

Relationship Between Curriculum and Society: A Brief Overview of Japan's Education System From 1945~2014

Mark Andrew PILEGGI*

ABSTRACT

This paper's main theme was decided while I was studying for my Master of Science in Education specializing in Curriculum, Instruction and Technology. I was researching curriculum and its effect on society and vice versa, but instead of focusing on America's system, I chose to research about Japan, as it has been a short but exciting journey in the last 70 years. I love Japan, and raising my own two children here, I want to try my best to help make reforms in education, especially English education, where ever possible. Let's work together to bring about changes for the better to both the educational system and essentially to society as a whole.

Keywords: curriculum, society, educational system, implementation, democracy

1. Introduction

Ever since the mid-1940's, the United States has played an extensive role in the total reform of Japan in the political, governmental, religious and educational realms. Here we will focus on outlining the reform that began in 1945 that changed not only the curriculum but the entire educational system in Japan in the course of 8 years. The period of time examined begins in a rather sensitive period, but I hope that it will not offend anyone. My wish is that this information might stimulate healthy thinking about curriculum and educational reforms.

2. 1945-1959

In stark contrast to the notion introduced by Olivia (2005) that curriculum rarely changes completely or abruptly, this is exactly what the end of World War II and the occupation of the United States in Japan caused the Japanese educational system to undergo. Japan had been implementing an imperialistic education system that had been using a militaristic, educational curriculum for from the end of the Meji Period up to World War II. The United States tried to eradicate this militaristic education system and "democratize" Japan. The educational system that the United States implemented was based on the American model. Teachers that were antagonists of the US were removed from the school system and teachers with anti-war effort ideas that had lost their jobs before the war were offered new positions. Discrimination was prohibited.

Shinto was considered the ultra- nationalistic source and was banned from schools completely. There was a purge of the teaching staff and 650,000 teachers were examined. Just under 3,000 teachers were purged without any further examination, which meant there were huge losses to the teaching force at this time. The school system took on a 6-3-3-4 structure with six years of elementary education, three years of junior high school and three years of high school followed by four years of university. Compulsory education started out being elementary school only but was soon extended to include junior high school as well.

The overhaul of the national educational administration was a huge task. What had been a top down tier system was changed to a democratic system requiring local boards of education to be established. The U.S. demanded that non-professional community members be elected into administration on the local level to make the change to a democratic style. This was a totally new concept in Japan and it was difficult for the newly independent boards of education to create enough funding to pay teachers and secure facilities for use as schools. It wasn't until the economic boom of the 1950s that the school system had enough money to properly fund its teachers, the facilities and the materials needed. In the area of materials, all of the textbooks had to be recalled, most of them rewritten, especially in the subject areas of morals, Japanese national history and geography. Civics courses were implemented not only for the students but on the community level as well, social education was needed to educate all citizens about the new form of government

*General Studies Lecturer

called democracy. Political and educational reforms were connected in many ways, and the enforced equity of the sexes was another such area that was the result of a direct order by Douglas MacArthur to the Japanese Cabinet in December of 1945. From a curriculum planner's viewpoint, this type of situation must be a colossal job and a huge responsibility.

To help organize this huge complete curricular reform in Japan, the U.S. sent over a team of 26 acknowledged experts in education led by George D. Stoddard. After analyzing the situation, they outlined the curricular changes deemed necessary meeting with the Japanese acknowledged team of educational experts. It was at this point in Japanese history that the Romanized alphabet was introduced and English language arts entered the Japanese curriculum. Even more important was the revising of Japanese morals, civil law, Japanese history and geography into one new wider scoped class called social studies, which was the vehicle that would deliver the understanding of democracy to formerly imperialistic Japan. The fusion of the different disciplines allowed for the smaller number of teachers to complete the large task at hand. A similar course was introduced as civil education to educate the public community and train new teachers in higher education as well. Not only in schools, adult education was implemented through parent-teacher activities, evening and extension classes for adults as well making use of libraries and museums. In the "Report of the United States Education Mission to Japan" (1946) which became the guideline for the United States new democratic curriculum implementation, they notably stated, "To this end, knowledge must be acquired that is broader than any available in a single prescribed textbook or manual, and deeper than can be tested by stereotyped examinations. A curriculum consists not merely of an accepted body of knowledge, but of the pupils' physical and mental activities; it takes into account their differing backgrounds and abilities. It should therefore be set up through cooperative action involving teachers, calling on their experiences and releasing their creative talents."

Because of the scale of change implemented in Japan after World War II, curriculum planning and reform were continually implemented. After the U.S. occupation of Japan ended, Japan saw the need for reform and in 1958 Courses of Study were announced, making the curriculum more compatible to the Japanese educational system as they saw fit. Slowly but surely other subjects were introduced back into schools including the dividing of social studies back into civics, geography and history. These changes

could be made as the economy rebounded and government funding and scholarships were able to help provide the facilities, materials and newly trained teachers. To help stimulate the economy after the war science and mathematics were targeted as good subjects to focus on and the results caused a circular effect of education helping to increase technical skills in the work force and the rising economy helped the funding the educational system.

3. 1960s

The 1960s was a period of rapid economic growth and technological advancements. To keep up with the world changing around them, the Japanese decided that further reform of the curriculum would be necessary and a new Courses of Study was implemented for elementary schools in 1971 and for junior and senior high school in 1972. In efforts to collect data to help in the reform of the curricula The Ministry of Education tried to use surveys of student's academic progress in their last year of elementary and secondary school. Unfortunately the Japanese Teacher's Union was not on board because they worried the data would be used to evaluate the teachers in attempts to control the educational system. Nevertheless, an international survey in 1964 helped the Japanese educational system to gain international recognition when Japanese marks were high internationally, and this helped to facilitate the cooperation needed for more reforms and a remarkable increase in students seeking higher education. From the MEXT reports on "The Growth of Higher Education" it shows an exponential growth in the number of universities and junior colleges from 226 and 228 respectively in 1953 to 389 universities and 486 junior colleges in 1971. In terms of students, the number attending universities increased 1,468,538, which was 3.3 times that of the student population in 1953, where the number of junior college attendees jumped 4.3 percent to 275,256 students. The sudden boost in the higher education can be attributed to multiple factors including the increase of economic stability in the 1950s and the establishment of a "single-track" system that insured students an automatic eligibility to higher education if they completed their secondary education. A simplification of procedures for the establishment of new private universities and the rising prestige of such private universities greatly contributed to the rapid growth in higher education as well.

3. 2006-2014

Fast forwarding to the present situation in Japan, we find the revision of the Basic Act on Education which

was implemented in 2006. It was the largest reform to take place since the 1950s and in it they outline the foreseeable important social changes facing Japan as well as the social concerns of the current times. In paragraph 1 of Article 17 of the revised Act the government was required to formulate a basic plan, which would facilitate the comprehensive and systematic implementation of measures for the promotion of education. The Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education was implemented in 2008, and the resulting curricular changes coming from the plan are still being implemented at the time of this paper's conception in 2012. Critical issues such as the general public's excessive pursuit of economic convenience, weakened social ties and the spread of undesirable "individualism" were addressed. It clearly stated the dangers of a society chasing material abundance and warned about the declining birthrate and ever increasing elderly population. I was most impressed to read the amount of social conditions in the opening of the plan for Japan's commitment to the improvement of not only the educational system but the reconstruction of the social systems. The competition intensifying in the international society was also mentioned, China specifically, as well as the need for international efforts towards finding new solutions for energy sources and food shortages. Issues such as ethnic conflicts and religious confrontations as well as terrorism were also mentioned at the onset.

In the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education (2008) the Mission of education opens with an interesting summary of the role of education, "Education is essential to building character through unique personality development, improvement of abilities, acquisition of independence and lifelong pursuit of a happy life. At the same time, education takes on a mission to nurture the citizens who form the country and society. Education also empowers us to sustain a democratic society. Furthermore, throughout the history of mankind, cultures and civilizations have been transmitted from one generation to another through the intermediation of education, and have evolved into a richer state. Such role of education is universal regardless of how our society changes in the future."

It appears that indeed the Japanese have come to embrace the benefits of democracy and the value of education in securing a healthy future for the country. The objectives laid out to help transform students into healthy citizens of the future were made into five objectives and then summarized into the following three:

-To bring up people whose intelligence, morals and physical strength are well-balanced, and who are

independent and seek self-realization throughout a lifetime.

-To bring up citizens who respect a sense of public duty and voluntarily participate in the formation of the country and society.

-To raise Japanese people who participate in the international society with respect for the traditions and culture of Japan and other countries.

These objectives were brought into being by the Office of Educational Reform, Policy Planning and Coordination Division, Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau in 2008.

4. Conclusion

It seems as if being a curriculum designer could be paramount to founding a country such as George Washington and the founding fathers did in 1776. What an enormous task and responsibility at the national level! The knowledge born from the experiences of each countries educational system can be used to help other countries in similar situations or for developing countries following the same pattern. UNESCO has a great Bureau called the International Bureau of Education, which has the profiles of 130 countries education systems available online at <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en.html>

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