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System and reform of education in Japan

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Nariakira Yoshida and Yuichi Miyamoto

System and Reform of Education in Japan

Abstracts

EN

In this article, we briefly introduce the political and academic situation of education in Japan. Along with the ongoing centralisation, the government, school, teachers, and scholars tackle with diverse challenges, including curriculum reform, overwork of teachers, and so on. The state of the curriculum has been questioned as society casted doubt and distrust upon the state of science after the explosion of nuclear power plant in Fukushima. Challenges in academic teaching research have also been raised in response to the call for empirical methodological debates.

DE

In diesem Artikel stellen wir kurz die politische und akademische Situation des Bildungswesens in Japan vor. Zusammen mit der fortschreitenden Zentralisierung sehen sich Regierung, Schule, Lehrer:innen und Wissenschaftler:innen mit verschiedenen Herausforderungen konfrontiert, darunter die Reform des Lehrplans und die Überlastung der Lehrer:innen. Der Status des Lehrplans wird in Frage gestellt, da die Gesellschaft nach der Explosion des Kernkraftwerks in Fukushima Zweifel und Misstrauen gegenüber dem Stand der Wissenschaft hegt. Als Reaktion auf die Forderung nach einer empirischen Methodendiskussion werden auch Herausforderungen in der akademischen Unterrichtsforschung angesprochen.

PT

Fazemos uma breve apresentação da situação política e acadêmica da educação no Japão. Juntamente com a centralização em curso, o governo, a escola, os professores e os acadêmicos enfrentam diversos desafios, incluindo a reforma curricular, o excesso de trabalho dos professores, etc. O estado do currículo é questionado pelo facto de a sociedade ter lançado dúvidas e desconfiança em relação ao estado da ciência após a explosão da unidade de energia nuclear em Fukushima. Os desafios da investigação acadêmica

sobre o ensino também são levantados em resposta ao apelo a debates metodológicos empíricos.

JA

本稿では日本の教育の政治的・学術的状况について紹介する。特に近年進行している中央集権化を概観したうえで、政府、教師、学校が直面している諸課題について、カリキュラム改革、教師の過重労働、東日本大震災以後の科学教育の在り方に焦点を当てて紹介する。授業に関する研究については、研究方法論の構築という点から課題を示す。

1 Centralisation in a decentralised educational system

Although school education and childcare are decentralised to prefectural and municipal administration, centralised chains of command structure in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) actually possess immense commanding power by announcing the official guideline for Course of Study and preschool education respectively.

The curriculum in Japanese public schools consists of subjects (Japanese, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, English, and several other Art subjects) and Special Activities. Every school must follow the Course of Study as the minimum standard, although a free area where each school can develop a curriculum is also guaranteed to reflect decentralisation.

Collegiate teacher training in Japan is not exclusively available for the teacher training course in the faculty of education, but is open to other students from other faculties. The teacher training course has still had been to a far lesser extent under governmental control as each university/college can determine the contents and competencies of being a teacher. However, since the MEXT announced the Core Curriculum for Teacher Education in 2016, two-thirds of the curricula in mandatory courses for teacher training course became prescribed, which could be regarded as the promotion of centralisation.

Through the entire process from preschool education to higher education, school education has become more and more centralised. This shift caused controversies in the discussions of educational research, where one may criticise, on the one hand, the disappearance of school autonomy for curriculum development, while others claim, on the other hand, the benefits that schools could enjoy by maintaining sustainable human, material, and other qualitative resources.

2 Challenges in teaching practice

The courses of study were renewed in 2017 and 2018, showing a shift from a content-based to a competency-based curriculum. Under such a globally scaled curriculum reform, Japanese students are also expected to acquire and develop competencies through ‘active learning’ by making full use of information technology (IT), so that they can live their lives in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) society. Along with aiding the development of competent individuals, an important challenge for schools is promoting care and welfare for children who suffer from poverty, bullying, and abuse. This has resulted in an increasing emphasis on moral education, i.e. the introduction of the Morality Period as a special subject in school education in 2018. A Minister for Loneliness was settled in February 2022, which implies the Japanese government is seriously tackling the issues around social welfare standing at risk for the younger generation. Furthermore, as reported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), problematic situations with respect to the overwork of teachers are a central theme that is emphatically discussed (OECD 2019), and public discussion calls for a reform of work-life balance for school teachers. Extra-curricular activities, especially clubs and fraternities in secondary school, have been a great burden for teachers for a very long time because teachers have to take care of everything, from coaching and giving technical and mental advice to students to helping them with financial management for participating in competitions. As such, local school administrations have undertaken solution-oriented processes to manage the challenges around the curriculum, students, and teachers.

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, new educational concepts like competency and information and communication technology (ICT) require the reorganisation of teacher training, recruitment, and in-service training. Normally, students who have taken the training course at university have to take the teacher recruitment exam at the prefectural or municipal level. Those who pass the examination must take an initial teacher training programme for one year by conducting lessons and managing a classroom. For in-service training, official courses held either at school, or in the training centre of the board of education are prepared for all teachers. Lesson Study, which will be discussed later, is positioned in this series of in-service trainings. The number of Graduate Schools of Teacher Education is also increasing, where well-experienced veterans and researchers collaboratively work to train teachers with a master’s degree, which ensures a higher qualification of teachers.

Another challenge lies in rethinking ‘science’ as the base of the curriculum and school education. The Great East Japan Earthquake and the consequent explosion at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station had an extraordinary

influence on Japanese scholars. The 'scientifically totally assured safety' of Nuclear Power Stations has been proven false. To teach something based on science, especially what textbooks with scientific proof claim as safe, is not assured anymore. Of course, the relativistic approach that maintains 'everything is a myth and false' is not a good solution because it seems equivalent to indoctrinating something as the total truth. Here, critical thinking becomes one of the most important themes to be inquired in pedagogy (Koyasu & Shiozaki 2013).

3 Challenges on teaching research

Greater emphasis on the importance of accumulating practically oriented research outcomes is prevailing as represented by Lesson Study. This orientation can be seen in a trend where more than 80 academic associations of educational research programs in Japan formed a platform for implementing practical research to acquire a massive scale of funding resource, and there are trials to develop transnational archives for lesson records (Yoshida 2019). There has been a traditional conflict between qualitative and quantitative research in Japanese educational research. A combination of the two methodologies has also been suggested. However, this conflict appeared to be an unproductive discussion, as researchers felt that the current political agenda had to be examined. Thus, current educational research trends in Japan pursue research using both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide more productive notions for teaching practices in school.

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