

## *Keynote Speech*

# **Education Reform and Experience in Japan**

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## **Introduction**

It has been said repeatedly that teacher quality is the crucial factor enhancing student achievement and determining the success of education and education reform. It seems, however, that current education reforms are undermining the bases for successful teaching and thereby deteriorating the culture of teaching and the moral of teachers, rather than improving teaching conditions, encouraging teachers to make live efforts and enhancing the sense of efficacy and confidence among teachers. Unfortunately, this seems the case at least in Japan. Why? What kinds of education reforms are now going on? Why can we say the current reforms are damaging schooling and teaching? What are the current states of schooling and teaching and what kinds of challenges are they facing with in a changing post-modern society? What kinds of policies and practices are expected in order to cope with the social changes and their associated challenges? Keeping these questions in mind, this paper first describes the current education reforms and to discuss their features, and then, examines some changing contexts of schooling and teaching, and discusses some guiding principles for policy-making and for improving teaching practices.

## **1. Age of Education Reform and its Irony: The Japanese Case**

### **The 3rd Major Education Reform in Japan since the 1980s**

Since the 1970s, Japanese education began to attract the attention as a successful example among some developed countries like USA. It is assumed to have educated competent work force and thereby contributed to post-war Japanese economic recovery and development. It is exemplified by the discourse of the US education reform movements called “Back to Basics” and then “the Pursuit of Excellence” ever since the 1970s, including the well-known report of Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk* issued in 1983.

Ironically, however, since the 1980s, the Japanese government launched the third major education reform. In 1984, the Ad hoc Council of Education (ACE) was set up as an advisory body to the Prime Minister. ACE spent three years reviewing the nation’s education system and generated four reports to the prime minister. These reports have been the basis for the subsequent neo-liberal and neo-conservative reform movements.

The first major reform was the establishment of the modern educational system in the Meiji Restoration period. The second major reform occurred just after the end of the Pacific War. The Fundamental Education Law and School Education Law, both issued in 1947, laid a foundation for the democratic and egalitarian ideology of schooling in Japan, and reorganized the system into the open, egalitarian, single-track 6-3-3-4 school system with the first nine years compulsory.



Under this system, Japan has achieved one of the highest quality levels of schooling in terms of enrollment ratio, retention rates, daily attendance, equality of opportunity, academic performance and caring students. About 97 percent of the age cohorts are now enrolled at three-year senior high school, and over 90 percent of these students graduate from high school. About 63 percent of the age cohorts are enrolled at higher education institutions: About 42 percent at four-year colleges and universities, about 8 percent at two-year junior colleges and 13 percent at three-year special training colleges.

The high quality of caring function of schooling and local community might be demonstrated by the international comparison of juvenile crimes (see Figure 1s). Japanese juvenile crime rates have been lowest among the countries shown in Figure 1s. In terms of overall juvenile criminal offense as of the year 1996, Germany was 5 times higher than Japan, UK is 3 times higher, and USA and France were about 2 times higher than Japan. In terms of juvenile homicide, USA was 14 times higher than Japan, Germany was about 6 times higher, and France and UK were about 5 times higher than Japan. The differences are much more striking in robbery: Germany was about 35 times higher than Japan, and USA, UK and France were about 20 times higher than Japan. Given these differences, policymakers and researchers in the field concerned have asked why Japan could have kept such a low level of juvenile crimes?

The high quality of teaching and learning has also been demonstrated by the international comparative studies on student performance conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in 1964-70, 1978 and 1995-1999 and by OECD in 2000 (see Figure 2s). Each time the average scores of Japanese students were among the top three countries. Japan was even the top at math and science in the first and second IEA studies, and in the OECD/PISA study the top at math and the second at science among the countries participated in these studies. The results of these comparative studies and Japan's post-war economic success have attracted the attention of other countries to Japanese schooling as a model of success.

It is very ironic, however, that Japan launched the radical education reform when many other countries paid attention to and tried to learn from Japanese schooling. Since the 1980s, based on the recommendations of ACE mentioned earlier and several other Councils concerned, various reform measures and policies have been introduced and implemented at all levels of education from elementary to higher education. Among them, this paper will focus on the reforms at elementary and secondary education levels.

It may be worthy of noting here that this irony seems to be applicable to Singapore and Korea too, both of which have started to undertake the education reforms similar to those of Japan since the late 1990s. In the third IEA study, so-called TIMSS, Singapore was the top both at math and science among 40 participating countries and region, and Korea was the second at math and the fourth at science. Hong Kong was the fourth at math, while about the middle at science. In the OECD/PISA study, Japan and Korea were shared the top two at math and science, while about the sixth or seventh at reading literacy. The results of these recent two studies have had a significant influence on recent education policies and policy arguments in many western developed countries, making the terms like TIMSS impact and PISA shock popular in the discourse of education policy. This seems to be partly because the top ranks were occupied by Singapore and Korea in addition to Japan, and Singapore and Korea are the Asian NIES countries that began to achieve rapid economic growth since the 1970s.

Three stages of current education reform and the crisis of Japanese education generated by the reforms

The following are the major reforms and reform arguments that I have considered critical and therefore made critical comments on them from time to time especially since 1990 (Fujita 1997, 1998 & 2000).

There are the three stages that can be identified in current education reform movements: the first is during the 1980s, the second is from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, and the third is from the late 1990s to the current.

At the first stage, the policy of so-called “Yutori Kyoiku” started with the revision of the national course of study (curriculum guide lines) implemented in 1980 in order to make school life enjoyable and free of pressure. This curriculum revision reduced the number of lesson hours as well as the contents of major subjects, introduced the flexible lesson hour called “Yutori no Jikan”, and suggested the importance of child-centered teaching and learning. The literal translations of these “Yutori” phrases are “relaxed education” and “relaxed or flexible hours” respectively.

The major thrust to this reform came from as a sensational response to the upheaval of various school disorder and maladjustment problems such as school vandalism, school violence, bullying, school refusal (truancy) and some serious juvenile crimes since the late 1970s. The mass media made sensational reports on several serious incidents that happened in schools and serious juvenile crimes that school children committed. Educational critics elevated them into major public debates and discourse. Politicians and business leaders soon joined in these debates and outcries for radical reforms. All of them adopted the “school stress” theory to explain these problems, blamed school education in general and public schools in particular for these disorder problems, calling these problems “education pathology” or “school pathology,” and expressed repeatedly their distrust in public schools and teachers. Thus, the tide of their assaults against public schools and teachers came to stay in the subsequent reform arguments.

It should be noted, however, that these disorder and maladjustment problems have been observed in common among many developed countries, and that these problems stem largely from the society at large including the family, rather than from school education. In this sense, these are problems of “social pathology” rather than “education pathology”. Schools and schooling are expected to cope with these problems, not because these problems are caused by schools and schooling but because schools and schooling are one of the major policy variables to which we can manipulate more or less, expecting them to cope with these problems.

The second stage emerged through the arguments and reports of ACE mentioned earlier, which advocated “slimmer schools” and liberalization and privatization of schooling. In addition to the school disorder problems, they consider various needs and demands of a changing society equally important. The development of information and communication technologies, globalizing knowledge-driven economy, and its associated intensification of international competition, all have become major concerns of politicians, business leaders and media people as well as educational critics. They started to question the effectiveness and efficiency of Japanese schooling to meet various needs and demands of the postmodern society, using the phrases like “the end of catch-up type development and schooling” and “the end of uniform



schooling.” They criticized Japanese schooling as stressful on the one hand and on the other as cramming students’ heads with standardized knowledge useful only for passing entrance examination. Instead, they emphasized the importance of creativity and problem solving ability, and advocated the expansion of individualized learning and liberalization of schooling.

Based on the recommendations of ACE and several other Councils concerned, the following reform measures and policies have been introduced and implemented at the second stage: (1) the phased introduction of a five-day school week, which made one Saturday off per month in 1992, then two Saturdays off in 1995, and finally all Saturdays off from the year 2002; (2) the revision of curriculum guidelines along with the full-introduction of a five-day school week, which drastically reduced the number of lesson hours and the contents for most subjects including math and science on the one hand, and on the other, created a new cross-subject lesson entitled “comprehensive study (for example, of 110 lesson hours per year at the fifth and sixth grades and 70 lesson hours at the lower secondary level); (3) the introduction of combined junior and senior high school education (six-year secondary schools) which will inevitably lead to the transformation of the existing single-track 6-3-3 school system into partially multi-tracked one; and (4) the introduction and gradual expansion of “school choice” plan at the elementary and lower secondary levels which, along with the introduction of the six-year secondary school, will make the problems of school ranking at these levels a major issue and problem of the next decade. All of these policies and reform measures as well as those of “Yutori Kyoiku” continue to stay to the current, being intensified and expanded even more.

The third stage started since the late 1990s, when the business recession after the collapse of a so-called “bubble economy” became clear and the financial deficit expanded seriously. In order to survive this economic and financial crisis, the Government launched the overall “structural reforms” in government administration, national finance, banking, industry and business, social welfare and education toward decentralization, deregulation, liberalization and marketization. In this context, promoting reform itself has become a supreme goal and purpose in the current Japanese society, being fueled by the growing concern with accountability. This has been especially true in the field of education. Thus, crisis and reform have now become a legitimate pair for social and educational progress.

In addition to the above-mentioned four reform measures introduced at the second stage, the following reform trends have now become clear: (5) The policies to raise the level of academic competencies in two ways, by introducing common, standardized tests at all elementary and secondary schools conducted by each local board of education on the one hand and on the other, by differentiating the learning process on the bases of students’ ability; (6) the reform of school management and governance in two directions, that is, some local boards of education appraise the management style of business as a model and the market competition among schools through the school choice system, while other boards of education encourage school-based management with collaboration of parents and local people; (7) the introduction of school and teacher assessment again in two directions, that is, in some local boards of education like Tokyo, schools and teachers are now assessed by parents as consumer and by bureaucratic officers as supervisor on the bases of their merits, achievements and even attitudes toward their supervisors, while other local boards of education are trying to create the formative evaluation scheme; and finally, (8) the prime minister and his economic and administrative advisory councils are advocating and putting strong pressures on the Ministry of Education and Science to promote reforms oriented toward further deregulation, liberalization and marketization as well as cutting

down financial supports to public schools. Under these pressures, reform initiatives in school management and assessment mentioned above as (7) and (8) tend to move toward the first direction, while I have supported the second direction.

Thus, the current state of Japanese education is chaotic in a sense, with many serious contradictions and inconsistencies in reform measures and policies. All of these reforms are now undermining and deteriorating the bases of teachers' autonomy, authority, dignity, confidence, dedication and collaboration on the one hand and on the other, the foundations of co-creative learning and caring community in particular and public schooling and its sound functioning in general. It is very much sad to say this, but this is reality according to the present author's view. The crisis of Japanese schooling is now caused by the education reforms, not by various school disorder problems, nor by the existing system of schooling and the style of teaching. If Japanese schooling and teaching could continue to be successful more or less, it would be not because of the current education reforms, but because of the dedicated efforts of Japanese teachers and their professional competencies.

## **2. For Constructing Good Education for All Children**

### **Changing contexts of school education**

The above review of current education reforms does not intend to say that Japanese education and public schools are good enough without any necessity of efforts to change and revise. In a modern changing society, the contexts of school education are also changing at least at the following four aspects: changes in the knowledge base, in the status base, in the incentive base and in the order base.

The knowledge base of schooling has been changing along with the rapid development of sciences and new information-communication technologies, economic globalization and the rise of knowledge society, cultural and ethnic diversification of the society, the expansion of life-long learning and so forth. The range and volume of knowledge that schools are expected to cover are expanding along with this change of knowledge base.

The status base of schooling has changed along with the advent of the information age and development of various information media. Schools are not a monopolistic institution providing valuable knowledge anymore, but one of many institutions including mass media. Students can now learn from various sources and at various places outside schools. In this context, the status of schools has declined relatively and significantly.

The incentive base of schooling and learning has been undermined by the advent of an affluent and consumption-oriented society. Since the 1980s when the economic affluence spread throughout Japan, many students started not to have much incentive to study hard and to run away from learning.

The order base of schooling has also undermined by the diversification of value orientations and life styles, the decline of normative orientations toward discipline and social order, and the decline of teachers' authority along with the changes of the knowledge, status and incentive bases mentioned above. School violence, vandalism and truancy, all can be seen as the results and symbolical phenomena caused by this change of the order base.

All of these changes combine to have made school management and teaching practices much



more difficult than before. To cope with these challenges, the above-mentioned reform measures and policies have been adopted and implemented. But there is no rational ground for assuming that they are effective and appropriate. We need to ask some basic questions rationally and sincerely. How can we cope with the motivation crisis in an affluent society? How can we meet the functional needs and demands of the post-modern society and knowledge economy, especially in terms of ability and moral development? How can we enhance the curriculum validity? Should it be by emphasizing basic common knowledge with recognition and appreciation of individual uniqueness and various differences among individual students, or by curriculum diversification and individualization as early as from the elementary level? How can we make teaching and learning more appropriate and attractive? Is it achieved by subject-based learning in appropriate combination with comprehensive, situated learning, or solely by expanding comprehensive, situated learning? My answer to all of these questions is rather conservative and old-fashioned.

### **Importance of reconstructing the culture of efforts and praise**

As mentioned above, the contexts of schooling, teaching and learning have been changing. All of those changes have made schooling, teaching and learning more difficult than before. But the fundamentals of academic ability, moral responsibility and self-dignity have been unchanged, and the fundamentals of teaching and learning for developing them have also been unchanged and will continue to stay the same as before.

It may be worthy of paying attention again to the TIMSS impact and PISA shock mentioned earlier. It has become a global tendency to assess students' performance and school effectiveness by standardized testing. Although I am rather critical to this tendency, I cannot help but consider it as an indication that the global standardization of knowledge and academic ability has taken place. In other words, the globalization and the advent of knowledge society have gone with the global standardization of basic and professional knowledge and ability. It seems necessary to take this into account, when we think about how to develop academic ability, thinking capacity, creativity and the like. There would not be any rational reason or acceptable excuse for devaluing and making little of existing knowledge in general and standardized knowledge in particular. It is indeed the central role of schooling to transmit existing knowledge to students and to make them master it.

Thus, two points would be worthy to be considered here, in relation to the two of three sub-themes of this conference, "teaching and learning assessment" and "learning motivation". The first point is that thinking capacity, creativity and the like can be developed through the efforts and activities of mastering and accumulating existing knowledge, not through the efforts and activities to develop them solely. The second point is that there would not be any special way to develop academic ability, thinking capacity, creativity and the like without spending sufficient time and making sufficient efforts.

Needless to say, however, this does not mean that thinking capacity, creativity and the like are not important, nor that traditional approaches to teaching, learning and curriculum design are superior than various new approaches like situated learning, individualized learning, cross-curricular subjects and so forth. Which approach is more appropriate and effective varies, depending on subjects, lesson materials, students, teachers, and many other factors. It is a matter of appropriate combination and it is indeed the place where each teacher as well as each school can and should display his/her professional ability to the full.

Irrespective of the teaching style and curriculum design adopted, what to be critical for successful learning are: student's participation in learning activities; commitment to the subject world as well as to the learning community; encouraging students to make sufficient efforts; and appreciating student's efforts and dignity. Sources of motivation, value and meaning do not pre-exist there in each subject or learning materials. Motivation is something to be developed and values and meanings are something to be found or to be created through the participation, commitment and making efforts.

Two things are critically important to make this cycle operate: One is to make students understand and master the contents of learning even if the pace is slow and level is not high, not leaving them incapable to understand and neglecting them. The other is to recognize, to appreciate and to praise students' efforts as well as their successful achievements in any kinds of good areas of activity. It is because recognition, appreciation and praise as well as caring contribute to develop sense of self-efficacy, capability, confidence and self-dignity, and to help students developing motivation and finding values and meanings to learn and to make efforts.

Here, the principle of "parity of esteem" is important to keep in mind. By "parity of esteem" it is meant that any subject and any good activity has the equal value in the respect of being worthy of recognition, appreciation and praise. It means that not only academic subjects but also various activities like cleaning school building and extra-curricular activities are equally valuable in the respect of being worthy of praise.

#### **Some guiding principles for creating good schools**

Now, let me make some final comments on guiding principles for creating good schools. First, school is a life space. Accordingly, it should be the secure and safe place where anybody can be accepted and trusted.

Second, school is a learning space. Accordingly, it should be good enough to develop basic skills and knowledge and to prepare students for further learning. In addition, it is desirable that the process of learning is lively and pleasant.

Third, school is a space for identity formation. Accordingly, dignity, autonomy and diversity of all members should be appreciated. Acceptance and participation are also critical for students to develop their ability, motivation and identity.

Fourth, stable and rich time and rhythm are critical for successful learning and stress-free, enjoyable school life.

Fifth, education is an unfinished project. Its success depends on the continuous efforts and sincere practices that are worthy of trust and at the same time will make possible to secure trust.



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