools frequently promote creativity, critical thinking, innovation, and global citizenship, the increasing reliance on highly structured curriculum packages may constrain the professional autonomy necessary to achieve these goals. Teachers are often expected to foster independent thinking among students while simultaneously operating within tightly prescribed curricular frameworks. This tension reflects broader debates concerning the role of educators in increasingly standardized and market-oriented educational environments.

At the same time, the literature suggests that teachers are not merely passive recipients of curriculum mandates. Educators frequently adapt, supplement, and reinterpret scripted materials in ways that better respond to student needs and local contexts. These practices demonstrate that teacher agency continues to exist even within constrained institutional environments. Nevertheless, the extent to which such agency can be exercised remains shaped by organizational expectations, accountability structures, and market pressures.

This review argues that scripted curricula should be understood not only as instructional resources but also as manifestations of broader neoliberal processes that reshape teacher professionalism, institutional identity, and educational purpose. Within Japan's English-medium international schools, curriculum standardization functions simultaneously as a pedagogical tool, a mechanism of quality assurance, and a source of institutional prestige within competitive educational markets.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. While the review focuses on English-medium international schools in Japan, much of the available scholarship draws on the broader international school and comparative education literature. Additional empirical research is needed to examine how these dynamics are experienced within specific Japanese EMI school contexts. As a critical literature review, this study does not present primary empirical data and therefore cannot make claims regarding the experiences of all teachers working within EMI schools in Japan. Rather, the purpose of the review was to synthesize and critically examine existing scholarship in order to identify dominant themes, tensions, and areas for future investigation. Further empirical research involving teachers, school leaders, curriculum coordinators, and educational managers would contribute valuable insight into how curriculum standardization is experienced and negotiated in practice.

Future research may also benefit from examining differences across various types of international schools operating in Japan, including traditional expatriate-serving schools, ideologically oriented international schools, and newer for-profit institutions. Comparative studies exploring how curriculum policies are interpreted and enacted across these settings

would contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between teacher agency, educational markets, and institutional identity.

Ultimately, the expansion of EMI schools in Japan raises important questions concerning the future of international education and equal access to knowledge. As schools continue to balance market demands, parental expectations, and educational goals, the challenge will be to ensure that curriculum serves not only the interests of efficiency and competition but also the broader purposes of teaching, learning, and democratic educational practice. Preserving teacher agency and professional judgment may therefore remain essential if international schools are to fulfill their promises of innovation, critical thinking, and meaningful global education.

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This manuscript presents a critical literature review examining scripted curricula, teacher agency, and neoliberal educational reform within English-medium international schools in Japan.

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