

# 日本の教育改革：国際評価と総合的学習

## Japanese Education Reform: The Integrated Curriculum and the Politics of International Assessment

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### ABSTRACT

Japan is undergoing its most comprehensive education reform since the post WWII period. This research examines the integrated curriculum, a reform designed to provide teachers and schools with greater autonomy to design and implement educational activities that focus on human rights, multicultural, international understanding and environmental education, and community outreach. This paper describes the history of education reform in Japan; the deliberative process by which the current reforms were enacted; the debate currently taking place between supporters and opponents of the reform; and the integrated curriculum activities taking place in Japanese public schools. This research is based on seventeen months of fieldwork in Japan. During this time, the author observed integrated curriculum activities in about sixty public schools; spoke with Ministry of Education officials, scholars, teachers, and administrators; and consulted written commentary and scholarship in newspapers, magazines, and education journals. The author contrasts education reform in Japan that emphasizes autonomy and decentralization, with education reforms in the United States that are limiting teacher autonomy and centralizing educational administration. The author argues that education reform in both Japan and the United States are a reaction to the results of international assessments such as those administered by the OECD. He supports greater national autonomy in educational policy and practice, free from the constraints of international organizations.

日本は現在戦後最大の教育改革に取り組んでいる。本研究は総合的学習という、人権問題、多文化、国際理解、環境教育、地域活動などに焦点を当てたカリキュラムを含む教育活動を教師、学校が導入、構築していく事について考察する。本研究は現在の改革に至った日本の教育改革の歴史を詳述し、改革に際しての賛否の議論と現在の日本の公立学校で総合的学習の時間について、詳しく見ていく。本研究は17か月におよぶ現地調査に基づいている。この間、著者は公立学校60校の総合的学習を視察し、文部科学省の担当者、学者、教師、役員などに話を聞き、新聞、雑誌、教育研究紀要などの記事を参照した。著者は脱中央化や自主性を強調する日本の教育改革と、教育行政の中央集権化が進み、教師の自主性を制限する方向へ向かう米国の教育改革を比較する。著者は日本と米国における教育改革は、OECDなどが発行する国際評価の結果に対する反応と見る。そして、そのような国際組織による制約から自由な、より自立した国の教育政策と実践を支持する。

## 1 Japanese Education Reform: Policy, Politics, and Practice

Japan is in the midst of its third major education reform. Since the 1980s, reform has been high on the agenda of education policymakers in many nations and Japan is no exception. While the market-oriented reforms that stress accountability and choice are present in Japan's reform efforts, the nation has also embraced curriculum reforms that have reduced the core curriculum by 30% to make room for the *sogoteki na gakushu*, or the integrated curriculum, an attempt to individualize and diversify learning by providing students ample time for independent study and applied learning.

This paper is based on seventeen months of fieldwork in Japan: two months in 2003, and fifteen months in 2004-2005. During this time, I observed integrated curriculum activities in about sixty public elementary and junior high schools, and a few senior high schools in Japan. I spoke with Ministry of Education (MOE) officials, scholars, teachers, and administrators about the current reforms; and consulted written commentary and scholarship in newspapers, magazines, and education journals.

This article explains the historical and current context for education reform in Japan; considers the opinions of supporters and opponents of the current reforms including the media, the public, education scholars, and school teachers and administrators; describes the educational events that schools are undertaking in the context of the integrated curriculum; and draws some international comparisons with education reforms taking place in the United States.

## 2 The Historical and Current Context of Education Reform in Japan

Fujita has labeled the current reforms the "third

major education reform in Japan."<sup>1</sup> Japan's first education reform took place with the establishment of the modern education system during the Meiji Period (1868-1912). The Imperial Rescript of Education (1890) established the principles of an education system based on the service of the individual to the state. Three themes are prevalent in the Rescript: 1) Confucian values such as filial piety and loyalty, 2) the role of education as a moral exemplar, 3) and the duty of subjects the nation's laws. Seemingly opposed to the Enlightenment educational ideals that dominated Western educational thought in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Rescript reinforced the duties of the individual to the state, embodied in human form as the Japanese Emperor. The Rescript dominated the philosophical orientation of Japanese education until the post-war period (1945). According to Murthy, the Rescript was treated as a sacred document, with a level of respect similar to that afforded the Talmud, the Koran and the Bible. School principals kept the Rescript in a secure location and read from it on special occasions, and students memorized its contents.<sup>2</sup>

Japan's second education reform occurred in the late 1940s under Allied Occupation. The Fundamental Law of Education (1947) provided the basis for a democratic and egalitarian education system. Demilitarization, decentralization, and democratization were the primary concerns of the SCAP<sup>3</sup> education authorities during the post-WWII reform era. Among other measures, the SCAP Education Committee, with the cooperation (or coercion?) of their Japanese counterparts in the Ministry of Education, introduced social studies as a subject to provide students with opportunities to connect learning to their immediate social environment, and revised textbooks to reflect democratic ideals and values. By the beginning of the school year in April 1947, revised textbooks were in use in all subject areas with the exception

of history which proved to be contentious terrain between SCAP and the Japanese Ministry of Education officials.<sup>4</sup> According to Yoshida, educators considered the sixth national Japanese language readers as nothing short of revolutionary. The texts presented Japanese and international literature works that promoted a scientific spirit, individualism, respect for human rights, a spirit of community giving, love for humanity, world peace, world cooperation and harmony, and ideological thinking.<sup>5</sup>

The current 'third era' of education reform can be traced back to the documents of the Central Council for Education (CCE)<sup>6</sup> in the 1970s. In 1972, a CCE Report commented on the declining state of students' lives, and the stiff competition for entry into upper secondary school and higher education. The language of the document implies that Japanese children had lost their connection to nature, and that human relationships had suffered due to the rapid economic growth of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

In 1985, Yasuhiro Nakasone, the Japanese Prime Minister at that time, accelerated calls for reform by forming the National Council for Education Reform (NCER). The NCER produced four reports between 1985 and 1987. The following quotation reflects the prevailing mood of the NCER concerning the Japanese education system in the mid-1980s.

*“over-emphasis on memorization in classroom instruction has prevented children from developing the ability to think and judge independently...too many stereotyped people have been produced who have no distinctive individuality...competition for university entrance has intensified, (creating) various manifestations of the state of desolation in education such as bullying, school violence, juvenile delinquency, and*

*school refusal...Due to socio-economic development, the content level of subject areas has been increased...As a result, there are some students who cannot keep up with classroom lessons...School programs (tend) to be operated on the basis of teacher-centered modes of thinking rather than child-centered ones. Urbanization has caused a decrease in places to play for children, thinning of relations between neighbors, and the sense of community solidarity is weakened.”<sup>8</sup>*

Again in 1996, the Central Council for Education reiterated many of the previous concerns and recommended significant reforms including the implementation of the integrated curriculum. In this report, the CCE defined two concepts that are the current buzzwords in Japanese education reform: *yutori* education (education with room to grow) and *ikiru chikara* (zest for living).

The CCE defines *yutori* education as follows: to have psychological and physical space; to reflect and think about things; to be able to participate in and experience a variety of activities.<sup>9</sup> *Ikiru chikara* (zest for living) is described as the qualities and abilities to solve problems for oneself even in situations encountered for the first time; the ability to think independently; a spirit moved by nature and beautiful things; a mind for justice and fairness; respect for human rights; the ability to sympathize with and think from another person's point of view; learning for self-realization along with demands to meet the needs of a changing society; stress on the irreplaceable nature of individuality; personal and creative growth of each individual child; a spirit of self-reliance; individual responsibility; co-existence with others and tolerance towards cultural difference.<sup>10</sup>

### 3 The Policy: The Integrated Curriculum

In April 2002, the new Course of Study took effect in all public elementary and lower secondary schools throughout the nation.<sup>11</sup> With this document, the MOE enacted a five-day school week, a 30% reduction in the content of the core curriculum, and the Integrated Curriculum, the focus of my research.

The MOE defines the integrated curriculum as environmental and social experience based on observation, experimentation, research, problem-solving, and real-life learning. The purposes of the integrated curriculum are stated as: 1) to foster student's ability to find a theme, think, judge, and solve a problem on their own; and 2) to nurture in student's the ability to discover their own way of learning and thinking, and an attitude to discover topics with creativity and individualism.<sup>12</sup> To accommodate this reform initiative, the Japanese Ministry of Education provided schools three hours per week for local, school-site cultivation of the integrated curriculum.<sup>13</sup> With the goal of cultivating *ikiru chikara* (a zest for living) among students, individual schools generate integrated curriculum plans that specify the goals and purposes, describe the learning activities for the academic year, and list the expected outcomes.

The MOE issued broad guidelines to schools, recommending that they might implement activities that focus on one or more of five content areas: 1) environmentalism, 2) volunteerism, 3) information technology, 4) health and welfare, and 5) international understanding education. The MOE suggests that students might visit factories and learn about the manufacturing process, interact with people of different ages such as the elderly, and study English as part of international understanding education.<sup>14</sup>

### 4 The Politics

Shortly after the ink had dried on the new Course of Study released on December 16, 1998 (to be implemented in April 2002), controversy concerning the reforms had surfaced. The press was critical of the Course of Study, arguing that Japan would lose its achievement edge on international assessments. Business leaders stressed that human resources were the nation's greatest asset, and feared that a decrease in the content of the curriculum would diminish the richness of the nation's human capital. Sociologists contended that 'dumbing down' the curriculum would disadvantage some students who are not able to utilize private educational resources to prepare for entrance examinations.

In the following paragraphs, I refer to criticism and commentary to provide a brief outline of the diversity of opinion concerning current education reform in Japan. I also provide the comments of teachers concerning these issues to incorporate their perspective on the controversy.

Beginning in 1999, the academic decline (*gakuryoku teika*) debate engulfed the nation as critiques emerged almost overnight in newspapers, magazines, journals, and books to challenge the logic of the proposed reforms. In particular, the 30% decrease of the core curriculum raised a red flag.

The debate began unexpectedly with the publication of a book entitled 'College Students Cannot Calculate Fractions.'<sup>15</sup> Nishimura et al. administered math examinations on college students and found that students who had taken the math portion of the university entrance examination performed better than those that had not. Although Nishimura directed his criticism at the Ministry of Education's policy that permit students to bypass the math section of the entrance examination, he also warned against the 30% reduction in the

content of the math curriculum.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1999, the weekly publication of the Asahi Newspaper carried articles proclaiming an academic decline. One article, published on March 28 entitled “The Universities of Tokyo and Kyoto: Academic Crisis,” Asahi journalists used results of math examinations from these two institutions over the span from 18 years (1981 to 1999) to demonstrate a steady academic decline. This evidence, in the words of the Asahi reporter, made it impossible for anyone to deny the existence of an academic decline in Japan.

In simple terms, the term ‘academic’ ability in Japanese refers to reading, writing and arithmetic (*yomi, kaki, soroban*). However, as Shimizu points out, this definition of academic ability is far too narrow and does not take into consideration the current purposes of education that include computer literacy and cultural literacy. This concept of new academic abilities (*shin gakuryokukan*), which also integrated aspects of motivation, thinking skills, and the child’s interest into the discourse, first emerged in the Course of Study implemented in 1992 and has since influenced pedagogy in Japan.<sup>16</sup>

In an attempt to discover if an academic decline actually was real, Shimizu et al. re-tested Osaka students in 2001 on a test first administered in 1989. They discovered the following: 5<sup>th</sup> graders’ scores in language dropped by 11.5 points (80.6 to 69.1); the 5<sup>th</sup> grade math test showed a decline of 7.3 points (78.8 to 71.5); and junior high 2<sup>nd</sup> graders dropped 4.1 points in language and 5.1 points in math. In addition, these researchers discovered a camel-shaped (two humped) distribution of scores clustering around the 80<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> percentiles.<sup>17</sup> This fragmentation of students into two distinct achievement groups was also noted by Noguchi in his research.<sup>18</sup>

In May 2000, Sato wrote a piece entitled

“Escape for Learning.”<sup>19</sup> Based on a variety of sources, Sato determined that student’s academic ability had declined but more importantly, he noted what he called an ‘escape from learning.’ He found that students’ out of school study time had decreased, that they were reading less in their free time, and that the number of students who claimed that they hated some school subjects had increased. Sato estimated that while about 30% of students were highly motivated in their studies, the remaining 70% were ‘escaping from learning.’

Sato also claims that the decline of what he calls ‘Asian-style accelerated Modernization’ has adversely affected academic ability in Japan. Previously, in Japan’s era of rapid economic growth (mid-1960s to early 1990s), students were motivated by the prospect of social mobility through the acquisition of academic credentials. Sato interprets the education reforms based on the recommendations of various educational reform committees since the Nakasone era of the 1980s as a move towards a new conservatism in Japanese education policy. The recent reforms, including the 30% reduction of the curriculum, diversification of the high school curriculum, and choice of subjects for entrance examinations, all reflect a market-based ideology to education policy in which responsibility for a child’s education shifts from society to the individual (i.e. family).<sup>20</sup>

Kariya examined the academic decline issue from a social capital perspective. In an article published on January 11, 1999 in the Asahi Newspaper,<sup>21</sup> based on survey data collected in 1979 and 1997, Kariya et al. discovered a decrease in the amount of study time outside of the classroom. They found that the percentage of students who claimed that they do not study at all outside of school increased from 22% in 1979 to 35% in 1997. The researchers also examined the data using social capital parameters. They found a strong correlation between mother’s academic

attainment and the amount of time spent on study outside of school including examination preparation schools (*juku*). Kariya has labeled this situation an 'incentive divide' and claims that the pursuit of *yutori* education will further exacerbate the social class divide in Japan. As a result, it is possible that *yutori* education will cause middle class families in the cities to leave the public education system to attend private schools, while families in rural areas will have to invest more heavily in supplemental education for test preparation. Either way, the reform will increase the social class divide in Japan based on educational attainment.

Ohmori, a former bureaucrat at the Japanese Ministry of Education, claims that current criticism of the education system is based on one premise—anything having to do with studying, including exams, intellectual development, and knowledge—are cast in a negative light. Students obviously hear the opinions of the mass media and use this anti-intellectual excuse to support their lack of study. According to Ohmori, in the past, the conviction of preparing for entrance examinations to get into a good school and later obtain a desirable position in a corporation was sufficient to counteract the anti-academic arguments in the press. Presently however, as the economy has matured and the number of students has declined, entrance examinations alone no longer motivate students to study. Ohmori contends that there is no reason to believe that academic skills must be sacrificed for the sake of creativity and individuality. He calls for freedom of choice and accountability to correct the misguided course of Japanese education. By freedom of choice, he means that schools be granted greater autonomy to design curriculum, but with accountability to ensure that parents and the community have the information to properly evaluate the performance of their children's school.<sup>22</sup>

Nagao provides a critique of the scholarship on academic decline, calling the debate a political issue.<sup>23</sup> In his article, he analyzes the arguments of Nishimura, Ohmori, Kariya, and Sato (cited above). Nagao claims that both Nishimura and Ohmori frame their arguments in the context of national economic interests and profit. Both claim that the success of Japan's economy is the result of technological advancement based on high academic ability, and the loss of this competitive edge will produce economic hardship for Japan.

Nagao categorizes the arguments of Sato and Kariya as based on ability of the curriculum to meet the academic needs and interests of students. Sato claims that the escape from learning that he has observed is a social crisis in which Japan is losing its culture of learning. Sato places blame for this crisis directly on the new conservatism in Japan that is decreasing public accountability and increasing personal responsibility for education. Kariya claims that *yutori* education is expanding the incentive divide in education. Policies that promote personal choice, diversity and responsibility will help some students but others will suffer as a consequence of these policies. Kariya also sees the current reforms as a move away from education as a public good, provided equitably to all students, to education as a personal responsibility in which students with sufficient resources (both financial and cultural) will benefit, while those without will fall further behind, increasing the social divide in Japan.

The articles noted above represent a small sampling of the commentary and criticism on the academic decline debate in Japan. I hope to have provided a brief overview of the type of arguments that exist on the issue. To add another dimension to the discussion, below I refer to the opinions of teachers and administrators concerning the academic decline, *yutori* education, and the integrated curriculum.

## 5 Teachers Speak Out

I was curious about the way that teachers and administrators perceived the academic decline debate. In interviews, I asked educators whether they thought *yutori* education was responsible for academic decline. Overwhelmingly, educators and administrators that I spoke with supported *yutori* education and the integrated curriculum. Many were critical of the nature of the debate on academic decline in the press, suggesting that those who opposed the new Course of Study were from the business world and knew little or nothing of the condition of students in the classroom. The following comments demonstrate this opinion:

*“I think it is difficult to point to any one thing that created the academic decline problem. In current Japanese society, graduating from an elite institution is not enough to ensure employment. What is important in today’s society are people with the desire to live and succeed, those that can endure hardship and recover. They will be successful.”<sup>24</sup>*

An elementary school principal provided the following comments:

*“I don’t think anyone can answer the reason why students’ basic skills are in decline. For example, at the junior high school level, if we assume that academic ability is more than memorizing information for entrance examinations, then what is it?—it is ability to summarize information, communicate, find themes, etc. All of these skills should be considered part of academic ability. Also, the term *ikiru chikara* refers to learning beyond test scores—considering various social problems, and through this process, students*

*will acquire *ikiru chikara*. Those who criticize the academic abilities of Japanese students are capitalists and businessmen that see only the results of tests and not the reality of classrooms. Because college students cannot do math, they conclude that the high schools, junior high schools and elementary schools lack quality. Some of the parents also have this attitude. In the context of the integrated curriculum, students are considering things deeply, they are not just ‘playing’ as some have suggested. So now, the argument has divided into two camps—those who support and do not support *yutori* education and the integrated curriculum.”<sup>25</sup>*

On the other hand, a minority of educators I spoke with were opposed to *yutori* education and the integrated curriculum. As one teacher remarked:

*If you ask me which I support, I think it is mistake to decrease class time and implement integrated curriculum activities. The foundation of problem solving is basic academic skills. It is not helpful educationally to have students making presentations when they lack the proper basic skills. So they become good speakers, but so what if they do not know what they are talking about. Even if you win an argument, if the argument lacks content, it is not learning. In our current mode of *yutori* education, learning is relaxed and knowledge levels are decreasing, students are not studying... I now teach science and I see the decrease in basic skills among students. In the newspaper, you see articles that talk about students who cannot do math. I think the new Course of Study, particularly the decrease in content, is directly responsible for this.”<sup>26</sup>*

Another teacher expressed her frustration by demonstrating to me that her students were losing their ability to write Japanese kanji. While I was observing an integrated curriculum activity in her 6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, the teacher asked a student to come to the board and take notes on the content of the discussion. It soon became apparent that this student was having trouble writing some of the kanji characters and the teacher soon called on another student to assist her.

After the class, the teacher pointed this out to me and stated that many of her students could no longer write the kanji they were expected to know at that grade level. She then showed me her weekly schedule. In the 6<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum, 110 hours of the integrated curriculum are required. This is the equivalent of 3 hours per week, the same amount of time given to Japanese language instruction for 6<sup>th</sup> graders. Although she agreed with the principals of the integrated curriculum such as actual experience, problem solving, etc. she felt that this was an issue of methodology rather than curriculum. I interpret this to mean that if teachers change their teaching methods to incorporate the principals of the integrated curriculum into core courses such as language, science, social studies, etc., the need for 110 hours of integrated curriculum per year could be reduced or even eliminated. This attitude was prevalent at this particular elementary school in Kawasaki City. Several teachers commented to me that the number of hours for the integrated curriculum should be reduced while the learning principals of the integrated curriculum should be incorporated into core subjects.

## **6 The Practice: The Content of the Integrated Curriculum: A Cultural Model of Teaching and Learning**

As noted in the introduction, in the course of

seventeen months of fieldwork, I observed integrated curriculum in nearly sixty schools. My fieldwork took place in Japan's two major metropolitan areas: Osaka Prefecture, (the area surrounding Osaka City); and the greater Tokyo area (including Tokyo City, Yokohama City, Kawasaki City, and Chiba and Saitama Prefectures, and Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture).

Based on this fieldwork, I have constructed what I call a 'cultural model of teaching and learning' that emerged from the data during the course of my research. This cultural model of teaching and learning focuses on constructions of self and other in the context of cultural tradition and change in Japan. The model consists of four approaches to the integrated curriculum: 1) the human rights approach; 2) the community-based education approach; 3) the cross-cultural co-existence approach; and 4) the international understanding education approach. Each approach reflects aspects of tradition and change in Japanese society as the nation contends with ethnic diversity and a changing global role.

The cultural model of teaching and learning that I have constructed begins with integrated curriculum activities that provide students with opportunities to gain self-respect and self-esteem, and gradually extends the students' field of inquiry into inter-personal relationships, community, nation, and world. In the context of the human rights approach, students learn about the issue of bullying (*ijime*) and its consequences, and the value of human life through life studies classes (*inouchi no kyoiku*). They also explore human rights issues in Japanese society such as issues of equality facing minorities, the disabled, the homeless, and the elderly.

The community-based approach opens the doors of the school to the local community as students explore neighborhood facilities, commercial and residential distinctions, transportation systems, and

agriculture. More importantly, they discover the people of the community—the work that they do and the problems that they encounter. The man who runs a local dry cleaning service or bakes bread at the local bakery becomes the focus of student exploration, helping students develop a sense of local pride. Other integrated curriculum activities in the community-based approach focus on the work of traditional Japanese artisans and efforts to preserve their art forms; ancient Japanese history revealed in the physical environment through the examination of artifacts, museums, and historical sites; the recreation of a traditional farming village to simulate life in ancient Japan; and environment issues, both local and global. The community-based approach to the integrated curriculum shines a light on the Japanese nation, revealing its cultural traditions, natural habitat, and the everyday lives of its people.

The cross-cultural co-existence approach adds complexity to the cultural model of teaching and learning by adding an international dimension to local community. Learning events in this approach consider the growing ethnic and cultural diversity within Japan, particularly in communities with Korean, Indochinese, and Brazilian populations. Students consider the hopes and struggles of immigrant and minority students and adults in their communities, and learn about their native culture and language.

In the context of the international understanding education approach, the focus shifts to consider Japan's knowledge of, and interaction with, the rest of the world. Students discover the world through information technology, interaction, dialogue, and debate. In the process, they consider the influence of foreign culture on Japanese traditions, the lives of foreigners living in Japan, Japan's relationship with other nations, and Japan's evolving global role.

## 7 Globalization and Education: International Implications

The current education reform in Japan aligns with some international trends in education policy and practice, but at the same time, the integrated curriculum seems to contradict many of the current international trends.

Market-oriented neo-liberal ideology that criticizes the public sector as inefficient and pushes accountability dominates education policy in the United States. "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), the current Bush administration education policy, enforces this ideology. States design and administer annual tests for students in grades 3-8 to measure the performance of schools. Teachers and administrators are thus under pressure to raise the performance of their students to meet state standards. This form of 'high-stakes testing' is taking its toll on the educational process as schools in many states are 'modifying' curriculum to provide additional time for reading and math instruction, the two content areas emphasized in NCLB policy. For example, some school districts in Maryland have decreased social studies instruction to one semester rather than two, and some districts in Michigan have decreased hours for the arts (music and visual arts) to devote additional time to instruction in reading and math. There is an increasing fear that teachers are now 'teaching to the test.' In addition to the protests of educators, state legislators in nine states including Virginia and Utah have considered opting out of the legislation but are hesitant to do so given that they would lose between 5 to 10% of their educational funding.<sup>27</sup> The Harvard Civil Rights Advocacy Project warns that the legislation threatens to push more students out of the system.<sup>28</sup> In other words, rather than face failure in examinations, students will elect to withdraw from the education system.

On the other hand, in Japan, a 30% reduction in the core curriculum and the implementation of the integrated curriculum reflects a loosening of the curriculum, providing space for independent exploration, and opportunities for students to engage in dialogue, debate, and discussion. While the entrance examination system still takes its emotional toll on students as they prepare for high school, so-called high stakes testing at the elementary level is non-existent in Japan, although the Ministry of Education will begin to implement yearly examinations (*gaku testuto*) in 2007. However, to my knowledge, the MOE will not use this data to evaluate the performance of schools and/or teachers.

The trends in educational policy reform in the two nations are also troubling in a sense that they seem to be heading in opposite directions. While the U.S. is stressing basics in reading and mathematics, Japan is providing students more freedom to express themselves and engage in self-directed learning. These trends in and of themselves are not necessarily negative and might even provide some balance between basics skills and exploratory learning in both nations. However, the fear is that policymakers will fail to find common ground between basics skills and exploratory learning. Extending policies too far in either direction produces the possibility of a negative backlash. This is entirely possible in Japan as we have seen from the negative reactions to the current education reforms. Critics of NCLB in the United States are also out in full force, arguing against high stakes testing in its current form.

The role of international assessments in determining the direction of education policy in both nations should not be underestimated. The results of the examinations administered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA's TIMMS, 1995),

and the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development's (OECD) PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) (2000), have had a great influence on the direction of education policy in both countries. As is well known, the U.S. students have not performed as well as Japanese on these assessments. Since 'A Nation at Risk' (1983), a 'back to basics' movement has gained prominence in U.S. education policy, countering the progressive educational ideals that dominated the 1970s. The Clinton administration's education policy (Goals 2000) proclaimed that U.S. students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement by the year 2000. However, according to the U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the results of the IEA TIMMS test administered in 1995 and 2003 show no measurable difference in science and math achievement.<sup>29</sup> NCLB is the latest policy manifestation of the federal government's attempt to improve the performance of U.S. students on international assessments through focusing on the basics to the detriment of progressive education.

In Japan, the influence of international assessments on education policy are no less salient, but have produced different policy interactions. While Japanese students have retained a high ranking in math and science assessments (TIMMS, 1995 and PISA, 2000), on attitudinal surveys, Japanese students were far less likely to say that they like math or science, or had the desire to pursue a career in math or science. The Ministry of Education perceived these results as an indication of a motivational problem. Why did Japanese students, who out-performed their counterparts in most other nations, dislike math? The problem, according to the MOE, was the result of the cramming type of teaching (*tsume komi*) that dominates classroom instruction in Japan. What Japanese students needed, according to the MOE, were opportunities to apply knowledge to actual

real-life issues and problems.

Other data have also contributed to this perception. A survey conducted by the MOE revealed that a majority of Japanese students were unable to follow the content of their lessons. This phenomenon was labeled the 7-5-3 issue—30% of upper elementary age, 50% of junior high students, and 70% of high schools students indicated that they understood less than half of the content of their lessons (*hotondo wakaranai*).<sup>30</sup> The Japanese refer to this problem as the *ochikobore* issue, in other words, students who cannot keep up with their studies. In addition, a variety of school-related problems such as school refusal (*futoko*), in-school violence (*konai boryoku*), and classroom disorder (*gakkyu hokai*) have dominated the news media and scholarship on education for the past decade and have strengthened the demand for reform.

These ‘problems’ prompted the MOE to enact education policies to promote *yutori* education, including the 30% reduction of the core curriculum to make learning “easy from the student’s point of view,” and the integrated curriculum, to provide students with opportunities to apply their knowledge to the real world. The integrated curriculum has provided schools and educators with increased autonomy to create and implement curriculum based on the desires of students, teachers and parents. Given the heavy hand with which the Ministry of Education has historically controlled the Japanese education system, this is a remarkable development. The examples of the integrated curriculum activities noted previously represent progressive education ideals, activities designed to provide opportunities for students to consider social, environmental, and global issues.

International assessments continue to influence the direction of education policy in Japan. The results of the 2003 OECD’s PISA test of fifteen year-olds revealed that Japanese students have

faltered, falling from the first position to the sixth position on the applied math section of the test, and from eight to fourteenth in reading comprehension. Immediately, the press and some scholars pointed to *yutori* education as the source of the problem. On January 19 2005, both the Daily *Yomiuri* and the *Asahi* Newspapers reported that the Minister of Education indicated that schools could use the integrated curriculum for supplemental instruction in Japanese language and/or math. By early February, the Daily *Yomiuri* reported that 71.9% of the Japanese public disagrees with *yutori* education. This compares with 60% agreement among the public on *yutori* education shortly after the Ministry of Education announced curriculum reforms in late 1998.

The tendency to correlate Japan’s decline in international ranking on the latest PISA assessment to *yutori* education and the integrated curriculum is unfortunate for several reasons. First of all, the PISA test was administered in 2003 on fifteen year-old students worldwide. The integrated curriculum was not implemented until 2002. Therefore, it is premature to correlate the decline in Japan’s international ranking on the PISA test to *yutori* education and the integrated curriculum. Second, the 2003 PISA test was designed to measure applied knowledge, that is, the ability of students to apply scientific and mathematical concepts to real life issues and problems. A main criticism of Japanese education, at least among Japanese critics, has been the tendency to cram information into students (*tsume komi*) rather than provide students opportunities to apply knowledge to real issues. If this is case, it is logical that Japanese students would not score as high as students’ in nations that focus on applied knowledge. Hence, the 2003 PISA results re-affirm the MOE’s policies that promote *yutori* education to provide students with increased opportunities to apply knowledge to real social and global issues.

Finally, it is indeed unfortunate that international assessments have any bearing on national education policy. Globalization has raised the profile of the so-called supra-national organizations (World Bank, OECD, etc.) in the field of education policy. Many have criticized the structural adjustment policies of the World Bank for drastic cutbacks in social sector spending on education in debtor nations in an attempt to 'balance the national books' to secure loans from The Bank. According to Klees, the World Bank seems to have ignored the lessons learned after two decades of structural adjustment and continues to encourage developing nations to contain social spending.<sup>31</sup> Spring argues that the education policies of the OECD serve the needs of multinational corporations and global capitalism.<sup>32</sup> As a result, the OECD promotes neo-liberal policies in education that encourage market-driven reforms to the detriment of education as a 'social good.'

In my opinion, *yutori* education and the integrated curriculum have precipitated a fundamental change in the way that Japanese teachers teach. Students have much more time for independent exploration. They become content experts and share their knowledge with teachers and peers through individual and small group presentations. Students are engaged in extended debate on issues such as the recent anti-Japanese protests in China, and youth crime in Japan. They are exploring the growing ethnic diversity of their own nation and Japan's changing global role. Volunteers of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) are visiting classrooms to talk about their experiences in Morocco or Palestine. NGOs are talking to students about bullying, disability, cross-cultural co-existence, and international development.

The forces of globalization exert undue influence on national education policies as nations compete for economic dominance in the global marketplace

and at the same time, attempt to preserve cultural traditions amidst the onslaught of global culture. Many scholars believe that schools are the only institutions that can balance the global and the local, helping students identify with local and national culture while as the same time, embrace multiculturalism and a tolerance for difference, and prepare to work in a global labor force.

I feel that the integrated curriculum has provided the curricular space and teacher autonomy needed for these explorations of the global and the local to take place. Moreover, it is my opinion that many schools and teachers are utilizing the integrated curriculum for this purpose, focusing on activities that promote human rights, pride in one's local community, cross-cultural co-existence, and international understanding.

Globalization is a dual process with inherent tensions co-existing between global pressures from above, and local pressures from below. In this case, the forces from above, specifically the OECD, have placed a fear in the Japanese public that the quality of their human resources are in jeopardy, evidenced by the recent decline in the standing of Japanese students on the 2003 PISA test. From below, the integrated curriculum represents an effort to provide students with learning opportunities that help them balance the local and the global, to cherish cultural traditions while respecting the cultural differences of minorities within their national borders, and embrace a worldview based on making a positive contribution to world peace and human prosperity.

At the moment, the integrated curriculum continues to flourish at schools throughout Japan. However, its future remains uncertain as the political forces that stress international competition compete with those that support international understanding and cooperation. The outcome will no doubt be revealing: Will education policy in Japan continue to support teachers in the pursuit of

progressive educational ideals via the integrated curriculum, or will policies force them to return to pedagogy that stresses test preparation? Only time will tell.

## Notes

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