

National Curriculum Reforms in Japan from 1998 to 2018: A CDA on the Possibility of Sustainable Development

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Abstract

In Japan, there is a concept of Yutori (relaxed) education. Yutori education refers to education that follows the national curriculum guidelines (or the Course of Study) revised in 1998. Although the guidelines in 1998 respected human nature, living together, and learning through problem solving, they have been criticised because Yutori education results in low academic ability, as the contents of the curriculum and number of lesson hours have decreased. In the mid-2000s, the term “Yutori generation” was also used, referring to the generation who learned according to the guidelines revised in 1998; this generation is regarded as selfish. However, this criticism is not accurate. Now, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is concerned that the criticisms from the Yutori education will once again arise. For that reason, the national curriculum guidelines that were revised in 2008 and again in 2017 have increased the number of class hours and do not fully emphasise learning through problem solving.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the validity of Japan's curriculum reform from 1998 to 2018, focusing on the concept of Yutori education, and to think about the possibility of the sustainable development of curriculum policy in the future. In this report, I first explain the criticism of Yutori education in Japan. Next, I point out that the criticisms about the Yutori education and the Yutori generation were incorrect. Then, I examine how the criticism about the Yutori education affected the revisions of the national curriculum guidelines in 2008 and 2017. Critical discourse analysis (CDA), which focuses on language and discourse created with a specific intention, is used in this study. CDA “has become one of the most influential and visible branches of discourse analysis” (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000:447) since the late 1980s. It is problematic that such language and discourse form a specific image that influences people's thinking, labels some people, and has a negative influence on policy formation.

National Curriculum Guidelines

The national curriculum guidelines establish standards for schools to develop a curriculum under the “School Education Act” to ensure a certain level of education nationwide. MEXT defines the national curriculum guidelines as: “broad standards for all schools, from kindergarten through upper-secondary schools, to organise their programmes in order to ensure a fixed standard of education throughout the country. In addition, the “Ordinance for Enforcement of the School Education Act” specifies the standard number of school hours for subjects, amongst other things. Based on these guidelines and the annual number of school hours and other requirements, each school develops a curriculum tailored for local and school conditions” (MEXT, “What Is the Course of Study?”).

Revision of the national curriculum guidelines is announced and implemented after a thorough understanding of its objectives. The revision and implementation history of the national curriculum guidelines for elementary, junior-high, and senior-high schools in the Heisei Era is shown below. The year of revision here is described collectively for all school levels (based on the year for elementary schools, etc.).

Year	Details
1989	Revised for elementary, junior-high, and senior-high schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elementary: Implemented in April 1992 • Junior high: Implemented in April 1993 • Senior high: Implemented in April 1994 (grade-based)
1998	Revised for elementary and junior-high schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elementary and junior high: Implemented in April 2002 Revised in 1999 for senior-high schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior high: Implemented in April 2003 (grade-based)
2008	Revised for elementary and junior-high schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elementary: Implemented in April 2011 • Junior high: Implemented in April 2012 Revised in 2009 for senior-high schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior high: Implemented in April 2013 (grade-based)
2017	Revised for elementary and junior-high schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elementary: For implementation in April 2020 • Junior high: For implementation in April 2021 Revised in 2018 for senior-high schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior high: For implementation in April 2022 (grade-based)

Meaning of “Yutori”

“Yutori” is a common word, as in the expression “a comfortable (Yutori) lifestyle,” and it generally has a positive meaning. It can be said to be a word reflecting an ability to afford something. For example, when I am busy, I could say, “There is no time or space (Yutori).” “Yutori” is a keyword referring to “youth theory” and “education theory” in Japan, and it is commonly used in terms such as “Yutori education” (relaxed or stress-free education) and “Yutori generation.” These words have been coined through a combination of “Yutori + education” and “Yutori + generation,” but in Japan, they are established as well-known phrases that hold a negative connotation. It is not uncommon to hear such statements as, “the Yutori education failed”; “the Yutori generation has low academic ability”; and “the Yutori generation is selfish.” But are these true?

Definition and Criticisms of Yutori Education

Before answering this question, it is important to clarify the definition of Yutori education. Although there are various opinions on the scope of Yutori education, it can be said that it is referring to the education based on the national curriculum guidelines for revision in 1998. The full implementation of the guidelines was in 2002. The guidelines emphasise learning through problem solving and experiential learning. In addition, in accordance with the five-day weekly school system implemented in 2000, class hours were reduced and the curricular content was carefully selected. Some critics who responded negatively to this feature began criticising the national curriculum revised in 1998 by calling it “Yutori education,” starting around 2000. The MEXT, in order to address the criticism of the Yutori education, increased the contents of education and class hours at the guidelines revised in 2008 and 2017 (see Tables 1 and 2). The revised national curriculum guidelines for 2008 were positioned as “reactionary” towards the revised guidelines from 1998. It cannot be denied that similar criticisms continue with the 2017 revised edition.

Table 2: Changes Made to the Standard Elementary-School Class Hours for All Grades

Revision Year	Japanese Language	Social Studies	Arithmetic	Science	Socio-environmental studies	Music	Arts and Crafts	Home Economics (HE)	Physical Education (PE)	Foreign Language	Moral Education	Special Activities	Integrated Study Period	Foreign Language Activities	Total Number of Class Hours
1989	1,601	420	1,011	420	207	418	418	140	627	0	209	314	0	0	5,785
1998	1,377	345	869	345	207	358	358	115	540	0	209	209	430	0	5,367
2007	1,461	365	1,011	405	207	358	358	115	597	0	209	209	280	70	5,645
2018	1,461	365	1,011	405	207	358	358	115	597	140	209	209	280	70	5,785

Table 3: Changes Made to the Standard Junior-High School Class Hours for All Grades

Revision Year	Japanese Language	Social Studies	Math	Science	Music	Art	Health and PE	Technology and HE (THE)	Foreign Language	Moral Education	Special Activities	Elective	Integrated Study Period	Total Number of Class Hours
1989	455	350-385	385	315-350	140-175	140-175	315-350	210-245	☆	105	105-210	350-630	0	3,150
1998	350	295	315	290	115	115	270	175	315	105	105	155-280	210-335	2,940
2008	385	350	385	385	115	115	315	175	420	105	105	★	190	3,045
2017	385	350	385	385	115	115	315	175	420	105	105	★	190	3,045

Note: A time unit is 45 minutes for elementary schools and 50 minutes for junior high schools. Time for special activities will be allocated to homeroom activities. The standard number of class hours for foreign language at junior high schools under the 1989 revision (☆) is 105-140 hours per grade as a selective subject. Selective subjects in junior-high school could be covered at a school's discretion and have not been eliminated under the 2008 revision (★). However, they might be difficult to cover in practice because of limited class hours.

Source: National Institute for Educational Policy Research, Changes in Curriculum Improvement Policy, Subject-Based Goals, and Assessment Points, Etc. — School Curriculum Council's Reports, Courses of Study, and Guidance Records (1947-2003), March 2005:26-27. Central Council for Education's Report, "Improvement of the Course of Study, Etc. for Kindergartens, Elementary, Junior-High, and Senior-High Schools and Special-Needs Schools," 17 January 2008. MEXT "On the Course of Study," A handout at the Working Group for Curriculum, Sub-Committee Meeting for Elementary and Secondary Education, Central Council for Education, 24th April 2017.

What age group does the Yutori generation refer to? According to newspaper articles, this generation is delineated based on whether a student took university entrance examinations using the revised educational guidelines of 1998. Current first- and second-year undergraduates took an entrance examination for university based on the revised educational guidelines for 2008 for all subjects. Therefore, it can be said that the current first- and second-year university students are not in the Yutori generation.

Is Criticism of the Yutori Education Correct?

At Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), Japanese academic achievement levels have been high, including during the time when the students from the Yutori generation participated. TIMSS is designed to assess to what extent students have retained what they learned at school. Japanese students have taken the highest ranks in arithmetic, mathematics, and science, although there have been some fluctuations as the results of participating countries increase on each assessment.

At the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Japan students made up the top class in the 2012 survey. Students who took the PISA in 2012 were from the generation learning using the 1998 revised national curriculum guidelines, the so-called “Yutori education.” In other words, there was no drop in academic ability due to the Yutori education. As for the score of PISA reading literacy, since there was fluctuation in the 2000s, the reason will be discussed below. I will consider the reason why the reading literacy scores were low in the 2003 and 2006 surveys, yet outstanding in the 2009 and 2012 surveys.

First, why then have the results of PISA reading literacy been at around the average level in the 2000s, particularly in 2003 and 2006? Or why did PISA mathematical literacy results seem lower even in the higher group than TIMSS results? The answer is simple. Japanese children had not gotten used to PISA-type questions. If they were asked to answer the problems that they had never learned, they would have no other choice than to give wrong answers or no answer because they failed to understand the points of the questions. It is well-known that PISA measures key competencies, which will enable them to participate fully and productively in adult life. This is a new view of academic ability to Japanese students. Although a new view of academic ability has been presented, the abilities to use skills and knowledge in real-life situations have not been taught in Japan. That is why Japanese children may have failed to fully understand the intention of the questions in the PISA reading literacy test and consequently showed poorer-than-expected results.

Second, why then did Japanese reading results rise in the 2009 and 2012 tests? Because schools started to give PISA-conscious lessons. After Japan received unfavourable results on the 2003 and 2006 PISA, schools started to give Type A questions (basic knowledge) and Type B questions (ability to think, judge, and express using knowledge) in the National Assessment of Academic Ability (for 6th graders and 9th graders; Japanese language and arithmetic/mathematics (science from 2012) starting in 2007. Type B questions are PISA-type questions, and thus reportedly have greatly affected the front line of education (Sato, 2016). Soon after that, lessons reflecting PISA-type questions have spread widely in junior- and senior-high schools.

The generation raised under the 1998 revision has been criticised as a Yutori generation whose academic standards went down under Yutori education. However, a closer look at TIMSS and PISA results finds such a logic unreasonable. Since their academic abilities have not declined, the negative usage of “Yutori education” and “Yutori generation” turns out to be quite contrary to fact.

Is Criticism of the Yutori Generation Correct?

The Yutori generation has been widely criticised. Although it is difficult to explain the characteristics of the young generation, Furuich (2011:73–75) has made the following points based on the “public opinion survey on social consciousness” of the Cabinet Office:

“ Do you always want to be useful for society as a member of society? This question has been consistently asked in the survey. According to the 2012 survey, 59.4% of young people in their twenties are hoping to serve society. In the 1983 survey, only 32% answered that they wanted to serve society in their twenties. That means that in less than 30 years, the number of young people who really want to serve society has doubled. Contemporary young people are not just ‘society-oriented,’ but also want to contribute to society. ”

From here, we can see the young generation’s interest in public contribution. This may be the result of a variety of background factors, but if we focus on school education, it can be considered to be the result of the 1998 national curriculum guidelines that strove to overcome competitive education and emphasised human nature, living together, problem solving, and experiential learning. In other words, criticism of the Yutori education and the Yutori generation is not appropriate; instead, it can be said that it is a factual misunderstanding.

How Did the Criticisms Lead to the 2008 Revision?

The negative impact of Yutori criticism in the development of curriculum policy still exists. Since the MEXT is concerned about the re-occurrence of the criticism towards the Yutori education, its only option is to increase class hours and educational content. In short, because of the discourse surrounding the Yutori education, MEXT cannot freely develop curriculum policy. After the revision of the curriculum guidelines in 2008, the quantity of homework assignments and learning drills increased. Since the curriculum that was taught in the upper grades was moved to the lower grades, unreasonable learning expectations that are incompatible with developmental stages were raised. At the same time, various problems concerning children’s growth have arisen. For example, according to the MEXT “Final Report on Support to School Refusing Students” (Study and Research Collaborators Meeting on School Refusal, July 2016), the number of schools refusing pupils increased for the first time in six years in 2013 (in academic year [AY] 2014, 0.39% of elementary-school children and 2.76% of junior-high-school students do not attend school). The current National Curriculum Guidelines have made educational content too difficult, and students are busy everyday. Should the national curriculum guidelines be considered as one of the background factors of the high proportion of school refusal?

How Did the Criticisms Lead to the 2017 Revision?

The 2017 revision did not reduce study content. It maintained the number of class hours, and even increased class hours in elementary schools. The 2008 revision had created certain problems, including an increased number of class hours, a focus on drill work, increased homework, the use of units unsuitable for the students' developmental stages, and a "crowded curriculum." The guidelines that were revised in 2017 did not solve any of these problems. Thus, the coursework might not all fit into the allotted time. As a matter of fact, some boards of education have even proposed a "shorter summer holiday." The main reason behind these policies that focus on "total volume" and "increased content and class hours" is that MEXT has gone on the defensive; they fear the revival of the criticism of the Yutori education that the 1998 revision might have caused academic decline. However, that criticism was mistaken. The 1998 revision did not advocate for children being relaxed, but rather should have been considered as promoting learning through problem solving and living together.

Conclusion

From an international perspective, the Japanese curriculum policy has problems. In order to realise a competency-based curriculum for a knowledge-based and global society, OECD suggests that increasing the number of class hours is inappropriate; instead, deep learning is important (Taguma, 2015). Mochizuki (2018) who is a Head of Programme, Curriculum, UNESCO MGIEP mentioned that humanity should be respected rather than economic competition. Is the current curriculum of Japan keeping students busy, competing to exclude them from 21st-century learning? Internationally, is there any possibility that the Japanese education will become obsolete? In order to maintain the possibility of sustainable development in the curriculum, discourse such as the criticism of Yutori education should be abolished. Constructive discussion over education is the first step in policy formation that will lead to sustainability.

The ideas of Yutori education and Yutori generation, as discussed in this article, have no substance and evidence; in addition, they have tarnished the image of many young people. The 2008 revision of the national curriculum guidelines, developed as a reaction to these negative ideas, seems to have forcibly moved some educational units from upper grades to lower grades. This can result in social problems like insufficient understanding or bipolarisation of academic abilities. The groundless criticism against Yutori education and the Yutori generation had ripple effects on the 2008 revision and, consequently, on children.

These ideas are groundless and empty and should no longer be used. As today's values diversify, it may be unreasonable to categorise all of those people born in the same period as one generation. A one-sided remark such as "your generation is characterised by "xxx" easily spreads a collective image of a generation with no respect for individuality. As a result, the stereotypical view of a generation prevails throughout society, making those in the generation feel like "that's not who I/we really am/are" or "it's difficult to live like that." These negative feelings are far from productive. Here, the author wants to suggest the idea of being "generation-free."

“Generation-free” refers to being “free from a generation label and any words that spread its stereotypical characteristics.” The idea of generation-free specifically aims to free the population from groundless and improper words and remarks about generations, as well as simplified conceptions of those generations. This can liberate us from the pattern of seeing one single generation in a collective and fixed manner, and to instead pay attention to the intentions and needs of individuals and different categories (e.g., groups with the same interests that transcend generations), thus enabling us to generate new concepts, viewpoints, and ideas. This action will even lead to new market development, new places of belonging, and new business team formations, as well as intergenerational coexistence, ultimately leading to a renewed and revitalised society. Whether looking at business, policy-making, academic research, or community activity, going beyond a generational framework and instead exchanging ideas about particular themes is expected to improve the activity’s quality.

Realising a generation-free society requires the ability to view generation-related remarks objectively and properly disassemble them. What can be done to determine whether particular words are improper? Answering the questions of who, what, where, when, and how is important (Ikemizu, 2007:134). In addition, the author wants to emphasise the critical importance of the “power of knowledge,” specifically a breadth of vision, scholarly attainments, and the ability to research. When each of us learns to make more proper judgments, we can look critically at any argument.

Francis Bacon, the English philosopher, listed human mistakes (fallacious ways of thinking, preconceptions, and prejudice) that he called “the four idols.” Idols of the tribe are mistakes based on human sensory illusion. Idols of the cave are mistakes caused by personal experience, habits, character, or living environment. Idols of the market are mistakes caused by improper words and expressions that spread where people gather. Finally, idols of the theatre are mistakes caused when people consider tradition, authoritative ideas, and doctrines to be absolutely correct. Based on this logic, the mistakes of the Yutori education and the Yutori generation largely correspond to the idols of the market and theatre. We need to be conscious of these perceptual mistakes that were highlighted by Bacon, and squarely face them on a daily basis. Such accumulated efforts should definitely get us closer to a generation-free society.

Note: This article is an English summary of “How Has Criticism of the Relaxed Generation Been Made?” published in Japanese in 2014, which was co-authored with Tomochika Okamoto, this article but summarises and revises Hiroshi Sato’s section. The book was introduced for discussion at SEAMEO and this theme attracted attention at the International Conference in Tokyo on 11 February 2018. This article was written in English to discuss “criticisms of Yutori education” internationally, especially with SEAMEO researchers, policy-makers and educators.

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