INTRODUCTION

As of July 2014, there were eighty weekend Japanese language schools in the United States. They are called supplementary instruction schools (hoshū jugyō kō), and their main purpose is to serve Japanese children overseas by providing them with instruction in the Japanese language arts. All of the schools of this type are community based, but their supporting organizations vary greatly. Schools located in a region where many Japanese businesses exist are sometimes supported by a local branch of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce; others are run by Japanese or Japanese-American Associations (nihonjin-kai or nikkeijin-kai), and even by small groups of Japanese families. Once these schools get approved by the Japanese government and are officially recognized as hoshū jugyō kō, they can receive grants and subsidies from the Japanese government. When a school has 100 students or more, it can request the Japanese government to deploy teachers and a principal from Japan. However, there are inherent conflicts in running a hoshū jugyō kō with teachers and a principal from Japan, as the following two points are in contradiction with each other: 1) hoshū jugyō kō are run by local people in the United States with the aim of serving local students’ needs; and 2) Japanese government policy toward Japanese children overseas is basically to provide instruction in the same curriculum designed for schools in Japan, based on its Course of Study developed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Technology (MEXT). As a result, hoshū jugyō kō have an inherent tension between the local administration of the school and the teachers and principal deployed by the Japanese government, who may not be fully knowledgeable to deal with situations particular to a local community where the school is located. In the 2000s, as the student bodies of hoshū jugyō kō diversified to include those with fewer ties to Japan, this tension became more apparent.

In studies of heritage language education, however, the issues arising from the gap between the policy of the Japanese government and its local implementation has rarely been discussed. In this chapter, we examine how the tension common to all hoshū jugyō kō played out in one weekend Japanese language school in the northeastern United States. We trace the struggles of administrators sent by the Japanese government and locally appointed counterparts to cope with a changing
student body, which reflected Japan’s changing position in the world and shifts in migration patterns. The chapter is part of a wider, four-year-long ethnographic study on the effects of institutional settings and heritage language education on students’ subjectivities (see Doerr & Lee, 2009, 2010, 2013).

We first situate our chapter in the existing research on heritage language education, outline the changes in Japanese government policies towards the education of Japanese citizens’ children overseas since the 1960s, and introduce a weekend Japanese language school founded in 1980, located in the northeastern United States, which we call Jackson Japanese Language School (JJLS; all names are aliases). Then we present struggles experienced by local school founders/administrators, and the principals deployed by the Japanese government, as the school sought to respond to the changing student body while maintaining the status hoshū jugyō kō with a principal deployed by the Japanese government.

RESEARCH ON HERITAGE LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Since the 1990s, scholars have used the term “heritage language” in the context of research on education in the United States. It is an emerging field (Brinton et al., 2008), and perhaps as a result a consensus has not yet emerged as to what exactly “heritage language” is, or who “heritage learners” are (Carreira, 2004; Hornberger & Wang, 2008, among others). In terms of studies in the Japanese heritage language (JHL henceforth) in the United States, the focus has generally been on children who are bilingual in English and Japanese (Kanno, 2003; Sato & Kataoka, 2008). Such studies often discuss children’s language proficiencies (Chinen & Tucker, 2005; Kataoka et al., 2008), their identity construction (Chinen & Tucker, 2005; Kanno, 2000, 2003), and heritage language curriculum development and pedagogy (Douglas, 2005; Kondo, 2003). These studies do not refer to the operation of hoshū jugyō kō from the points of view of local or MEXT-sent administrators. One of the exceptions is Shibata’s study (2000), which describes the process of opening a Japanese Saturday School and briefly mentions that the school became approved by the Japanese government and was thus eligible to receive financial support. However, the school discussed did not receive MEXT-sent teachers or a principal, and there was no discussion on the relationship between MEXT-sent and local teachers and administrators. Another exception is the study by Doerr and Lee (2009, 2013), which refers to administrators’ efforts in building a JHL program within a hoshū jugyō kō. It is safe to conclude that there are not many studies done on how the Japanese government policies are interpreted and implemented by local administrators in such community-based Japanese weekend schools, especially when they involve a teacher who was sent by the government to oversee language instruction based on MEXT guidelines. What makes the matter comparatively more complex in Japan’s case is that the Japanese government policies must be implemented beyond the Japanese boundary as a nation. However, because not many governments intervene with the education of its citizens and their children abroad, there is not much discussion