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Educational Reform in Contemporary Japan

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Introduction

Japanese politicians assert that recent educational reform is the end of “postwar education,” and the start of new education. However, most people in our educational field do not think there is much difference between the two. Historically, many Japanese have had a very positive attitude toward the 6–3 system because, over the years, the junior high school in Japan became a symbol of the democratization of educational opportunity, symbolizing equality of educational opportunity. For this reason, the Japanese junior high school has not been the focus of comprehensive reform. However, since 1971, and especially since 1984, the 6–3–3 school grade organization has been the subject of increasing discussion by educators and politicians due to two factors: a growing awareness of the actual developmental characteristics of Japanese young adolescents, and the decentralization of educational policy from the central government to local governments.

In 2005, the Central Council for Education emphasized compulsory common education and called for more flexibility and experimentation in the 6–3 school grade organization. As a result, some local governments have changed their 6–3 grade organization to a 4–3–2 or 5–4 system or even 3–4–2 systems, largely as experiments. So far, there has been a positive assessment of those experiments. Changing demographics (a decreasing number of school students) and declining school budgets have pressed local governments to consolidate smaller schools into fewer but larger schools (MEXT, 2006). Under these conditions and situations, the national curriculum was revised around 2005.

The State of Japanese Public Schools

Until 2000, Japan did not show much concern for the international test scores of IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) or

OECD/PISA (OECD Program for International Student Assessment). Scores were solid, and the nation’s rank was satisfactory. But when we found the 2003 PISA scores of Japanese students of the age 15 were worse than we had expected, educators were pressed to look for reasons.

In PISA 2000, Japan was top in mathematical literacy, eighth in reading literacy, and second in scientific literacy; however, in PISA 2003, Japan was sixth in mathematical literacy, 14th in reading literacy, second in scientific literacy, and fourth in problem solving across 40 countries and regions. Many Japanese worried over reading literacy, which went down from eighth to 14th, registering a score that was almost equal to the OECD average. The trend of Japan’s scores in PISA 2006 was almost the same as those in PISA 2003.

In IEA/TIMSS (IEA’s Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) 2003, Japan’s Mathematics score was fifth in lower secondary school across 46 countries and regions, compared with fifth across 38 countries and regions in 1999, third across 41 in 1995, first across 20 in 1981, and second across 12 in 1964. In addition, Japan’s Science score of lower secondary school was sixth across 46 countries and regions in 2003, compared with fourth across 38 in 1999, third across 41 in 1995, second across 26 in 1983, and first across 18 in 1970. These trends in Japan’s ranks of mathematics and science scores forced a review of the reform of school education.

In the area Japanese would label “student guidance,” there have also been difficult trends. In the occurrence of acts of violence in schools, the total number of cases was 30,022 in 2004, including 23,110 in lower secondary schools, almost the same as the average of the most recent five years. In the area of bullying, the total number of cases was 21,671 in 2004, including 13,915 in lower secondary schools, almost the same as the average of the most recent three years. In number of cases of non-attendance (students who refuse to attend school), the total number was 123,358, with an exceptional number of 100,040 in lower

secondary school, almost the same as the average of the last three years (MEXT 2007).

All of these figures suggest that Japanese education has shown no improvement, especially in lower secondary education. As a consequence, in 2007, a new Fundamental Law of Education was legislated, and other key education laws were altered. The national curriculum standards were revised in 2008, to take effect in 2011.

Recent Reform and Current Issues

Japan is now in the midst of a so-called age of educational reform. Since 2000, Japan has moved to a decentralized process of reform. During the last 10 years, the Japanese government has enacted a new set of important educational laws, including the new Fundamental Law of Education, alongside decentralization of the administration of public education, particularly compulsory education. There are those who have continued to criticize public education in terms of the central government's strong control, its decreasing governmental subsidies, and the increasing anxiety of many Japanese parents over their own children's education. In 2007, the enactment of the new Fundamental Law of Education inaugurated a new era in educational history of Japan (MEXT 2006).

Contemporary Japanese thinking on education currently includes attention to the upper grades (fifth and sixth) of elementary school and the three grades (seventh through ninth) of junior high school. As for the middle-level education, in terms of the "deregulation" of administration, local governments have been able to change the school-grade sequence from 6-3 to 4-3-2 or 5-4 or 4-2-3. Almost 10 years ago, several conservative politicians said that six years in elementary school might be too long and that a 5-4 school system would be preferable. Japanese junior high schools enrolling students ages 12-15 are being connected with elementary schools more closely and being given the flexibility to develop their curriculum differently from each other (Abiko 2006)

In 2007, the Japanese government instituted new national tests for sixth and ninth graders. These tests are designed to provide accountability. Scores show students' growth in various academic fields. From the test results, last year we found a strong correlation between scores of basic knowledge and skills and scores of thinking ability. This means we must work to strengthen both abilities simultaneously.

Reform of the Public School System

As acknowledged above, there has been an "age of educational reform" for more than 10 years now, taking on the dimensions of a third great national educational reform. The first reform was in 1872 when Japan had a new modern school system; the second reform was in 1945 when Japan introduced an American educational system; and this third reform consists of these last two decades.

In my opinion, the first reform was mainly related to the historically dramatic political opening of Japan to the West. The second reform was strongly related to a period of great postwar economic development, and the third period of reform seems to be related to what might be called a cultural opening, with the consequent controversy that cultural change implies. Some conservative politicians, however, those who might be called nationalists, do not want Japan to be opened to the global world. They want Japan to be more nationalistic and isolated, as in the past.

The educational reforms now underway, mainly the reform of public elementary and secondary schools, exhibit two closely related themes that express interest in post-nationalism. They represent recommendations and proposals made by central governmental councils, such as the Central Council for Education, the Council of Administrative Reform, and the Council of the Promotion of Decentralization. From these recommendations for administrative reform, the movement for decentralization has become an important overall policy agenda in Japanese society.

The second outcome of reform recommendations is related to the increasing public dissatisfaction with, or anxiety about, public elementary and secondary schools. Many Japanese appear to have been losing their trust in the public education system due to high profile phenomena like bullying and the refusal to attend school, phenomena that may have persisted due to excessive control of schools by the central government or the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (Shiraishi 2005).

In this policy of decentralization, after the 2005 report entitled "Redesigning Compulsory Education for a New Era" issued by the Central Council for Education, a number of local governments were given permission to reorganize their public school systems from a 6-3 grade organization to a 4-3-2 form. Recently, the number of such experimental schools has reached 162; the number of pilot schools by local government was 67 in 2007. At this moment, the total number of non 6-3 schools approaches 300 and appears to be increasing year after year. Japanese junior high schools have, in this way, been changed.

In the later part of 2006, the new Fundamental Law of Education came into effect. In June 2007, three other important laws in education were amended. Those laws suggest that educators should consider the first nine grades (1-9) as a unit, rather than separating the first six elementary years from the three lower secondary (junior high school) of public schools. The traditional Japanese 6-3 school system is now open to experimentation and reconfiguration in response to local government policy preferences and different perceptions by the public of children's development. It is interesting that U.S. middle school, with its 5-3-4 grade organization, has been recently discussed as possibly adaptable to Japan (George 2005). I think Japan can learn from this American idea (Okamura 2003).

Curriculum Revision

At present, Japan is on its way to implementing the newest national curriculum standards. They are to come into effect in 2011. Several issues have been at the center of the debate surrounding these new standards. For the last three years, we have had to revise the National Course of Study, and last March, in 2008, we faced the newest national course of study, as the Central Council for Education recommended that seven issues should be improved in the new National Curriculum:

- (1) Sharing the Ideal of Enriching Education to Create a “Zest for Living”: Focusing on “Zest for Living in Real and Actual Life.” This recommendation derives from reflection on public concerns that parents, teachers, and educational administrators must improve upon their understanding and enactment of this educational ideal.
- (2) Mastering Basic and Principal Knowledge and Skills for Thinking Abilities: Creating a Balance between Subject Knowledge and Problem-Solving Abilities. This point was originally proposed in 2003, and its importance was confirmed by last year’s national PISA scores and Finland’s revision of national curriculum standards. Knowledge and skills are different from thinking abilities, and as such, the methods for teaching knowledge and skills must be different from the methods for teaching thinking abilities.
- (3) Nurturing Thinking, Judging, and Presenting Abilities: Introducing the Application of Knowledge and Skills “Activities” as a Sort of “Preparatory Experience” for Inquiry in “Integrated Studies.” In order to improve this aspect, we must try to connect the knowledge and skills in subjects with inquiry activities in integrated studies through application activities of such knowledge and skills.
- (4) Increasing the Number of Periods of Instruction for Promoting Academic Abilities: Promoting Thinking Abilities through Increasing the Number of Periods from 28 to 30 per Week. This point had been a source of controversy as the government had insisted that there is no correlation between academic achievement and time spent on academic subjects. However, most Japanese criticized the decrease in the number of academic subject hours per week; they wanted an increase instead. In addition, some of the members of the Central Council for Education insisted that more hours might well be needed if we want our students to think more. Finally, the government conceded this point.
- (5) Enhancing Learning Motives and Establishing Learning Habits: Placing Stress on Learning Habits through Homework. In particular, we are concerned that students’ motivation in learning mathematics and science is weak. Despite weak motivation and poverty, it is very important for all students to acquire good learning habits in childhood. (Shimizu 2005)
- (6) Intensifying Moral Education and Physical Education: Emphasizing Moral Education Connected with Subject Learning: Increasing the Number of Periods for Physical Education. Most Japanese people complain about students’ misbehavior; they want to intensify moral education in schools. Therefore, the teaching materials for moral education are to be improved, and greater connection with subject learning and other activities is to be emphasized. As for physical education, the number of hours is to be increased in each grade.
- (7) Important Tasks through a Cross-Curricular Approach. (a) ICT Education: How to Use Mobile Phones Appropriately. So far, Japanese students have been taught how to use PCs, but currently, they have to learn how to use mobile phones appropriately, in efforts to combat cyber-bullying and other inappropriate behaviors. (b) Environmental Education: “Education for Sustainable Development” (ESD). This point originated with former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, and the United Nations took up this idea and began a decade-long program starting in 2005. The Japanese government hopes to lead this movement in public education. (c) Invention in Industry: Fine Arts, Science and Technology and Home Economics Expected by Industry. Invention has long been of great concern among many Japanese due to the nation’s limited natural resources. Invention by students who demonstrate mastery in fine arts, science, technology, and home economics are very much desired by Japanese industries. (d) Career Education: Industry Expects Children’s Positive Awareness of Career Implications. This is demanded by the industrial world because of the recent increase in numbers of FREETERs (people between the age of 15 and 34 who lack full time employment or are unemployed, excluding homemakers and students) and NEETs (16–18 year-olds not in education, employment, or training) in Japan. We want our children to have a proper attitude toward work and labor to ensure a good life. (e) Food Education: Obesity and Health Awareness in Daily Life. This is an important topic in recent years. Both Japanese parents and Japanese food companies are strongly interested in children’s food and their food habits. We must educate our children to have a better awareness of food in our lives. (f) Safety Education: Security of Children’s Life Inside and Outside of School. This is another important topic at present. Although children’s security remains primarily their parents’ concern, Japanese people do want public school teachers to take responsibility for children’s security even outside of school. (g) Deep Understanding of AIDS: HIV Prevention among Japanese

Youth. The spread of HIV among Japanese youth continues even while the number of patients in many other countries has been decreasing year after year. This initiative seeks to redress the trend in Japan.

Main Curriculum Characteristics of Public Schools Since 2011

As evident from the above, the new national curriculum aims at improving the thinking abilities of students in actual life. To do so, the curriculum of each public school should demonstrate these characteristics:

- (1) Enriching Language Activities across the Whole Curriculum: Emphasis on Language Activities such as Recording, Explaining, Stating, and Debating. Each school must emphasize language activities in every academic subject; they are the foundation of intelligent activities, communication activities, and moral behavior.
- (2) Intensifying Science and Mathematics Education: Motivating Student's Inquiry Activities with Interesting Daily Experiences among Students. Since the Meiji era, many Japanese have considered mathematics and science to be the most important subjects for promoting modernization in every field. This characteristic was included because recently many fear that young Japanese students do not like these subjects as the subjects seem to have no connection with their daily experiences.
- (3) Promoting Japanese Traditional Culture Education across the Curriculum: Increasing Japanese Traditional Culture in Music, Literature, Industrial Arts, Classical Martial Arts, etc. Conservatives in Japan continue to work to make our public education more nationalistic. They want to stress our traditional and classical culture in education. Their opinions have been reflected within the limits of the New Fundamental Law to respect our national culture as well as international cultures.
- (4) Intensifying Moral Education across the Curriculum: Clarifying the Need for Moral Education through Subject Learning. Moral education in Japanese schools has always been a controversial issue. Until now, moral education has been implicit in all subjects taught as well as explicit in one "Period for Moral Education" per week. However, the new national curriculum states that moral education must now be explicit and clear. In addition, emphasis is placed on the participation of members of the community and industry in the teaching of the "Period for Moral Education" as well as parents since they must provide a model for morality.
- (5) Enriching Experiential Activities across the Curriculum: Increasing Experiential Activities in Science Education, Career Education, etc. In recent years,

Japanese children have lost opportunities to have experiential activities in natural and social circumstances. In every area of school learning, we must ensure children have more chances for hands-on learning.

- (6) Introducing "Foreign Language Activities" into the Elementary Curriculum: One Period of Foreign Language Activities per Week from the 5th Grade in Elementary School to Promote International Understanding. Most Japanese people want elementary schools to have a foreign language program (mostly English), and most elementary schools until now have provided a foreign language program in "Periods for Integrated Studies." The revised national curriculum now introduces "Foreign Language Activities" as a preparatory program for foreign language learning in junior high schools. However, the main focus of the program is not on language education but rather on promoting international understanding.

Big Issues

Among the curriculum issues mentioned above, I would like to discuss some main issues and to articulate my proposals for the future.

- (1) Relaxation of pressure for constantly increasing academic achievement: After long years of discussion about the stringent requirements of Japanese education, the nation began to move toward a relaxation of standards. Consequently, the national curriculum standards were revised in 1998. It was an extensive change accompanied by the considerable alteration of the former standards. The new standards reduced both the total number of annual school hours and subject content required to be learned, and tested, in each subject. With this reduction of subject content and lowering of national curriculum standards, it was hoped that the new curriculum standards would be more flexible and that schools could devise teaching programs at their own discretion.

But after Japan found the Japanese students' test scores of OECD/PISA 2003 were not as high as those of Finland and went downwards slightly, most Japanese people worried about children's schoolwork. Therefore, in 2003, when the national standards were partly revised, the number of the school hours that was allowed became only a *recommended minimum* for each school. Each school could set more than the standard hours if its philosophy or conditions recommended it. And the new program allowed schools to raise the subject requirements for students who might want to study more. In 2008, when the national curriculum standards were again revised entirely, the number of the school hours per week was increased from 28 hours to 30 hours for Japanese junior high schools. This

increase is *intended* to focus on learning that permits the enhancement of thinking abilities and that moves away from Japan's traditional emphasis on memorization and test preparation.

- (2) Integrated Studies: In addition, an entirely new area, that of a "Period for Integrated Studies" was introduced in 1998 to the new curriculum standards. All students, from the third grade of elementary school to the 12th grade of senior high school were to experience the opportunity for work in an integrated curriculum. This new area was intended to encourage every school to design their programs based on their own students' interests and concerns. The ultimate aim of this focus on curriculum integration was to raise the natural interest of students toward learning and simultaneously develop the individuality of students. Focusing on the individual development of students became a new and important goal for Japanese education.

Sadly, though the purpose of the renewal was proper, Japanese junior high school teachers have proved unwilling to cooperate. More than half of them have complained, offering reasons for their rejection of an integrated curriculum. The first reason many cite is that "integration" is very difficult for junior high school teachers because they are "subject teachers," not "classroom teachers." The second objection is that it is difficult to make this period of the day different from elective subjects already in the junior high school curriculum. The third concern is that this Integrated Studies program is ineffective and unfruitful if the other, traditional, subjects in the school day have no close relation with these "integrated" studies. In light of these spirited objections from teachers, in 2003, the national standards were again partly revised to connect Integrated Studies more closely to the learning of traditional subject area content.

Reflecting a real, but not often articulated concern about testing and national comparisons, the total number of teaching periods or hours in the national curriculum standards now has to be interpreted as "minimum" not "maximum" in order to raise the academic achievement in general subject areas as well as in critical thinking or problem solving ability. In 2008, the entire revision of the national standards by MEXT decreased the number of periods of "Integrated Studies" from three hours to two hours per week and now aimed at making a better connection to the traditional subjects in the junior high school curriculum.

- (3) Elective subjects: In 1998, MEXT stressed the role of "elective subjects" for junior high school students. Therefore, it was expected that elective subjects would be much more visible in the school day of junior high school students, for all three years; the aim was to develop students' individual

traits and personalities (MoE 2001). However, once again, most junior high school teachers complained that those electives made the junior high school curriculum more complicated, took time away from the basics, and were not any different from Integrated Studies and the enriched programs that were introduced in the 2003 revision. Bowing to the pressure from teachers' unions, in the 2008 revision, MEXT decided to eliminate elective subjects completely from formal curriculum components in junior high schools. However, there are still many who think elective subjects are necessary, even in compulsory and junior high school curriculum because young adolescents should have some experiences according to their own choice if they are to become more independent and individualistic. That must be the reason why electives have a vital place in middle-level and compulsory school curriculum in almost all Western countries.

In my assessment of the curriculum of middle-level education, I begin by pointing out that Japanese secondary education was not originally divided into lower and upper levels. The secondary curriculum was planned originally to include a focus on "personality or individuality" and "independence in life." If Japanese secondary education is divided into a lower curriculum and upper curriculum, then the role or objectives of each curriculum must be different, otherwise there is no point in dividing them into two parts of lower and upper. My own recommendation is as follows (Abiko 1997 and 2002a):

The objectives of lower secondary (junior high school) should include "seeking for" their own personality and laying the "base" for becoming independent. The objectives of upper secondary (high school) should focus on developing students' personalities and making direct and vocational "preparation" for their becoming independent. Elective subjects should also be different at the two school levels. Electives in junior high school should be aimed at helping students "find or search for" students' individuality.

Those electives should be wide in range, shallow in specialty, many in number, short in term, and light in responsibility. At the upper secondary level, electives should aim to develop students' individuality. They should be narrow in range, deep in specialty, few in number, long in term, and heavy in responsibility. However, MEXT has not adopted this concept related to principles of elective subjects for Japanese junior high schools, so there have been very few schools whose electives are structured this way. Instead, the government continues to press for the compulsory school curricula common to all students. I hope the government will realize the importance of balance among the core subjects and electives—even in compulsory schools—because the few schools that have implemented the newer style of electives report that students have been enjoying their experiences with the electives.

- (4) Reforming process of 6–3 school system and curriculum: Recently, Japanese schools, in particular most junior high schools, have been required to deal with “school-refusal” or non-attendance and bullying (MoE 2000). However, the number of students involved in non-attendance and bullying is low below the fourth grade (age of 10) but clearly increases starting in the fifth grade in elementary school. After the first year of junior high school, the incidence of these problems shows a drastic increase until the end of ninth grade. Since around 2000, in an attempt to deal with these problems, the central government and MEXT became eager to introduce a 4–3–2 or 5–4 school system instead of the 6–3 grade organization. Currently, the number of experimental schools that have tried to configure the grades of school system has been increasing. This total number, 229 in 2007, might be about a half of the number expected by MEXT.

The reasons for continuing to experiment with grade organization are varied. One reason to explore alternatives to the 6–3 grade organization is to permit a smooth transition from elementary to secondary education. Also, there have been many students who have failed to make sufficient progress in mathematics and science. Prevention of bullying and non-attendance is important since those numbers increase drastically between the sixth grade in elementary school and the first year (grade 7) of junior high school.

A final motive for experimenting with grade organization is the need to keep students’ feelings of self esteem or self respect positive because Japanese students tend to become negative around the age of 10 when puberty or adolescence begins. Before the age of 10, most children here have a positive or high self-esteem, but the self-esteem of many Japanese children after the age of 10 becomes very low. Therefore, there is a lag between school articulation and students’ ages in Japan. About 50 years ago in Japan, puberty began around age 12, but now it begins around age 10. So it might be a more developmentally appropriate for Japanese students to have education from the elementary level to the secondary level continuously, meaning they don’t have a 6–3 system of education but rather have a whole 9-year system of education. The growing number of experimental schools shows that some Japanese parents want their children to experience a 9-year compulsory education that is smooth and continuous, not broken into sharply demarcated elementary and secondary education (Abiko 2002b).

- (5) Junior high school’s contradiction: In 1999, MEXT introduced a model for a six-year secondary school (grades 6–12) and provided for three types of grade organization. One possible model is the traditional three-year upper division and three-year lower division of “secondary” school. A second possibility is

a three-year junior high school and three-year high school in a “combined” school—different school buildings but on the same site. A third possibility is a three-year junior high school and three-year high school that are linked together as “coordinated” schools but are different schools at different sites. In 2007, the total number of these 6–12 secondary schools was 257, more than half of the 500 schools that are expected by MEXT. However, during the recent reform (since 2000) the central government and MEXT have been eager to remake our compulsory education (as acknowledged earlier). This reform emphasizes an elementary school and junior high school model that makes a more smooth transition between the two since many parents criticize the increasing numbers of non-attendance and bullying occurring during this transition. The traditional Japanese junior high school now finds itself in a difficult position, with contradictory demands from parents, teachers, the central government, and reform-minded educators.

Focusing on the developmental needs of young adolescents, reformers advocate for a flexible, student-centered experience. But most Japanese people continue to believe that compulsory education must have a strongly common curriculum, without so much emphasis on an integrated curriculum or electives related to students’ individuality or personality. In the 2008 reform, therefore, Japanese junior high schools will not be permitted to offer electives in their curriculum after 2011. To date, MEXT has not been willing to take steps to resolve the basic problems and contradictions related to junior high schools, though the mission of the Japanese junior high schools has now been lost and is now facing critical demands.

Conclusion

Recently, the Japanese government has had a very challenging time attempting to reform and redesign what many regard as an excellent school system. There is no clear consensus on the proper role of junior high school education, despite the New Fundamental Law of Education. Most Japanese people understand that education is one of the basic functions of any society, like politics and economics, but they no longer seem to realize the important educational roles that must be played by the family, the neighborhood, at school, at any workplace such as a company, etc. In particular, since 1945, the Japanese people have wanted their schools to assume much more of the responsibility for every kind of education, replacing even the family. As a result, Japanese schooling at present is perceived by many Japanese people as showing a level of critical dysfunction.

The problems are, interestingly enough, almost all at the upper grades of elementary school and junior high school, whose students are ages 10–15. Non-attendance,

bullying, and delinquency have occurred mostly in upper fifth and sixth grades of elementary school and at junior high schools in Japan. Many become more dissatisfied year after year as these problems continue unsolved. Trust between the public and the teaching profession has been weakened.

However, the Central Council for Education still has not intensively discussed the problems of the Japanese junior high school. As one of the regular members of the Central Council for Education, I have been disappointed with MEXT's administrative policy so far. Though it is important that the 6-3 school system be at least partly changed due to the acceleration of children's development, many, including teachers, remain reluctant to think of a continuous 9-year school experience. They don't see the problems at this school level as critical for society. The reason why junior high school in Japan has not received the attention it needs is that these schools are perceived as still serving as a transitional process from elementary level to secondary level. Few educators or parents, as yet, appreciate the fact that Japanese students at that level are actually at a crossroads in their lives. Many students are struggling with this difficult situation in junior high schools, but their parents and society are not adequately aware of their children's anxiety and agony. I hope we can reform our junior high school, including the fifth and sixth grades of elementary school, as soon as possible to give better education for young adolescents from 10-15.

Finally, though these problems still remain, Japan has implemented a sort of competency-based education since 2011 under the influence from the OECD/PISA, which was referenced in the report of the Central Council for Education in 2008. Most Japanese people, particularly people in the industrial world, welcomed this educational policy, expecting that their students would show both higher academic achievements in basic knowledge and skills as well as better creativity in application of those basic abilities needed for the real world.

Interestingly enough, even though the blueprint of the governmental policy of education looks good, it is possible that it will be ineffective when that is put into a social context. This is a lesson from our historical experience. In the case of Japan, the entrance examination for universities

and colleges has influenced the school system so heavily that the school education has always been changed according to simply the preparation for the entrance examination to those universities and colleges instead according to the healthy growth and development of students. Moreover, because Japan experienced tragedies and disaster from huge earthquakes and tsunamis in the northern part of the mainland in 2011, the people need to think about formal education more deeply and continue to remake the total educational implementation.

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