
Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment in Japan

Beyond lesson study

Koji Tanaka, Kanae Nishioka
and Terumasa Ishii

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Chapter 2

Historical overview of curriculum organisation

National control over curriculum vs.
school-based curriculum development

Kanae Nishioka

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Introduction

In post-World War II Japan, the curriculum basically has been assumed to be something organised by the schools. However, the way and the extent to which the Japanese government regulates the curriculum organisation have been transitioning through several turning points. This chapter will describe the post-war Japanese history of curriculum organisation, focusing on national regulation.

Moreover, the curriculum organisation of schools cannot be established without being supported by teachers' professional development. Therefore, this chapter will also examine how teacher professional development is achieved in Japan.

I Curriculum organisation and the teacher training system

I-1 The Japanese school system and the National Courses of Study (NCS)

Before presenting the history of curriculum organisation in post-war Japan, let us describe the basic framework of both the Japanese school system and curriculum organisation.

Japanese schools employ a 6–3–3 system. This means that it comprises six years of elementary school (ages 6 to 12), three years of middle school (ages 12 to 15) and three years of high school (ages 15 to 18). Although elementary and middle school are part of compulsory education, the percentage of students advancing to high school has reached 98%. Secondary schools (a system that combines middle and high school) were founded as a result of the 1998 Enforcement Regulations for the School Education Act, but they remain few in number. According to the School Basic Survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in financial year 2014, there were 20,852 elementary schools, 10,557 middle schools, 4,963 high schools and 51 secondary schools in Japan (MEXT, 2014).

Schools can be divided into state-run, public and private schools. State-run schools are affiliated with national universities. The majority of schools are public

schools established by the prefecture or municipality. However, there are quite a number of private schools in urban areas in particular. The middle schools in Japan consist of 73 national schools, 9,707 public schools and 777 private schools (MEXT, 2014).

The curriculum organisation of elementary, middle and high schools in post-war Japan, as a principle, is conducted in accordance with The National Courses of Study (NCS) set forth by the Ministry of Education (MEXT as of 2001). While the first NCS that was developed after the war was treated as a ‘draft proposal’, the NCS released after the revision of the Enforcement Regulations for the School Education Act in 1958 became ‘announced’ and had legally binding power. The NCS list objectives and content for each subject along with general rules that constitute the fundamental policies for curriculum organisation. Since Japan employs a government approval system for school textbooks, the NCS serve as a textbook-screening standard.

Moreover, the number of classroom hours for each subject is stipulated by the Enforcement Regulations for the School Education Act. The number of classroom hours for each middle school subject, as stipulated in accordance with the 2008 revised NCS, is shown in Table 2.1. As the table indicates, the current middle school curriculum comprises subjects, moral education, the period for integrated study (PFIS) and special activities. For a long time in the post-war period, moral education was not a subject, but a “special subject in moral education” was

Table 2.1 The number of class hours for each subject in middle school

<i>Classification</i>	<i>1st year</i>	<i>2nd year</i>	<i>3rd year</i>
Number of class hours for each subject			
Japanese	140	140	105
Social studies	105	105	140
Mathematics	140	105	140
Science	105	140	140
Music	45	35	35
Art	45	35	35
Health and physical education	105	105	105
Technical arts and home economics	70	70	35
Foreign language	140	140	140
Class hours for moral education	35	35	35
Class hours for the period for integrated study	50	70	70
Class hours for special activities	35	35	35
Total class hours	1015	1015	1015

Source: MEXT, adopted by author

Note: Table 2 for the Enforcement Regulations for the School Education Act (pertains to Article 73).

introduced in the NCS partially revised in March 2015. The PFIS refers to a time in which students themselves set the topic and explore it independently (refer to chapters 3 and 9 for details). ‘Special activities’, on the other hand, refers to group activities such as class activities, student council activities and school events.

Curriculum development in Japanese schools in actuality is conducted in accordance with the NCS within the framework of the number of class hours indicated within the School Education Act Enforcement Ordinance. Therefore, one can ascertain the trend of curriculum for each period by looking at the transitions of the NCS.

However, how the policies of curriculum organisation proposed in NCS are actualised in a school setting is determined by the selections made by teachers who are responsible for education at school, based on their level of understanding and value judgements. Concerning the NCS, various proposals from a critical standpoint have been made within the Japanese education circle. The reason such proposals are possible pertains to the teacher training system unique to Japan. Section 1–2 will outline this teachers’ training system.

1–2 Teacher training system

The opportunities for teachers’ professional development can be broadly divided into those that are offered in the training process until they obtain their school teacher’s licence and those available in the training they go through after becoming teachers. The pre-service training process is carried out mainly by universities that have received course accreditation. On the other hand, in-service teacher training is conducted by various operating agencies. It can be broadly divided into job training that teachers participate in as part of their job and training in which they participate autonomously. Job training can be further divided into administrative training and in-school teacher training (Sato, 2003).

Administrative training is training held by an administrative body, such as a prefectural or municipal educational committee and educational centres. For example, during a revision of the NCS or when a new education policy has been stipulated, training will be held to explain the gist of such new changes. The government shoulders the cost of training, treating teachers’ participation as a ‘business trip’ in which the transportation fee and daily wage issued are drawn from public funds. In regard to statutory training, there is the initial teacher training and training for teachers with 10 years’ teaching experience. In addition to these, there are also various types of trainings that are held, including management training targeted toward school principals and vice principals, coordinator training for the head of each instruction department (i.e., the curriculum coordinator) and technical training related to subject teaching and student guidance. In recent years, there have been examples of long-term deployed training where teachers are sent to take a master’s course or to a private company for a long period of time. While the Japanese government assists training programmes that prefectural governments hold, the National Centre for Teachers’ Development also conducts training for

teachers who assume a leadership role and training that deals with the pressing issues related to school education (MEXT, n.d.).

On the other hand, in-school teacher training is a ‘practical activity in which all teaching staff members set a common topic as an issue to be resolved in order to realise the educational task as a school that is compatible with their school’s educational objectives. The issue is resolved strategically, organisationally, and scientifically by the school as a whole while building upon the coordination between related parties within and outside the school’ (Nakadome, 2002). It is said that in-school teacher training in which all teaching staff members participate started in Japan when school-job specifications became systematised in the 1890s and when the class format became established (Nakadome, 1999). As mentioned above, participating in in-school teacher training is part of a teacher’s duties.

In-school teacher training is held in various formats, such as a plenary meeting in which all teaching staff members attend, a subject meeting, a grade meeting, and a sectional meeting that is divided according to subjects. The content and method of such meetings can vary as well, including lesson studies, lectures to which an outside specialist is invited and workshops. Lesson studies are widely held in Japanese elementary schools and are starting to spread even amongst middle and high schools. The practice of lesson studies which focus on and aim to directly improve children’s learning plays a significant role in the development of new teaching methods and the promotion of shared understanding, in addition to improving each individual teacher’s competence. Furthermore, various research results have been borne in relation to the method of running lesson studies, including the classroom record-taking method, analysis of viewpoints and method of improvement (see Chapter 5 for details).

The next subject of discussion is the training in which teachers participate voluntarily. In Japan, it is not rare to see cases where teachers voluntarily participate in training held by private education organisations and universities. In the event that approval from the principal is attained, the teachers will be exempt from their obligation to give undivided attention to their duties and are able participate within their working hours. There are cases when teachers voluntarily participate in training held outside of their working hours (i.e., Saturdays and Sundays). This is referred to as ‘voluntary training’. When teachers participate in training voluntarily, they have to bear costs such as participation and transportation fees.

Built upon the teachers’ voluntary training, the non-governmental education research movement has been taking place in Japan for a long time. The non-governmental education research movement is a general term given to the study of ‘movements that advance democratic, independent, and scientific educational research, held through the cooperation/collaboration between parties related to education (i.e., teachers and parents) and private citizens (i.e., specialist researches from various scientific fields) without receiving any financial support from the government, public organisations, corporations, and labour unions’ (Usui, 2002). As it will be discussed in section 2, diverse arrays of non-governmental education research organisations have formed in Japan, engaging in activities such

as holding regular study meetings and publishing magazines. The origin of the non-governmental education research movement can also be traced back to the Movement for Civic Rights and Freedom during the Meiji era (1868–1912) and the Free Education Movement during the Taisho era (1912–1926). University researchers, alongside teachers, have participated in the non-governmental education research movement, constructing theories while learning from the practice on school grounds. It is no exaggeration to state that various theories in Japanese pedagogy were generated with the non-governmental education research movement as their foundation. The existence of the non-governmental education research movement, executed as a voluntary/autonomous activity of teachers, is a strength of Japanese education that merits mention.

Therefore, section 2 will outline the history of Japanese curriculum organisation by focusing on the trends of the non-governmental education research movement alongside the revisions made to the NCS.

2 The era of the new post-war education

2-1 Government policies that propagated the democratisation of education

During World War II, education in Japan was held under the rules of the emperor to promote militarism. Japan was considered to be the country of the emperor, who was considered god, with the Japanese people said to be his children. Education was conducted to spread the philosophy of devoting oneself as a Japanese subject to serving the country, and ultimately fighting and dying for the emperor was the right way of living.

With the defeat in the war in 1945, the Japanese government system shifted to becoming a popular sovereignty, with the Japanese education system changing its projection greatly to aim for democratisation. The General Headquarters Office of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (GHQ) ordered the termination of the subjects of moral training, national history and geography that prominently represented the divinity principle and imperialism. Moral training is a subject that includes moral education, and it was treated as a leading subject during the war. The Constitution of Japan that proposed the renunciation of war and pacifism in 1946 later also proclaimed the Fundamental Law of Education and the School Education Act in 1947.

The NCS was first issued in Japan in 1947. Its general provision was stated as follows: ‘Our nation’s education is currently moving in a completely different direction from the past. . . . What is believed to be the most important thing is that, despite how in the past there was a uniform leaning to implement the decisions made by those above and adhere to their directions as much as possible, now we come to create various things [in the curriculum] using everyone’s efforts, coming instead from those who are below [in the teaching and administrative hierarchy]’. Rooted in the repentance of wartime education, the NCS emphasised

the creation and design of the curriculum at the actual place where education was carried out. The 1947 and 1952 editions were each presented as a ‘draft proposal’. In other words, they were issued as a reference material (guidance) for school curriculum development and were not a legal mandate.

Another characteristic of the 1947 and 1951 editions of the NCS was the adoption of a standpoint centred on the children. The progressive educational philosophy of John Dewey and others was strongly reflected, due to the influence of the US Education Mission, which implemented educational reform in US-occupied Japan. The curriculum encouraged enriching the life experience of children and fostering citizens who could resolve social issues. Social studies, which was a newly established subject, was stipulated to ‘expand and deepen the social experience of youths but centring on the issues of the actual lives of youths, without relying on any of the so-called schools of academia’. However, policies centred on children attracted the criticism that they would lead to a decrease in the academic level.

2-2 Autonomous organisation of the curriculum

Under the educational policy that promoted the autonomous organisation of the curriculum across Japan, various attempts at curriculum organisation were actively made by regions, schools and non-governmental education research organisations immediately following the war. Those who took charge of such attempts were those who succeeded the Taisho era’s Free Education Movement or the Life Writing Education Movement of the 1920s. The Taisho era’s Free Education Movement took place in elementary schools affiliated with a normal school [i.e., a school for training teachers] or private schools in urban areas, after being influenced by the New Education Movement that was vigorous in Europe and the US during the late 19th to early 20th centuries. On the other hand, life writing is an education method that entails having children write prose or poems related to their actual lives and using the subjects of their writing as teaching materials, thereby appealing to how children see, feel and think. It is a method unique to Japan developed by teachers from farming areas within the life writing subject, the only subject that did not have a fixed textbook before the war.

During the early Showa era (1926–1989), the non-government education research movement was temporarily ceased as oppression by the state increased in association with the implementation of imperialistic education. However, after the war, a variety of study organisations were rebuilt or launched while succeeding the pre-war legacy.¹ In 1946, the year preceding the establishment of the social studies subject, the curriculum development was undertaken all across Japan. The Kawaguchi Plan, which served as a precursor of this curriculum, was a regional education plan that was developed by the city of Kawaguchi-city, Saitama Prefecture, by incorporating the elementary, middle and high schools within the city into the research framework with the support of researchers such as Satoru Umene and Tokiomi Kaigo. Furthermore, the Sakurada Plan proposed

in Sakurada Elementary School in Minato ward, Tokyo, emphasised the interests and attention of the children.

The Core Curriculum Association, formed in 1948 (renamed the Japanese Life Education Union in 1953), proposed turning the curriculum into a structure with social studies at the core. It was even referred to as the ‘nonofficial Ministry of Education’. In 1950, the Japanese Society of Composition (later renamed the Japanese Society of Writing), pursued a state of education that appeals to the manner in which one perceives, feels and thinks. In 1951, *The Yamabiko Gakko* a collection of essays written by middle school students instructed by Seikyo Muchaku (1951), was published. It received wide attention as an example of practical social studies education rooted in real life, as well as practical life writing education. The practice of life writing had a huge impact on the Educational Science Research National Liaison Council (renamed the Educational Science Research Association in 1962).

Meanwhile, various non-government education research organisations have also been formed from the standpoint of a discipline-centred approach that criticises the child-centric approach. Representative organisations of this approach include the History Educationalist Conference of Japan (formed in 1949), the Association of Mathematical Instruction (formed in 1951) and the Association of Science Education (formed in 1954). These organisations promote the research and development of subject-based education in line with the systematics of academia. It is said that almost all private educational organisations that advance the research of subject content appeared during the 1950s (Otsuki, 1982).

3 The era of enforcing the regulations of the curriculum

3-1 Educational policies that aim for economic development

The era in which autonomously developed school-based curriculum was encouraged did not last long, due to the reinforcement of the Cold War structure that was triggered by the Korean War. Since the revision in 1958 (revision for social studies took place in 1955), the NCS came to be ‘announced’ to have legal binding force. Indeed, even in the 1958 revision of the NCS, it was stated that ‘each school . . . shall organise an appropriate curriculum’. However, the textbooks that were used in schools were verified by the state, with the request that school education be conducted in line with these textbooks. As a result, opportunities for schools to question the content and arrangement of educational goals or to develop their teaching material without being confined to textbooks died down for a long time, except for a few cases, such as national university-affiliated schools and private schools. Thereafter, the era in which the state stringently regulated the curriculum lasted for a long time.

Another major change to the 1958 revision of the NCS was that a ‘period for moral education’ that aimed to cultivate patriotism and such was specially

installed. Behind this development was the political intention at work to make Japan a fort for anti-communism during the period of developments such as the expansion of the Korean War and the conclusion of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan. Various criticisms were made of the specially installed moral education course, stirring up a debate. These criticisms questioned whether the moral education course might lead to the resurrection of nationalistic education or whether teaching virtues would be an effective form of moral education.

Furthermore, the principle of curriculum organisation shifted to a discipline-centred approach that emphasised the systematic teaching of subjects in order for Japan to become a scientific and technological nation, aiming for the development of academic abilities. The 1958 revision of the NCS proposed a policy aiming to enhance students' basic scholastic ability and emphasise science and technology education. During the 1960s, the income-doubling plan was launched, with an emphasis on developing human abilities even within education policies from the standpoint of stressing rapid economic growth. The National Simultaneous Academic Ability Survey was conducted by the Ministry of Education, and various issues borne out of academic competition became fiercer. The 1968 revision of the NCS had advanced educational content also moving toward lower grades, partially influenced by the modernisation of education that was taking place in the US.

The Japanese economy experienced a period of rapid and dramatic economic growth (1955–1973). The economic growth rate (rate of increase over the previous fiscal year of the real GDP) from fiscal year 1956 to fiscal year 1973 was 9.1% on average.² During this time period, the central industry in Japan switched from agriculture to light industry, then to the heavy and chemical industries (cf. Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2013). As the requirements for being employed at a company after graduating from school spread, the school advancement rate soared rapidly. The advancement rate to high school was 42.5% in 1950 but reached 70.7% by 1965. By 1974, it surpassed 90% (90.8%) (cf. Kimura, 2002).

Combined with the advancement of the education content and the advancement rate, 'children who could not keep up with the classes' (in other words, failing students) became a social issue during the 1970s. As the competition surrounding entrance exams became fierce and issues such as school violence, bullying and refusal to go to school became grave, the harms of the educational style of knowledge cramming were pointed out. In addition, people became aware of the damage of economic growth when the desolation of regional farms advanced and serious pollution problems emerged. The 1973 oil crisis led to the end of the rapid economic development period, and qualitative improvement of education was explored under stable growth afterward (the economic growth rate between fiscal years 1974 and 1990 was 4.2%).

The 1977 revision of the NCS set forth policies that emphasised humanity. Within the backdrop of this development was the impact from discussions at the International Seminar that were held through the cooperation between the Ministry of Education and the OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation

(Ministry of Education, 1975), as well as the trends within the US to humanise education. The 1977 revision aimed to make standards flexible by expanding the scope of selected subjects and creating and installing ‘relaxed classes’, which were left to each school’s ingenuity. In reality, the curriculum research on education content did not progress much. Combined with the reduction of classroom hours, the criticism that education content is overly dense lasted until the 1990s.

Additionally, the Ministry of Education appointed schools designated for research and development across the nation in 1976, constructing a system to promote pioneering practical research and development in order to revise the next period’s NCS. The achievements of research and development at appointed schools were reflected later in the new establishment of life environmental studies and the installation of the PFIS.

3–2 The development of educational method research: Putting the focus on the development of the non-governmental education research movement

Although the autonomous organisation of curriculum had quieted down by the 1960s and 1970s, attempts by teachers acting independently to improve the quality of education continued. When the policy of shifting from a child-centric approach to a discipline-centric approach was indicated in the 1958 revision of the NCS, *Syoshinokai* (the Society for Achieving the Original Spirit of Social Studies) was formed by those who aimed to continue a child-centric approach. On the other hand, from the 1958 revision onward, groups who adhered to the discipline-centric approach criticised the systematics of subjects indicated in the NCS as being unscientific and instead generated research results that advocated their own unique systematics. The ‘*Suidohoshiki* (way of water course)’ by the Association of Mathematical Instruction and the Hypothesis-Verification-Through Experimentation Learning System by the Hypothesis-Verification-Through Experimentation Learning System Research Group are such representative systems. In addition, teachers and researchers who were against the special establishment of a period of moral education formed the Japanese Society of Life Guidance Studies in 1959 that aimed to clarify the correct state for moral education. The Japanese Society of Life Guidance Studies later developed a theory on the creation of class groups that was based on the theory of creating *hans* (small groups), leaders and discussions.

As the state’s control on education became strengthened once again during the 1950s, the non-governmental education research movement strengthened its tone of opposing such development. Kihaku Saito advocated developing classes as a role specific to teachers, rather than becoming lost in a political battle. Kihaku Saito, who was the principal at Gunma Prefectural Sabagun Shima Elementary School, devoted himself to the professional development of teachers who worked at the school and theorised the nature of classes and the method to systemise it. The assertion of Saito, who perceived classes to be a reciprocal interaction between teachers, children and the teaching material, has been evaluated as a starting point of the post-war lesson study.

By the 1960s, the non-governmental education research movement's scope was not confined within the framework of subject-based education and had spread to various fields. In conjunction with the rise in the school advancement rate after the rapid economic growth, interest in the method of academic and career counselling in middle schools started to increase. As a result, the National Academic and Career Guidance Research Association was established in 1963. The Japanese Association for the Study on Issues of Persons with Disabilities, formed in 1967, has made contributions such as achieving the 1979 legal mandate to establish schools for children with disabilities.

When the 1970s came and the issue of 'failing students' became a social one, the non-governmental education research movement became revitalised in order to ensure academic achievement. In 1985, the Research Association for the Development of Basic Scholastic Ability and Prevention of Being Left Behind (later renamed the Research Association for Fostering All Children by Developing Basic Scholastic Ability [or Research Association for Developing All Children's Basic Scholastic Ability]) was formed around the ideas of Yuji Kishimoto, who developed the hundred-square calculations. In addition, as theories by Benjamin S. Bloom were introduced (i.e., the taxonomy of educational objectives and mastery learning), the criterion-referenced evaluation movements were borne. The movements aimed at educational improvement by conducting evaluation with the attainment target as the standard (Japanese Association for the Study of the Criterion Referenced Evaluation was launched in 1983).

Even the non-governmental education research organisations that were founded during the early post-war period aimed at creating enjoyable classes from the 1970s onward. Thus, they made modifications to their theories and practice. With these trends in the backdrop, the Section for Developing Classes (which became the Class Development Network in 1996) was born within the Educational Science Research Association in 1986.

By the late 1980s, the trend of perceiving matters through ideologies had weakened for certain, with social movements overall starting to decline. During this period, the Movement for Turning Education Techniques into Rules (Mukoyama, 1985), formed around the ideas of Yoichi Mukoyama, aimed at experimenting and sharing fine education techniques, which attracted many young teachers. However, it drew criticism from those who succeeded the traditional non-governmental education research movement because it did not question the educational value of the educational objectives.

4 The era of 'relaxed education'

4-1 Educational policies that emphasised individuality and autonomy

As rapid appreciation of the Japanese yen took place, triggered by the Plaza Accord of 1985, the Japanese government expanded the public investment aiming to

expand domestic demand in hopes of dispelling international trade friction while promoting Japanese economic growth. Meanwhile, since a policy that lowers interest rates was taken, speculation of stock and land prices intensified. By around 1989, an atmosphere of being carried away by the unprecedented economic boom had spread across Japanese society. However, it later became clear that this was a bubble economy. The central industry shifting from the heavy and chemical industries to the service industries during this period also brought a cultural shift in which value was placed on ‘small and light’ objects rather than ‘large and heavy’ objects (Yoshimi, 2008).

During this state, from the late 1980s onward, Japan started to adopt neoliberal educational policies which aimed at developing children’s individuality as well as promoting the liberalisation of education. Before this period, the Ministry of Education played a central role in promulgating education policies. However, in 1984, the Provisional Council on Education Reform, which discusses educational issues, was installed in response to the consultation of the prime minister. The four reports by the Provisional Council on Education Reform (1985, 1986, 1987 and 1987) indicated a nationalistic approach that emphasised an awareness of the Japanese people and Japanese traditional culture. Individual-focused education and the implementation of lifelong learning were asserted as globalisation, computerisation and the aging of the population advanced.

Building upon the reports by the Provisional Council on Education Reform, the 1989 revision of the NCS emphasised fostering the desire for voluntary learning and abilities to autonomously handle societal changes. Social studies and science subjects were abolished for first and second grade in elementary school, and life environmental studies was newly installed instead. Life environmental studies are subjects with a strong child-centric tone in the sense that they are focused on making children learn through specific activities and experiences through their lives. Moral education to cultivate patriotism was further emphasised, having reinforced the handling of the Japanese national flag and national anthem (‘Kimigayo’). The 1991 revision of the NCS placed ‘interest, volition, and attitude’ as the primary perspective within its evaluation. It also advocated the perspective of new academic ability that emphasises the fostering of a desire for voluntary learning and abilities to autonomously handle societal changes, rather than the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

In 1991, the bubble economy collapsed, and the Japanese economic growth rate thereafter dropped to 0.9% (between fiscal years 1991 and 2013). The Cold War ending in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union shook the conflict structure between the right and left parties even in Japan.

From the late 1990s onward, the state’s control of the curriculum changed greatly. The 1998 revision of the NCS asked for ‘creating schools with characteristics’, stating that ‘each school is to aim at fostering children’s zest for living and to conduct distinct educational activities by using ingenuity’. Policies that emphasised schools’ ingenuity have been constant since 1998. In 2000, the easing of regulations was propagated, with schools that the Ministry of Education

had designated for research and development being solicited by the public and the special-structural reform district being introduced in 2003, led by the Cabinet.

The 1998 revision of the NCS introduced the PFIS, which did not come with a textbook, livening up the opportunity for curriculum development and leading to a great impact on schools. In conjunction with the reduction of classroom hours, subject content was picked carefully, further implementing ‘relaxed education’, which took place from the 1977 revision onward.

However, in 1999, critics started to argue that relaxed education policies brought about a decline in scholastic abilities. A little while later, the relaxed education policy was forced to make a transition, with partial revisions made to the NCS in 2003 aimed at improving ‘solid scholastic ability’. The 2003 NCS presented a policy that stated that NCS indicate the minimum standards and that schools are allowed to teach content above these guidelines. At one point, there was an increase in arguments that called for the return to cramming-style education.

4-2 The trend of curriculum research development within school settings

From the 1980s to 1990s, educational issues such as school violence, bullying and refusal to attend schools became serious. Furthermore, there was also an opinion that even if children did not exhibit such problematic behaviour, many children learning at school were essentially ‘running away from learning’ (Sato, 2000) (in other words, they were not committed to learning). As such development progressed, children’s participation in classes came to be discussed vigorously, partially influenced by the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and the legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) proposed by Lave and Wenger (1993). Representative examples of such discussions include the theories of critical thinking learning (Takeuchi, 1994) and learning community (Sato, 1995).

The introduction of the PFIS in the 1998 revision of the NCS revitalised the curriculum reformation across the country. Schools that succeeded the Taisho-era liberal education or post-war new education traditions served as the forerunners of this reformation. Teachers from across Japan gathered for the public research meeting of such traditional schools, sharing the exploratory methods of learning and teaching. The introduction of the PFIS had a major significance in spreading education that encompasses modern issues from various angles, including education on life, career education, human rights education, citizenship education, international understanding education, environment education and disaster prevention education. Furthermore, since it was apparent that evaluating this class with traditional tests would be difficult, it also served as an impetus for the portfolio assessment to receive attention.

Another new development that occurred since the 1990s that merits attention is the trend of education reform led by regional municipalities seen in various

areas in Japan. In particular, the initiatives by the Kochi Prefecture that aimed for the improvement of education competence through the cooperation between households, schools and the region and the initiatives by Inuyama-city, Aichi Prefecture, and Shiki-city, Saitama Prefecture, where the education reform was carried out with the mayor and the board of education at the helm, received nationwide attention. It is true that decentralisation reform and regulation easing by the government were behind this development. At the same time, it could also be attributed to the maturity of the citizens in charge of municipalities.

On the other hand, the expansion of economic disparity through the neoliberal economic policies worsened the poverty issue among children. It is worth noting that during this period, practices of volunteers engaging in assisting children's learning spread across Japan.

5 The era of globalisation compatibility

5-1 Education policy after the PISA shock

PISA 2003, held by the OECD, revealed in December 2004 that Japanese students' reading literacy had declined from the average level of participating countries. This was a huge blow to Japanese people, who have maintained a high level in the international comparative scholastic ability survey. It later came to be referred to as the 'PISA shock'.

From the PISA shock onward, Japanese education policies started to explore a vision of well-balanced scholastic ability while aiming for the improvement of 'solid scholastic ability'. As PISA evaluates the ability to use language, symbols and text interactively, it clearly differs from the perception of academic ability as an ability to memorise or reproduce knowledge and skills. While being influenced by PISA's perception of abilities, the 2008 revision of the NCS perceived academic ability as including the following three factors: (1) the acquisition of fundamental knowledge/skills, (2) the abilities to think, judge and express oneself necessary for resolving issues using one's knowledge/skills and (3) an attitude to engage in learning autonomously.

On the other hand, moral education is moving consistently toward being strengthened. In the 2006 Basic Act on Education reform, nationalistic morality was further reinforced. The 2008 revision of the NCS reinforced the approach of conducting moral education throughout the curriculum.

Moreover, policies that emphasise schools' ingenuity continued to be implemented. In "About the Education Promotion Basic Plan: Toward the Realisation of Education Nation" (2008), a report by the Central Council for Education, various approaches have been declared, including 'The vitalisation of school with the school and the community joining together as one', through the introduction of community schools (School Management Council System) and the school selection system of public schools; and 'assistance toward initiatives through ingenuity from school settings', which promotes making class organisation standards flexible,

guidance by learning maturity, installing teachers for teaching a small number of students, and a school selection system in accordance with regional circumstances.

The reform trend of holding the ingenuity of schools and children's individuality and volition in high regard makes one recollect the post-war new education. However, the 2000s reform differs in modality from the post-war new education, since it is advanced under the neoliberal policies that enforce the regulations on the input (targets) and output (results). "Creating a New Era of Compulsory Education" (2005), a report by the Central Council for Education, put forward a 'structural reformation of compulsory education', which aims for the following state: (1) after the target-setting and foundation implementation for realising such targets have been conducted with the state taking responsibility, (2) the decentralisation reform for expanding the authority and responsibility of municipalities and schools will be advanced, along with (3) ensuring the quality of compulsory education by the state taking responsibility for educational outcomes. In response, the nationwide scholastic ability/learning state survey was conducted from 2007 onward. Due to this survey, schools voluntarily made having high grades on the academic survey their goal. As such, there were criticisms that it restricted educational practices.

Currently (July 2016), MEXT is formalising its examination toward the next NCS revision. In October 2014, the Central Council filed for Education a report on making moral education a 'special subject' (Central Council for Education, 2014); and a "special subject in moral education" was introduced in the partial revision of the NCS in March 2015. Furthermore, in *On the State of Standards for Curriculum in Primary/Secondary Education* (inquiry), the following questions have been asked: (1) How do we conceive a curriculum in which education goals and content, learning and teaching methods, and learning evaluation are perceived as one? (2) What kinds of revisions are necessary for subjects and courses, based on qualities and competencies to be fostered? and (3) What is necessary as a measure for improving curriculum management, learning/teaching methods and evaluation methods at each school?

The reason 'qualities and competencies to be fostered' were raised as keywords includes the influence from international debate related to key competency and 21st-century skills. As globalisation and shifts into ICT progress rapidly, the development of human resources and civilians who possess a zest for living in post-modernised society is being investigated.

5-2 A new development in curriculum development

From the PISA shock onward, the aim has been the improvement of solid scholastic ability. In the midst of this trend, the focal point of discussion within schools shifted back to enhancing subject-based education. In particular, the proposition of 'schools that teach and make you think' (Ichikawa & Kaburagi, 2007) had a great impact on the 2008 revision of the NCS as something that strikes a balance

between learning and exploration. From the perspective of enhancing linguistic activities within classes to improve reading literacy, an increasing number of schools engaged in the practice of community learning (Johnson et al., 1998) and collaborative learning. In addition, the practice example that develops and practices performance evaluation has received attention as something that indicates the future of curriculum development that fosters the abilities to think, judge and express (Matsushita, 2007; Nishioka, 2009; Tanaka, 2011).

Furthermore, a policy to emphasise the development of qualities and competencies was aimed for in the next revision of the NCS. At the same time, there is increasing focus on instruction for improving thinking skills (Kansai University Elementary School, 2012) and active learning (Matsushita & the Center for the Promotion of Excellence in Higher Education, Kyoto University, 2015).

Knowledge for effectively conducting school curriculum management is starting to be accumulated as well. For example, formats have been proposed to analyse the actual state of curriculum management and to consider improvements (Tamura, 2014). Also, teacher training in a format in which teachers can participate more actively (i.e., workshops (Murakawa, 2005) and case methods (Ando, 2009)) are proposed.

Conclusion

As the above outline indicated, curriculum development in Japan has experienced conflicts between the state and the people at times, while at other times, the two have impacted one another, and the curriculum has developed to this day. The characteristics of the critical examination of national education policies, acceptance of the realities of children at school, learning from academic research results, and the activities of teachers who propose the ideal state of education, including specific practices to achieve such a state, have been continuously updated and are an excellent tradition within Japanese education.

We are currently experiencing major changes of the times, with developments such as globalisation, moves to ICT and global warming occurring. In order to ensure that children have the ability to succeed in the next generation, we need to recognise the ever-increasing significance of learning from practices and theories that Japanese education circles have accumulated.

Notes

- 1 The transition of the post-war non-governmental education research movement is described in detail in Ken Otsuki's *Post-war non-governmental education research movement history* (1982). Furthermore, *The Teachers Who Pioneered the Era: Messages from the Post-War Education Practice*, edited by Koji Tanaka (2005), summarises the characteristics of representative practitioners who led the non-governmental education research movement.
- 2 Based on the national economic calculation (GDP statistics) by the Cabinet Office.

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