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Issues of Transformation in the Ideas of Curriculum Reform, Curriculum Standards and Textbooks —A Japanese Perspective

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In recent times, the Japanese government has faced difficulties in reforming school and social education despite the amendment of the Fundamental Law of Education 2006. With the revision of the main laws of education, the government has been transforming the public education system in terms of "educational accountability" by establishing a national test related to national curriculum standards. However, in Japan, there has been much less criticism of standard-oriented education than there has been in the U.S. or Europe.

Interestingly enough, the educational problems in public schools are almost all found at the upper grades of elementary school and all grades of junior high school with young adolescent students aged 10-15. In the past two decades, Japan has been in the midst of a so-called "Age of the 3rd Educational Reform." We have been coping with school refusal, bullying, and delinquency, along with lower than expected student scores on OECD/PISA 2003 and 2006, which mostly occur among students of the age range mentioned above.

Therefore, in 2008, the government revised the National Course of Study, the national curriculum standards, in order to raise thinking abilities effectively as the core of the "Zest for Living" campaign. Under the new laws concerning public education, the revised curriculum standards stressed compulsory education, moral education, language activities, mathematics and science education, traditional culture education, experiential activities, and foreign language activities in the elementary curriculum.

In addition, mastering basic knowledge and skills, increasing the number of hours of instruction per week, enhancing learning motivation, and establishing learning habits are all emphasized. All of these should help reach the final objective of improving thinking abilities. However, the Central Council for Education has not discussed our middle level education in any thorough way, though junior high school students are standing at the crossroads of their lives and suffer considerable stress.

Keywords: curriculum standards, educational accountability, Zest for Living

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課程改革理念、課程標準與教科書的轉化議題──日本觀點

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2006 年日本正式實施新教育基本法，但最近在進行學校教育與社會教育改革時仍面臨許多困難。根據修正後的教育法，政府根據國家課程標準舉行國家考試，以「教育績效責任」之名試圖改變公立學校教育系統。然而，與歐美相較，日本對於標準取向教育之批評明顯少許多。

公立學校的教育問題多發生在國小高年級與國中階段，介於 10-15 歲的青春期學生。過去的 20 年間，日本處在所謂的「第三代教育改革時代」，忙於處理大部分發生在 10 至 15 歲學生的拒絕上學、校園霸凌、少年犯罪以及 OECD/PISA 2003 及 2006 測驗成績不如預期表現。

因此，2008 年政府修訂了國家教程、國家課程標準，以有效提升「生活熱忱」的思考能力。新教育法關注公共教育，所以，課程標準在小學課程中強調義務教育、道德教育、語言活動、數學教育、科學教育、傳統文化教育、體驗活動以及外語活動。

除此之外，精熟基本而重要的知識和技能、增加每周教學時數、提高學習動機以及建立學習習慣都是重點項目，這些有利於達到提升思考能力之目標。但國中學生處於人生的交叉路口且面臨相當大的壓力，中央教育委員會並沒有對國中教育有更深入、透徹的探討。

關鍵詞：課程標準、教育績效、生活熱忱

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1. The Current State of Japanese Public Schools as a Background for Transformation

Some Japanese politicians state that the recent educational reform marks the end of the era of "post war education" and the beginning of a new education system. In contrast, people working in the educational field find no difference between the two. The Majority of the Japanese population has had a very positive attitude toward the 6-3 system until recently, because over the years, the junior high school in Japan has become a symbol of the democratization of educational access, and the equality of educational opportunity.

However, since 1971, particularly after 1984, the 6-3-3 pattern of school grade organization has been the subject of increasing discussion among educators and politicians because of two factors: the growing awareness of the actual developmental characteristics of Japanese adolescents, and the decentralization of the 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 pattern of school grade organization. As a result, some local governments have changed their 6-3 pattern of grade organization to a 4-3-2 system or a 5-4 system or a 3-4-2 system, though this is largely as an experiment. Thus far, such experiments have been positively assessed. Changing demographics (a decreasing number of school students) and declining school budgets have, additionally, pressed local governments to consolidate a larger number of smaller schools into fewer but larger schools (MEXT, 2006). Under these circumstances, the national curriculum was revised after 2005.

With reference to the academic abilities of young adolescents, until 2000 Japan was not particularly concerned about international test scores of IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) or OECD/PISA (OECD Programme for International Student Assessment), because these scores were good and the student ranks were satisfactory. However, when the 2003 PISA scores of Japanese students aged 15 were found to be

worse than expected, it was deemed necessary to investigate the reasons for this level of performance (See Figure 1).

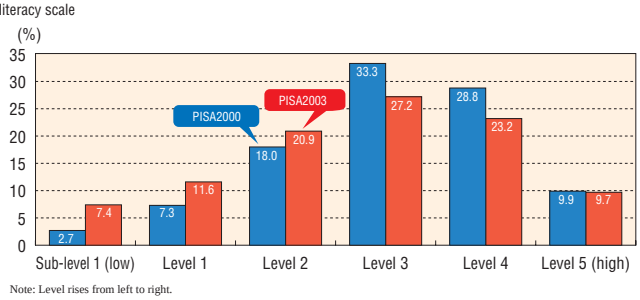
In PISA 2000, Japan was first in mathematical literacy, eighth in reading literacy, and second in scientific literacy, but in PISA 2003, Japan had fallen to sixth in mathematical literacy, fourteenth in reading literacy, second in scientific literacy, and fourth in problem solving, across 40 countries and regions. Out of these positions in the rankings the Japanese were most concerned about the reading literacy rank, which went down from eighth to fourteenth, with a score almost equal to the OECD average. The trend with regard to Japan's scores in PISA 2006 was almost the same as that seen in PISA 2003.

(1) International comparison of the average scores (across 40 countries and regions)

Mathematical literacy (top in PISA 2000)	First group: Hong Kong, Finland, Korea, the Netherlands, Liechtenstein, and Japan (6th)
Reading literacy (8th in PISA 2000)	Almost equal to the OECD average (14th)
Scientific literacy (2nd in PISA 2000)	First group: Finland, Japan (2nd), Hong Kong and Korea
Problem solving (newly added category)	First group: Korea, Hong Kong, Finland and Japan (4th)

Note: The subject children are those of 15 years of age. The first or second group represents the group of countries whose average scores have no statistically significant difference from the Japanese scores.

(2) Comparison of percentage of students performing at each of the achievement-based levels on the reading literacy scale



Note: Level rises from left to right.

Figure 1. Academic Ability of 15-year-olds According to OECD Programme for International Student Assessment(PISA)(2003)

Source: MEXT (2007: 14).

Note: According to the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) undertaken in 2003 (41 countries and regions), Japan's 15-year olds (first year upper secondary school students) were in the top class internationally. The reading literacy of the Japanese students, however, is dropping in rank and is not considered the world's top class.

In IEA/TIMSS (IEA's Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) 2003, Japan's mathematics ranked fifth in a survey of lower secondary schools across 46 countries and regions. It had ranked fifth among 38 countries and regions in 1999, third among 41 in 1995, first among 20 in 1981, and second among 12 in 1964. Japan's science rank for lower secondary schools was sixth across 46 countries and regions in 2003, compared with fourth out of 38 in 1999, third out of 41 in 1995, second out of 26 in 1983, and first out of 18 in 1970. These trends in Japan's ranks both in mathematics and in science forced a review of the reform of school education in the last decade.

At the same time, in the area Japanese would label as "student guidance," there have been additional problematic trends. The total number of cases of student acts of violence in schools was 30,022 in 2004, with 23,110 in lower secondary school, almost the same as the average of the past five years. In the area of bullying, the situation has been better, but the total number of cases was 21,671 in 2004, with 13,915 in lower secondary school, almost the same as the average of the past three years. Moreover, the total number of cases of school refusal (where students refuse to attend schools) was 123,358, with 100,040 in lower secondary school, almost the same as the average of the past three years (MEXT, 2007) (See Figures 2 & 3).

All of these data show Japanese school education has manifested a trend toward the worse, and there has no improvement, in particular, in lower secondary education for young adolescents. Therefore, in 2007, a new educational system was established in terms of the new Fundamental Law of Education and other major laws pertaining to education were altered, and the national curriculum standards were revised in 2008 to be implemented from 2011.

Therefore, Japan is now in the middle of a so-called "age of educational reform." Since 2000, the beginning of the 21st century, Japan has moved to a strongly decentralized process in public educational institutions and the implementation of transformation. Over the last 10 years, the Japanese government has made a new set of important educational laws, mainly based on the ideas of "neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism," including the new Fundamental Law of Education, alongside decentralizing of the administrative system of public edu-

cation, with particular attention to compulsory education. Mr. Junichiro Koizumi, during his term as prime minister, announced "Structural Reform of Compulsory Education," which had four national strategies: ① to clarify educational goals and to verify the result to guarantee quality, ② to establish trust in teachers, ③ to enhance the self-control power or autonomy of the local authority and each school, ④ to provide schools with all the necessary equipment.

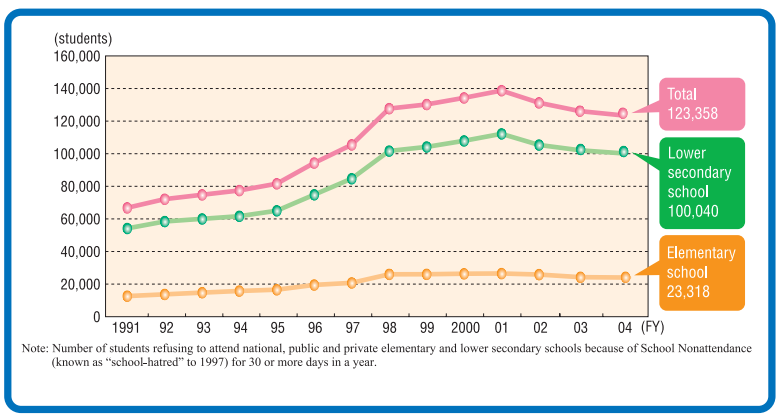


Figure 2. Trends in Number of Students Who Refuse to Attend Schools
Source: MEXT (2007: 19).

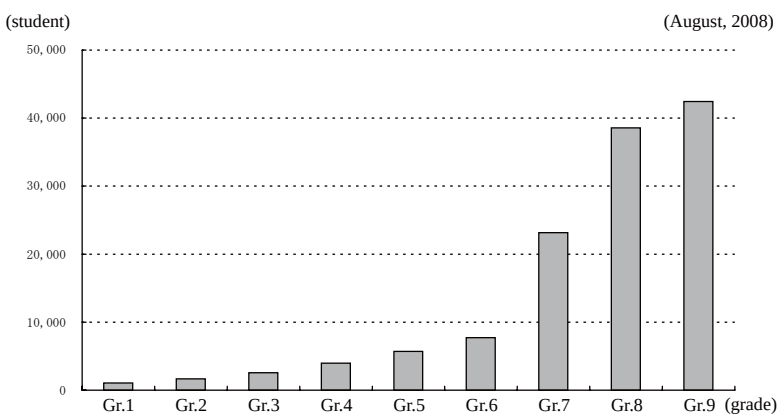


Figure 3. The Number of School Refusal Students in Each Grade from Elementary School to Junior High School (2007.4–2008.3)
Source: MEXT (2008: 3).

These strategies required that the central government set educational goals and provide good external conditions, as input, and also should investigate and evaluate educational results as an outcome, while the local authority and each school have their own powers and responsibilities as a process. This sort of policy was favored in big OECD countries like the U.S., the U.K. and Germany. Against the background of this transformation, some Japanese researchers in education, influenced by Dr. Michael Apple, have continued to criticize public education in terms of the central government's strong control, decreasing governmental subsidies, and the increasing anxiousness of Japanese parents (Apple, 2000). The year 2007, when the new Fundamental Law of Education came into being, might have been the beginning year of a new era in the educational history of Japan (MEXT, 2006).

Contemporary Japanese government debate on the education currently takes into account the upper grades (5th and 6th) of elementary school and the three grades (7th through 9th) of junior high school. As for middle level education, with deregulation in every administrative field, local governments have been widely able to change the school articulation from 6-3 to 4-3-2, 5-4, or 4-2-3 on their own initiative. Around a decade several conservative politicians opined that six years in elementary school might be too long and a 5-4 school system would be better for elementary students. Therefore, at present, Japanese junior high schools for students aged 12-15 are being connected more closely with elementary school and teachers are being given the flexibility to develop curricula different from those of other schools (Abiko, 2006).

Since 2007 the Japanese government has begun new national tests for 6th graders of elementary school and 9th graders of junior high school. The main aim of these national tests is to showcase the effect of Japanese compulsory education to the parents as a sort of measure of accountability. However, the scores also show growth and development of the Japanese young adolescent in academic fields. In these students' results of the last year's national tests, it is possible to observe a strong correlation between scores of basic knowledge and skills and scores of thinking ability. This means that it is necessary to make an effort to improve both these abilities of young adolescents.

The new Democratic government, which came into power last summer, has so far not used an educational policy clearly different from that of the Liberal Democratic Party.

The education community is still looking forward to seeing their principles of educational administration, which is oriented toward decentralization.

2. Transformation of the Public School System

In Japan, as mentioned previously, there has been a so-called age of educational reform for more than 10 years, which is now taking on the dimensions of a third great national educational reform. The first reform was in 1872, when Japan got a new modern school system; the second reform was in 1945, when Japan introduced the American educational system; the third reform has been taking place over the past 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 closely linked with a period of great post-war economic development, and now 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, though it might also be the fruit of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism. Some conservative politicians, however, who might be called nationalists, do not want Japan to open up to the global world, and would prefer that the country be more nationalistic and isolated, as in the past.

Reform of Public School Administrative System

The educational reforms now underway, mainly the reform of public elementary and secondary schools, have two themes closely related to attempts to move beyond the nationalistic voices. The most significant is the recommendations and proposals made by central governmental councils like the Central Council for Education, the Council of Administrative Reform and the Council of the Promotion of Decentralization. Out of these recommendations for administra-

tive reform, the movement toward decentralization has become an important part of the overall policy agenda for Japanese society.

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

In this context of decentralization, after the Central Council for Education's 2005 report titled "Redesigning Compulsory Education for a New Era," some local governments were given permission to reorganize their public school system from a 6-3 pattern of grade organization to a 4-3-2 pattern, autonomously making decisions in this regard. The number of such experimenta1 schools recently reached 162, and the number of pilot schools by the local government was 67 in 2007. At this moment, the total number of non- 6-3 pattern schools is nearly 300 and it appears to be continuously increasing. Japanese junior high schools have thus been changing gradually.

In late 2006, the new Fundamental Law of Education came into effect and after half a year, in June 2007, three other major laws concerned with education were amended. These laws suggest that educators should consider all the nine years (grades 1-9) of compulsory education as a unit, rather than isolating the six elementary and three lower secondary (junior high school) years of public schools. In particular, the new School Education Law showed 10 goals of the Japanese compulsory education in the article 21 for the first time, not those of the six-year elementary school and the three-year lower secondary school respectively.

The traditional Japanese 6-3 school system is now open to experimentation, and the configuration of school systems is changing, in response to local government policy preferences and different perceptions of children's development. It is interesting that the U.S. middle school with its 5-3-4 pattern of grade organization has been discussed for five years or more (George, 2005). One of the

Japanese researchers think Japan can learn from this American trend (Okamura, 2003).

The Revision of the Curriculum Standard

At this moment, Japan is on the way to implementing the newest national curriculum standards that are to come into effect in 2011. There are several issues at the center of the debate surrounding these new standards. In the last three years, the National Course of Study has required revision, and in March, 2008, the newest national course of study came into being, as the Central Council for Education had recommended that seven aspects be worked on and improved in the new national curriculum standards.

① Following the new main laws like the Fundamental Law of Education, the School Education Law, the Teacher's Certificate Law, and the Law of the Local Educational Administration that were amended in 2006 and in 2007.

The national curriculum had to be revised within the new framework of the major educational administrative laws. Strangely enough, the revised national curriculum, however, does not have a whole 9-year compulsory curriculum despite new 10 goals of 9-year compulsory education in the article 21 of the new School Education Law.

② Sharing the Ideal of Enriching Education to Create "Zest for Living": Focusing on "Zest for Living in Real and Actual Life"

This recommendation originates from reflection on the effectiveness of the present national curriculum. The ideal is relevant, but the understanding of the ideal has not been sufficient among persons providing education, such as parents, teachers and educational administrators and thus must be improved.

③ 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 Japanese PISA scores in 2006 and Finland's revision of national curriculum standards in 2004. Knowledge and skills are different from thinking

abilities, and, as such, the methods for teaching them must be different from the method used to teach thinking abilities.

④ Nurturing Thinking, Judging and Presenting Abilities: Introducing the "Application of Knowledge and Skills' Activities" as a Sort of "Preparatory Experience" for Inquiry Activities in "Integrated Studies"

This is the ultimate goal to be reached. In order to improve this aspect of education, it is necessary to attempt to connect the knowledge and skills in subjects with inquiry activities in integrated studies through activities requiring application of such knowledge and skills.

⑤ 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 was previously the major source of controversy, because the government had insisted that there is no correlation between academic achievement and hours spent on academic subjects. However, most Japanese people criticized the decrease in the number of academic subject hours per week and instead demanded an increase. In addition, some of the members of the Central Council for Education insisted that more hours might well be needed to encourage students to think more. Finally, the government expressed agreement with this opinion, and this point was listed as requiring improvement.

⑥ Enhancing Learning Motives and Establishing Learning Habits: Placing Stress on Learning Habits through Homework

In particular, there is a concern that students' motivation to study mathematics and science is very weak. Despite weak motivation and unfavorable economic backgrounds, it is very important for all students to acquire good learning habits in childhood (Shimizu, 2005).

⑦ Intensifying Moral Education and Physical Education: Emphasizing Moral Education Connected with Subject Learning, and Increasing the Number of Periods for Physical Education

Most Japanese people complain of students misbehaving and 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. The number of hours for physical education is to be increased in each grade.

From among these seven main points of curriculum revision, ③ ④ ⑤ and ⑥ are very important for discussion. With regard to ③, mastering basic knowledge and skills and improving thinking abilities are generally considered contradictory, but in Japan it is generally believed that the two are to be complementary. Both have to emphasized, for the former is a very important means for improving the quality of the latter. With regard to ④, "thinking abilities" require thinking activities that apply basic knowledge and skills to various problem solving situations, therefore, we shall introduce "activities for application of basic knowledge and skills" into school instructions even without formal approval from the government.

The point ⑤ was the most controversial one because the previous government has formally insisted that the number of instruction periods has no correlation to high score of academic achievement. The government refused to accept the increase in the number of instruction periods until the final report of the Central Council for Education in 2008. However, they had to accept this, because it was deemed that children need more time to think. Some practitioners and researchers criticize the increase of the number of periods, saying that children must be tired because of heavy workloads. The teachers therefore have to be careful and thoughtful when implementing this at school.

⑥ is another controversial point. Some nationalistic politicians of the Liberal Democratic Party forced the government to emphasize patriotic and nationalistic culture in moral education. The government emphasized moral education more than before in every school subject of the national curriculum. This is a critical point of curriculum revision in 2008, for many are anxious about the "neutrality of educational policy."

Main Curriculum Characteristics of Public Schools from 2011

As mentioned above, the new national curriculum mainly aims at improving the thinking abilities of students in real and actual life. The goal is that the curricu-

lum of each public school should have the following main 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 intelligence activities, communication activities and moral behavior.

② Intensifying Science and Mathematics Education: Motivating the Student's Inquiry Activities with Interesting Daily Experiences among Students

Since the Meiji era, Japanese people have considered mathematics and science to be the most important subjects for promoting modernization in every field. This characteristic was included because recently, there has been a fear that young Japanese students do not like these subjects as they seem to have no connection with their daily experience.

In addition, the school hours of mathematics and science are increased about 30% to be used effectively because there have had enough time for students to think deeply and creatively through learning back and forth between experiences and theories. Academic scholars welcome this revision.

③ Promoting Japanese Traditional Culture Education across the Curriculum: Increasing the Proportion of Japanese Traditional Culture in Music, Literature, Industrial Arts, Classical Martial Arts, etc.

Conservative people and politicians in Japan continue to actively make Japanese public education more nationalistic. They want to stress Japanese traditional and classical culture in education. Their opinions have been reflected within the limits of the New Fundamental Law to respect Japanese 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 involvement of members of parents as well

as the community and industry members in the teaching during the "Period for Moral Education" as they must all 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 for experiential activities in natural and social circumstances. In every area of school learning it is important to ensure that 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 one for English), and most elementary schools until now have provided a foreign language program during the "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.

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 now it is imperative that they 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 UN took up this idea and began a decade-long program for it starting in 2005. The 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 a great concern among the Japanese people

due to the nation's limited natural resources. Invention by students who have mastery in three subjects, fine arts, science, technology and home economics is very much anticipated by Japanese industries.

(d) Career Education: Industry Expects Children's Positive Awareness of Career Implications

This is also expected 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. Japanese society wants 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 has recently become an important topic in recent Japan. Japanese parents and food companies are deeply interested in children's food and their eating habits. It is necessary to educate our children for better awareness of food in their lives.

(f) Safety Education: Safety of Children's Life Inside and Outside of School

This is one of the most important topics at present. Although children's safety remains primarily their parents' concern, the Japanese people do want public school teachers to take some responsibility for it, even outside school.

(g) Deep Understanding of AIDS: HIV Prevention among Japanese Youth

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

From among these seven revised points of the new national curriculum standard, I would like to discuss ① ② ④ and ⑥. With reference to ①, there has been an apprehension that Japanese children in recent times have not been good at communicating with each other, and their facility declines year by year; there-

fore, it is necessary to encourage them to engage in more language activities, like reading, writing, and presenting, than before. Language activities are necessary to cultivate intellects, communication, and moral behaviors, as Japanese children are usually raised in very small families under rather isolated conditions.

Point ② is considered crucial by the Japanese academic researchers and for the Japanese industrial field. Confronted with a global economics of an information society, the academic and industrial sectors feel strongly that Japan needs human resources capable of thinking more creatively and critically. However, according to OECD/PISA 2003, Japanese children have had very little motivation to learn, compared to children in other OECD countries.

With reference to ④, Japanese conservative politicians are always eager to intensify moral education at school and to interfere in the national educational policies. Therefore, the new national curriculum is obliged to stress moral education across the whole curriculum. Some critics say this is politically influenced and violate "the neutrality of education."

Point ⑥ was controversial because the government stressed promotion of international understanding rather than foreign language abilities. Most Japanese people wanted to introduce foreign language programs into elementary schools. However, interestingly enough, most scientific researchers insisted that it is much more important for elementary children to learn the Japanese language thoroughly. They were very confident that it would be enough to learn foreign languages after lower secondary grades. As a result, the 5th grade was the beginning grade for the learning of foreign languages in elementary schools.

The Revision of Authorized Textbooks

After every revision of the national curriculum standard, the government must revise textbooks in order to secure neutrality in education. In Japan the government still authorizes textbooks of most school subjects in compulsory schools as well as in non-compulsory schools like high schools.

The Textbook Authorization and Research Council reported on "Improvement of Textbooks" on December 25, 2008. The report discussed "Basic

principles of Textbook Improvement," including the revision of the authorization standard and the authorization procedure for textbooks. The council recommendations are as follows:

① Textbook improvement based on the aims and goals of the new Fundamental Law of Education:

Under the new Fundamental Law of Education, the new School Education Law focuses the goals of 9-year compulsory education for the first time, instead of those of elementary schools and lower secondary schools. It might be a major change because 6-3 school system would be an alternative one. Further, the new Fundamental Law of Education discusses more specific goals than before. The textbooks, however, are not made for 9-year compulsory education, but made for 6-year elementary education and 3-year lower secondary education, because most Japanese schools have the 6-3 articulation system.

② Striking enrichment of both quality and quantity of textbooks to be effective for mastery, application and inquiry of knowledge and skills:

At present the content of textbooks is pretty high in quality but insufficient in quantity; new textbooks are expected to be higher in quality and greater in quantity(25% more in pages) as they might be available for self-study at home or outside schools. The aim is to stress self-study habits from childhood, based on research and ideas of Pierre Bourdieu.

③ Fair, neutral and balanced descriptions of textbooks to produce multifaceted and diverse considerations:

Some Japanese politicians are extremely nationalistic and patriotic and force the government to authorize more nationalistic textbooks, justifying this by saying that most countries do so. However, thus far, the MEXT has worked hard to keep the content of textbooks as politically neutral as possible, though these efforts are not quite enough. There have been no ultra-nationalistic or socialistic textbooks in any subjects until now. This effort must be continued.

④ To secure the precise descriptions in authorized textbooks:

Most textbook publishers have not been very concerned with including new research data and theories, as they prefer tradition and orthodoxy. Moreover, many publishers have been reluctant to proofread their textbooks because

of the increases in cost and time of production that this would entail. Publishers need to create effective systems to proofread their textbooks.

⑤ Facilitation of considerations and innovations in the textbook edition to help the students learn enthusiastically:

Currently, textbooks in most subjects are not appropriate for self-study, for students are encouraged to spend their times on non-academic activities like sports, arts, and other outdoor activities. In fact, Japanese children have had less and less time devoted to experiential learning activities every year, and the medical community is concerned that they have more time to playing video games or indoor games. New textbooks should be thicker and more informative so that students can study by themselves at home and elsewhere. Self-study would be stressed more with those textbooks than it is now.

⑥ Improvement in reliability of the textbook authorization procedure:

The authorization procedure for textbooks in Japan has been made more transparent than ever before. The names of the Textbook Authorization and Research Council members must be announced after authorization, and the members can select and discuss some important items intensively if necessary.

Despite Dr. M. Apple's criticism on the relation between teachers and textbooks in the U.S. (Apple, 1988), in Japan the government wants to retain the authorization procedure for textbooks. However, it is essential to think about what kind of textbooks are the best for our children's self-study and independent learning out of school.

3. Discussions on Significant Issues

From among the curriculum issues mentioned above, I would like to discuss some main issues and present my proposals for the future.

(1) Establishing the national assessment system: Since 2007, the government has assessed the results of the public school education and the effect of the national curriculum standards as "educational accountability." In major OECD countries like the U.S., the U.K., and Germany, the national tests have been strongly criticized because they ensure that school instructions are obliged

to be test-oriented or standard-centered. Most neo-liberalists and industrial people wanted public schools to compete with each other to raise the quality of their educational activities when they introduced this assessment system. However, many educationists and practitioners were reluctant to have this system in public school education in spite of recognizing the necessity of some means for the educational accountability.

There has been no national standard-centered education in Japan so far, because the Japanese national assessment has not presented any strict level to be cleared or be attained. This is good in comparison with the U.S. national assessment system, although Japanese teachers must devote themselves to their educational activities all the time. The problem is how to ensure that Japanese parents can trust their public school teachers in this assessment system, which is apt to force the school instruction to be narrow and poor in quality.

(2) 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 considerable alteration of the former standards. The new standards reduced both the total number of annual school hours and the content required to be learned and tested in each subject. With this reduction in 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.

However, after Japan found that the Japanese students' test scores in OECD/PISA 2003 were not as good as those of Finland and went downwards slightly, most Japanese people worried about children's school work. Therefore, in 2003, when the national standards were partly revised, the number of school hours 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. 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 school

hours per week was increased from 28 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. However, some critics say the increasing hours must be used for memorization and test preparation because of no improvement of the entrance examination of colleges and universities.

(3) Integrated Studies: In addition, an entirely new area, that of a "Period for Integrated Studies," was introduced in 1998 in the new curriculum standards. All students from the 3rd to 12th grade 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 increase the natural interest of students in 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 relevant, Japanese junior high school teachers have been rather unwilling to implement recommendations in this area. More than a half of them have stated objections and have been eager to assert the reasons for their rejection of an integrated curriculum. The first reason they cite is that "integration" is very difficult for junior high school teachers because they are "subject teachers", not "classroom teachers". The teachers' second objection is that it is difficult to make this period of the day different from those for 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 strident 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 international comparisons, the total number of teaching periods or hours shown in the national curriculum standards now has to be interpreted as "minimum,"

not "maximum," to increase academic achievement in various subject areas as well as in terms of critical thinking or problem solving abilities. In 2008, the complete revision of the national curriculum standards by MEXT decreased the number of periods of "Integrated Studies" from 3 hours to 2 hours per week, but aimed at making a better connection to the traditional subjects as a whole.

(4) Elective subjects: In 1998, the 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 3 years; the aim was to develop students' individual traits and personality (MoE, 2000). However, once again, most junior high school teachers complained that electives made the junior high school curriculum more complicated, took time away from basics, and were not in any way different from Integrated Studies and the enriched programs that were introduced with the 2003 revision. Bowing to the pressure from teachers unions, in the 2008 revision the MEXT eliminated 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 of autonomously making choices and decisions to become more independent and individualistic. This is the reason electives have a vital place in middle level and compulsory school curriculum in almost all western countries.

In my view, 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 lower and upper levels in curriculum, then the role or objectives of each curriculum must be different. My own recommendation is as follows (Abiko, 1997, 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 be developing their personality and making direct and vocational "preparation" for their becoming independent. Elective subjects should also be different at the two school

levels. Electives in the junior high school should be aimed at helping students to "find or search for" their 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, the MEXT has not adopted this view relating to principles of elective subjects for Japanese junior high schools, so there have been very few schools whose electives are structured in a new way. The government, instead, continues to press for the compulsory school curricula to be more common for all students. I hope the government will realize the important balance of the core subjects and the 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 a new approach to electives.

(5) 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 and bullying (MoE, 2000). However, the number of students involved in school refusal and bullying is very small below the 4th grade (age of 10) and increases explicitly from 5th grade in elementary school. After the first year of junior high school, the problems drastically increase until the end of 9th grade. In 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 pattern of grade organization. The number of experimental schools that have tried to reconfigure the grades of school system has been increasing. This total number, 229 in 2007, might be about half the number expected by the 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 articulation from elementary to secondary education. Further, there have been many students who have failed to make sufficient progress in mathematics and science learning. Prevention of bullying and school-refusal is important, since the numbers increase drastically between the 6th grade in the

elementary school and the first grade (7th) of junior high school.

A final motivation for experimenting with grade organization is the need to keep students feeling of self esteem or self respect positive, because Japanese students are mostly apt to become negative around the age of 10 when puberty or adolescence begins. Before the age of 10, most children in Japan have a positive or high self-esteem. Therefore, there is a lag between school articulation and students ages in Japan. About 50 years before, in Japan, puberty began around age 12, but now it begins around age 10. It might be favorable for Japanese students to have education from elementary level to secondary level continuously, meaning that they do not have a 6-3 system of education but rather a holistic 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 education and secondary education (Abiko, 2002b).

4. Conclusion

In recent times, successive Japanese governments have faced a major challenge in the attempt to reform and redesign what many regard as an excellent system of school education and social education. The new Japanese government from 2009 has followed the educational policy of the previous government thus far. Japanese society at present has not reached a clear consensus on the proper role of public school education, despite the New Fundamental Law of Education.

In Japan, as in other big OECD countries, the government was very interested in transforming the educational process between the national curriculum standard and the national test as the accountability system in education. However, strangely enough, Japanese school education has not been criticized so much in terms of test-oriented education, though there have been many such criticisms in big OECD countries. In fact, most Japanese schools have not oriented their education to the national test so far, because they experienced the fallout of such a mistake about 50 years ago when the first national test was introduced. Moreover, it is possible that the new government can learn from the

recent American trend of curriculum development of Grant P. Wiggins and Jay McTighe's "Backward Design" theory which is based on assessment activities (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

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 role that must be played by the family, the neighborhood, schools and workplaces, etc. In particular, since 1945, the Japanese people have wanted their schools to assume the most responsibility for any kind of education, replacing even the family. As a result, Japanese schooling at present is perceived by the Japanese people as showing a level of critical dysfunction. About 50 years ago Ivan Illich criticized giving the public school education too much responsibility in his book titled "Deschooling Society"(Illich, 1971).

The problems are, interestingly enough, almost all at upper grades of elementary school and junior high school, with students aged 10-15. School refusal, bullying, and delinquency have occurred mostly in upper 5th and 6th grade of elementary school and junior high school in Japan. People have become more dissatisfied year after year as they perceive those problems continuing unsolved and do not trust public school education and teachers (Abiko, 2009).

However, the Central Council for Education still has not discussed the problems of the Japanese junior high school intensively. As one of its ordinary members, I have been disappointed with the MEXT administrative policy so far. Though it is important that the 6-3 school system be at least partly changed, because of the acceleration of child development, most people and teachers remain reluctant to think about the whole 9-year school experience. They do not see those problems at this school level as critical for Japanese society. The reason the junior high school in Japan has not received attention is that these schools are perceived as still working in a traditional process from elementary level to secondary level. Few educators or parents, as yet, realize that the Japanese students at that school level are actually at the crossroads in their lives. The students are struggling with this difficult situation in junior high schools, but their parents and society are not aware of their children's anxiety

and agony. It is good that Japan can reform her junior high schools, including the 5th and 6th grades of elementary school, as soon as possible to provide better education to young adolescents of ages 10-15.

As for East-Asian countries including Japan, most countries have learned the educational and school system from the United States for a long time. However, though in general American people do not like memorization or repetition, most Japanese people like to make a high and good balance between thinking and memorization in school teaching practices in order to promote excellent thinking activities. Too much memorization is harmful, but too little memorization is senseless. Thinking without memorization is fruitless, and memorization without thinking is useless. We have to find what balance is excellent between them.

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