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Japanese Educational Reform for the Twenty-First Century

The Impact of New Course Studies Towards the Postmodern Era in Japan

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Japanese education became publicized broadly among American educational researchers particularly in 1980s. As Gerald K. LeTendre (1999) has pointed out, it is well known that Japan coincidentally became interested in the political agenda of American educational policies.¹ As the Sputnik shock demonstrated, the topic of education has been used for rationalizing politics and budget allocation. In 1980s and 1990s, a number of publications and broadcast news concerning Japan's education has been distributed to the public as a case of the politicized interest in the United States.

A number of publications have reported that the strict discipline and the consequent pressure to excel in entrance examinations have pressured Japanese children to achieve well above the average scores of school achievement around the world. However, the fact is not well known that a very flexible and progressive curriculum policy began to be administered in Japan starting in April of 2000. Among the global issues of curriculum in Japan, only the descriptions of the history of wars and racial discrimination in social studies textbooks are likely to be discussed internationally. The Japanese have been condemned for avoiding its historical duty to teach its bloody modern history, including the Nanking massacre and the crime of "comfort" women from Korea.

Japan has been interested in American education for longer than a century as a public discourse. The Japanese have used American education for reflecting on and changing Japanese educational policies since 1872.² On the other hand, American public discourse has been concerned with Japanese education for formulating educational policies in the United States. Japan's education was once used as a tool for changing American educational policy without the scrutiny of actual educational practices. America changed in the 1990s after the Japan's economic "miracle" ended in the late 1980s. A number of American educators began to observe Japan's schools without economic motivation. As a result, American researchers' stereotyped views of

Japan's education have been gradually corrected due an increasing number of publications depicting education in Japan. In particular, ethnographic studies of Japan's teachers' classroom teaching has contributed to the changing view of Japan's education. The videotaping of classes helped to correct stereotyped views of education in Japan. LeTendre (1999, p. 43) pointed out: "American teachers interviewed often spoke of the strict discipline of Japanese schools" and "cleaning schools." What American teachers saw was that cleaning schools actually created an enjoyable environment and cooperative atmosphere for Japanese children.

Studies like LeTendre's have contributed to changing stereotyped images of Japan's education that has been prevalent in the United States. However, there is always a critical problem in those behavioral comparative studies of schools. For in-depth curriculum studies, it is indispensable for a researcher to grasp and illuminate the internal state of the individual learner: what she/he thinks and how the world is interpreted within the individual's mind. Some studies do not elucidate the children's curriculum experiences because the language always hinders the in-depth mutual understanding of the quality of children's curriculum experiences. Language difference is one reason why a number of comparative studies between the United States and Japan have focused on the observable, e.g., children's test scores or social behavior such as fashion. LeTendre (1999, p. 4) rightly pointed out: "Because many of the social changes experienced by Japan are common to nations making the transition to a 'post industrial' economy, this area of research offers significant potential for researchers and educators interested in the impact of social change on cultural values and education." It is necessary to supplement this statement. Japan is confronted not only with a postindustrial economy but also with the "postmodern" world in curriculum. A simple economic explanation does not clarify the direction the new generation is heading in the twenty-first century.

Three major concepts (Living Power, Relax, and Education for Mind) informed the curriculum reforms in the 1990s. Those concepts represent a continuum of the educational reform of the 1980s. Emphasizing unique individual development (*Koseika*) and globalization (*Kokusaika*) accented educational reform in the 1980s. That reform was determined to deconstruct more traditional conceptions of curriculum and instruction emphasizing rote learning and factual knowledge.

Postmodern perspectives are also necessary to understand the contemporary shifts in Japanese curriculum policies. The “symbolic exchange” (Baudrillard, 1981) brought about curriculum discourse in Japan.³ The “Back to Basics” way of thinking has been dominant since the new course of studies started in 2011 although the course of studies holds the progressive and liberal values of curriculum. As a result, the progressive curriculum has turned out to be regressive in the new course of study. It is a drastic but inconsistent transition of the curriculum. There is no rationality in this transition. It is to be characterized as a conservative education movement. The prevailing concern over the “lesson study” is a part of this movement since it has been a mere tradition of teachers’ collaboration on job training in Japan.

The New Course of Studies in Japan

At the close of the twentieth century, the Ministry of Education announced the New Course of Studies (NCS) for elementary and secondary schools. It is not “new” anymore since it was extensively changed in the 2011 reform. But the essence of the 2002 reform still exists in the contemporary curriculum. NCS emphasized the phrase *Ikiru Chikara* (Living Power, Passion for Life) as the most important goal of education for the future in Japan. The Central Council of Education consists of the experts appointed by the Ministry of Education and is in charge of steering Japan’s most important educational policies. This Council constructed the main pillars of educational reform for the first decade of the twenty-first century. First is *Ikiru Chikara*.

The Central Council of Education asserted that the most critical issue facing contemporary Japanese children was the crisis of living everyday life. The Council members assumed that demographic and economic changes have influenced the children’s capacity to live. The most shocking fact they faced was the increase in the number of children committing to suicide. The number of children committing to suicide increased in the 1980s for many reasons, among them a case in which a middle-school student—a boy—was bullied. In that case, three classmates forced him to steal money from home and elsewhere. The victimized student was bullied in various ways, like being submerged a river whenever he failed to steal a specified number of times. In another instance, three junior high school girl students jumped out of the top of a tall building because they lost the meaning of life by abusing drugs.

They hated schools and lost the motivation to survive in this world.

While rare, these cases were symbolically used to rationalize the goals of Japanese educational reform. As a matter of fact, older generations knew that the way of life of their children and grandchildren had changed dramatically from their own. Older generations used their common sense to understand that the children’s behavioral changes did not represent merely a “generation gap” but rather a deterioration in the conditions of life. The degradation of daily life damaged the natural development of children’s biological and social existence. The Council took inspiration from this crisis to form the national goals of curriculum in Japan. There is no country in this world advocating “living power” as a national goal of education except Japan. How do we interpret this kind of educational goal? Living a life is a natural instinct for human beings as well as biological beings. This slogan has still remained after the reform of 2012 and is the top goal of national education policy.

What happened to the other two major goals of education? One of these was *Yutori* (Relaxation or Slowing Down). The Council found that the lack of children’s “living power” stemmed from the overloaded national curriculum content based on traditional subject matter. So the Central Council of Education proposed trimming the number of school hours and minimum essentials of curriculum content for all children. *Yutori* means relaxation, reducing the overloaded curriculum and the competition in education. But this slogan was canceled in the course of study reform of 2011. The bashing in the mass media was so intensive and extensive against this goal that the Council had to delete it from the national goals of education in the reform of 2011.

The most prominent point in the slogan of *Yutori* was the prescription of practicing the project method of learning at all grade school levels for two or three school hours a week on the basis of school initiative. At the middle school level, each school could allow students to choose certain subjects for two or three school hours a week. Theoretically, ninth-graders could decide what they wanted to learn for one third of their school hours—up to one-hundred hours of project type learning for a year. Japanese schools were legally granted flexibility in making curriculum on a school-by-school basis.

In the aftermath of the 2002 curriculum reform, the mass media started a campaign against the idea of the freedom of choosing learning activities. Reducing the number of school hours for the traditional subject matters would lead, it was alleged, to the lowering of Japanese children’s school achievements. In 1999, they started asserting distorted facts: e.g., a decrease of children’s home study hours; college students who cannot multiply or divide numbers; and college students who could not recall the years of the rise and fall of the Kamkura government. The controversy over the new national curriculum is hyperbolic rather than factual. There was no solid evidence demonstrating that

reducing the curriculum standard courses led to the lowering of students' school achievement. Even International Educational Achievement test scores did not show the lowering students' school achievements despite the insistence of conservatives that Japanese students' mathematics scores had declined. In this controversy over educational reform, it was possible to observe the character of Japanese national hysteria, intensified by the sensationalism of the mass media. The 2011 curriculum reform was so drastic that many schoolteachers could not follow its radical changes.

Another major goal of education was *Kokoro no Kyoiku* (Education for Mind, Psychological Treatment). The key phrase of *Kokoro no Kyoiku* was added at the last stage of the Council in 1998. Many were sacrificed before the formation of this pillar. One of the crucial incidents was that a middle school teacher was knifed by a student overwhelmed by stress. This murder shocked all of Japan. Controversy over students carrying knives became the sensational topic in education in 1998. The Council concluded that the traditional curriculum had damaged children's normal psychological development. But this pillar was destroyed in the 2011 reform of NCS.

Curriculum Reform for Democratic Citizenship

How can we interpret Japan's curriculum reform? It is not adequate to interpret this reform in terms of traditional frameworks such as discipline-centered curriculum versus child-centered curriculum. We have to take into account the fundamental changes in the economic, social, and cultural environments in Japan.

Japan entered the postindustrial era in the 1980s. Even conservative political leaders had predicted the coming economic crisis. The neoconservatives started fighting not only with the socialists but also with the old conservatives who used to benefit from the socialist pseudo-egalitarian bureaucracy. The farmers and the working class such as the National Railroad Corporation used to enjoy monopolistic benefits from the Japanese socialist economic system. Changing the socialist egalitarian economic system became an imperative for the conservative government for sustaining an economy dominated by corporate industries. Curriculum reform has been accompanied by the destruction of the traditional corporate economic system because Japan has had to face various crises in the postindustrial era.

Postindustrialism is not equal to postmodernism, but the cultural milieu surrounding schools has also changed since the 1980s. Most Japanese were not aware of that they were living in a postmodern era. Educational reform became the most important task for the government in the 1990s. At first, the government began to formulate new educational policies slowly. Their first target was the traditional curriculum, emphasizing "the basics." Even conservative political leaders conceded the lack of the individual ego development in Japanese citizenship education. Even con-

servatives allowed that the lack of the development of ego identity hindered the development of the individual's ability to make judgments when faced with dilemmas or social conflicts.

The cultural problem of the individuals' excessive dependency has been publicized and disclosed by a number of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts in Japan. Phrases such as "Amae" (sweat dependency) or "Moratorium" (holding the decision of the ego identity) are popular, although many have not tried to reconstruct their own subjectivity because they think the problem is not theirs but others. Western philosophers like Hegel and Weber pointed out the underdevelopment of the individual ego and identity in East Asian countries. They assumed that Confucian ethics had permeated into the individuals' mentality, leaving them liable to obey community leaders and even volunteer for slave labor. Thus, there is no democratic process based on the individual ego or identity in Confucian ethics.

For the Japanese, the curriculum reform represents a kind of cultural revolution laced with pain and antagonism from the traditionalists to socialist educators. No matter how hard school teachers teach children the knowledge of social justice or human rights in the classroom, its substantial value cannot be efficiently transmitted or realized due to the pressure of entrance examinations. Students do not have to remember factual knowledge after they attain university diplomas. They assume that the value of knowledge is not in the knowledge itself but in the entrance examinations. Even if they pass the examinations that test factual knowledge for good citizenship, there is no guarantee they will become good citizens. For many Japanese, knowledge is separated from their practical lives. This gap between theory and practice has always existed in the history of the Japanese school curriculum. Education for good citizenship typifies this gap in the Japanese curriculum. The critical problem in the field of curriculum study in Japan is that there are not many educators who take this problem seriously.

Theory and Practice of Good Citizenship Beyond the Knowledge-Based Curriculum

In 2002, the Ministry of Education introduced a new sphere of curriculum called "*Sougouteki Gakushu no Jikan*" (Time for Comprehensive Learning). Japanese schools had already taught the new subject matter, called "*Seikatsuka*" (The Study of Life), for the first and second grades at elementary schools in the mid-1990s, thereby integrating science and social studies. The Ministry of Education introduced the new curriculum, which was similar to *Seikatsuka*, into all other school grades: 3–12. *Sougouteki Gakushu* aims at implementing the project method that had been developed in the United States in the era of the progressive education movement of the 1920s and 1930s. The Council assumed that *Ikiru Chikara* would be attained through the process of "problem solving" in this type of learning. It was also expected to provide programs

for good citizenship through creating a community-based curriculum.

NCS prescribed that *Sougouteki Gakushu no Jikan* should include activities for international understanding, environmental study, IT, welfare and health, and others. These were to be taught in social studies, the sciences, and home economics. But the Ministry of Education found it necessary to clearly set the school hours for those areas of study separate from the hours of traditional subject matter because they assumed that it would be difficult to include such learning activities within traditional subject matters. Among various subjects, social studies kept its central status for educating citizenship. However, many social studies teachers have failed to prepare children for good citizenship.

Because many educators are frustrated with the failure of traditional subject matters, *Sougouteki Gakushu no Jikan* (the project method type learning) was introduced. Students would create their own projects through which they would learn good citizenship. Instead of memorizing factual knowledge, they were required to explore topics relying on their own judgment. Children were encouraged to take responsibility for their own planning and activities. Children's interests and needs were respected because motivation is the most important factor for successful learning. For successful learning, it was essential for the children to listen to their internal voice in their individual minds. Beyond the surface of the factual textbook knowledge, the curriculum asked educators and children to think critically about the ethics they can practice in their everyday lives. A number of outstanding practices and cases developing those activities were reported before Japanese schools officially started the integrated curriculum. It is important to know how the educators developed their own theories and practices.

A Typical Model of Integrated Curriculum in the 1980s

Many of the practices of curriculum integration have been attempted at all levels of school. For instance, Ogawa Elementary School (*Aichi-Ken*) organized a program of creating friendships with the elderly, the handicapped, between Koreans and Japanese, with people from other countries, with the staff of international organizations, and with people in the community. Most of their practices have shown good results in terms of the students' scholastic achievement, passion, and self-discipline in their everyday lives. However, we need a clear-cut analytical framework for interpreting those practices and results if they are to influence the direction and future of educational reforms. Thus, I would assume that an explanation is necessary to identify the reason why curriculum integration is mandatory in Japan.⁴ Here, I phrased the transition of Japan's school curriculum from modernism to postmodernism. The first pillar of the modern Japanese curriculum consists in its orientation of self-discipline, punctuality,

regularity, autonomy, structural consistency, standardized forms, individuality, and utilitarian value orientation. The school itself is a microcosm of the virtual reality of modern society.

Ogawa Elementary School is well known as a progressive school in Japan. There is a large amount of freedom in managing school life. The children have the freedom to lead their own meetings in the morning, freedom in planning their own lessons, freedom to control their own time, and the freedom of "open time." The freedom to make one's own decisions requires self-responsibility. The freedom of time-management means that the children are obliged to obey their own time-rules once they decide. The freedom of choice of what they explore means that they have to have responsibility to pursue their own goals. Therefore, the freedom of decision making means taking responsibility for one's own judgment. The freedom leads to self-discipline. Self-regulation comes from one's internal voice. Nobody can reach the individual self except through subjectivity. This internalized voice voluntarily springs from the clue of the ego identity.

Even in school baseball games, students are expected to run and take regulated forms in their team formation. As physical education demonstrates, power comes from the bottom up rather than top down. As Foucault describes, the modernism of education is based not on power relations of the human body but on the psychological structuring of human relationships. The internalization of authority made it possible to regulate one's own self. External physical punishment is not necessary for society to control individuals. Individuals are motivated psychologically to punish themselves.

Japan's modernization of curriculum implies the liberation of the individual from the outer control of the human body and soul. If the freedom of the individual's spirit is the ultimate goal of modernism, then the curriculum reform movement aims at the consistent spontaneity of self-control. Modernization demonstrates an optimistic faith in the future. The future is the "promised land" for those who have developed a work ethic in their self-disciplined day-to-day labor. They can enjoy their lives as long as they work hard to increase production. As far as they follow standardized procedures, they are satisfied with the realization of their utilitarian values.

Japan's curriculum reform movement has a postmodernist value in its practice. Traits of postmodernism are typically characterized as its reciprocity, mutuality, dialogue, flexibility, a situation dependency, virtual reality, style, marginality, chaos, and exchanging value orientation. Most curriculum reforms are defined in terms of those traits.

For instance, the "touching" (*Fureai*) program in various schools means that children have contact with the elderly, with city people, and with foreigners. Children demonstrate curiosity and interest in someone different and unfamiliar to them. Difference inspires creative motivation. The discrepancy between the day-to-day life and the

unfamiliar produces the inspiration to change. Deviation from the taken-for-granted world provides the opportunity to question and to the wonder about otherness. Children are encouraged be adventurous toward the “real world,” which is intangible in their everyday lives in school.

The Symbolic Exchange of Curriculum Discourse in 2011

Modernism and postmodernism are mixed in the teachers' everyday lives and their curriculum practices. It is conceivable that the Japan's schools are transitioning from a modern curriculum towards a postmodern one. There is no distinctive boundary in this transition. It is chaotic but creative. It is not the activity of creating order but of deconstructing the traditional structures of the curriculum.

The pendulum of public curriculum discourse, however, has swung the opposite direction since the new curriculum was issued in 2011. Much of the mass media hysterically attacked the new curriculum due to Japanese students' mediocrity in the achievement scores of international testing, in particular, the PISA test. There is no hard evidence that this so-called mediocrity was caused by the new curriculum. The mass media have been so intensive and extensive in its public discourse that its views have prevailed, true or not.

The decade of curriculum reform after 2002 saw the return of the traditional curriculum framework, emphasizing basic skills. The 2011 curriculum increased time to teach the basic skills, extending the annual hours from approximately 945 to 980 in the upper grades of elementary schools. Progressives lost political support from the

public in Japan. The entire ethos of curriculum discourse has moved toward “Back to Basics.” It has been predominantly occupying the masses' image of curriculum since the new curriculum was embodied. There is no progress in curriculum thought since this idea has taken control in the curriculum field.

Theories ought to be drivers for exploring the new world. New theories of curriculum will be generated from this chaotic but creative atmosphere. In the past, critical theories and phenomenological curriculum theories were born in such uncertainty. Now is the time to start thinking of the masses and their power and the pseudoconsciousness of curriculum. There is no rationality in the contemporary Japanese curriculum discourse. Reflecting on themselves and their situation, Japanese curriculum researchers must generate their own curriculum theories and develop the power to transform this uncertainty.

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