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28. THE CURRICULUM INNOVATION IN MAINLAND CHINA AND JAPAN: A SCHOOL-BASED APPROACH

BACKGROUND

One of the key reforms in the school curriculum of Japan and China in the 21st century is the focus on integrating subjects in the school curriculum and on promoting integrated activities in schools. This research attempts to analyze the integrated activities in Japan, a new aspect in the current curriculum reform, from its inception to its development, as well as the problems in its implementation in Japanese schools. A case study on an integrated project conducted in the northeastern part of China is also used to illustrate the issues and concerns in planning and implementing integrated activities in schools in Japan and China.

The new curricula, “Integrated Learning Time” in Japan and “Integrated Practical Activities” in China, were initiated and implemented concurrently, and their contents and approaches share many commonalities. However, the latest changes in Japan’s curriculum policies on educational reforms in 2008, specifically the reduction of the time allocated to the new integrated learning, show that the new curriculum may have encountered resistance from local schools and difficulties in its implementation. The decrease in time allocated for the schools’ integrated activities and the increase in time allocated for the core subject studies may indicate a decrease in their importance in Japan’s educational reforms or a possible failure in their implementation. The reversal to core subject studies in Japan may be due to the strong resistance from parents who object to the sharp decrease in subject content in the school curriculum, and who attribute the cuts in curriculum contents to the creation of the new integrated curriculum activities. Another concern from the public is the decreasing achievements of Japanese students among Asian countries in the league table of the Program for International Student Assessment. Japan’s Ministry of Education (MOE) has begun to wonder if the “relaxation” in education requirements and learning is the cause for the decrease in Japanese students’ academic performance in international assessment exercises.

In China, on the other hand, school-based integrated activities are being further developed and strengthened, and there is no indication of resistance with regard to their implementation. In fact, school-based approaches to curriculum development not only encourage schools to take more initiative in developing their own school-based learning materials, but also enhance the implementation of school-based curriculum development (SBCD) as well as other aspects of school reform.

The case school selected by the author has implemented the integrated approaches to organize learning activities; this paper is based on its experiences and reflections. Integrated approaches to organize learning activities are considered an essential feature in the contemporary educational reforms of Japan and China. Nevertheless, a comparison of the amount of teaching time allocated to conduct integrated learning shows a more positive bias toward integration in China than in Japan. Integrated learning amounts to the second largest subject studies next to Chinese language studies in China's school curriculum, which is continuing its policy of advocating various forms of integrated learning in the school system. Further details on the trends and practices in Japan and China are discussed in the following sections.

This paper will focus on the differences and similarities in integrated learning in Japan and China. It will then outline in great detail the policies that promote integrated learning in China. Afterwards, a case study will be used to illustrate the impact of a school-based approach on China's curriculum, which is contrary to Japan's educational policies, given that policies on integrated learning have been treated quite differently in the two countries. Detecting and obtaining evidence regarding the success or failure of these policies may even take several years.

Integrated Learning in Japan: Status Quo and Concerns

"Relaxation" approaches to school education as part of the educational reforms in Japan started in the 1990s. A large-scale reduction of subject content and the creation of integrated learning time were the two reform initiatives. The initiation of an integrated approach to organizing learning activities was begun as early as July 1996 by the Central Education Committee in its policy document "Looking Forward to the 21st Century of the National Educational Reform," which was later approved during its first meeting. The Japanese government was serious about the inclusion of a new curriculum on integrated learning time and prioritized its policy implementation. After several years of pilot studies and experimentation in selected schools, the policy of having an integrated learning component in the school curriculum was implemented in 2002.

According to the school learning guide published in 1998 and distributed to the primary and secondary schools in Japan, the goals of this new curriculum were to encourage students to discover their own learning direction independently, to nurture the students' capability to think and learn independently, to be able to make judgments, and to acquire abilities to solve problems in life.

Curriculum Guide for Primary Schools by the MOE (1998)

The "Curriculum Guide for Reforming the School Standards" was issued to all kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, high schools, and special schools in 1998 in Japan. The inclusion of "Integrated Learning Time" was a breakthrough for the traditionally compartmentalized curriculum and its constraints, allowing school

Table 1. Allocated Hours for Integrated Learning in Japan

<i>Year</i>	<i>Primary schools</i>				<i>Secondary schools</i>		
	<i>Yr 3</i>	<i>Yr 4</i>	<i>Yr 5</i>	<i>Yr 6</i>	<i>Yr 1</i>	<i>Yr 2</i>	<i>Yr 3</i>
2008	105	105	110	110	70–100	70–105	70–130
2009	95	100	75–110	75–110	50–65	70–105	70–130
2010							
2011	70	70	70	70			
2012					50	70	70

teachers more flexibility and freedom to design curriculum content and activities. The new curriculum aimed to cultivate habits of independent learning among students and to equip them with survival skills in a changing society. The MOE, however, was still unsure whether teachers could develop and design the curriculum and whether they should be left to make curriculum decisions without any guarantee of success. Generally speaking, the Curriculum Guides issued by the MOE are mandatory and outline in great detail the teaching contents and objectives; this is the new integrated curriculum. The contents include Understanding International Affairs, Environmental Studies, Social Welfare, and Health Studies, and cover thematic studies, integrated activities, and topic learning, which attract the interest of students, with strong regard for localism to student life and the community. After 10 years of implementation, however, the MOE has changed its policy, drastically reducing its lesson time, with one third of the original allocated time in primary schools and half in secondary schools.

Problems and Issues with Integrated Learning in Japan

Traditional practice and detailed guidelines have ensured a uniform model of practices among teachers. This model does not provide teachers the flexibility to make adjustments based on the needs of the students. Teachers used to follow the details contained in the curriculum guides; however, the new curriculum encourages decision making on the part of the teachers. In particular, it encourages the adoption of independent and enquiry-based learning styles among students and enhances the students' personalities and individuality, such that learning is motivated and in depth. Teachers, however, do not seem to have a full understanding of this new curriculum and, therefore, lead students to achieving independent thinking and acquiring the ability for problem solving.

The authors observed a lesson of integrated studies in a secondary school in Japan. The teacher decided on a topic of understanding China and divided the students into small groups of six. The groups were then dismissed to spend their study time in the library searching for materials and information using two computers. The latter half of the study time was allocated for student presentations without much

in-depth discussion and deep learning. Worse, the lessons on two subtopics such as Traditional Chinese Martial Arts and Traditional Student Games provided no information at all, and the lesson was dismissed without any further investigation into these two subtopics. The lesson objectives were not achieved and the majority of students was distracted. This situation is very common in schools where integrated learning is conducted. Instead of using the time for integrated learning, some schools choose to use the time for teaching core subjects like Mathematics and Language. The failure of the reform is that teachers were not prepared to take up the new curriculum. Kobayashi (2008) points out that many schools and teachers complained that they lacked time and that integrated learning should be abandoned. In addition, investments in the school education were not enough to sustain the implementation and institutionalization of the new curriculum, which was still in its embryonic stage in its experimentation. Hideo (2004) points out that schools should explore themes and topics regarding their own interests for integrated learning, and teachers should be involved in the entire process of planning, designing, and implementing. Reports indicate, however, that the teachers did not participate in the decision-making processes and were therefore not motivated to implement it with commitment. The effectiveness was, thus, in question. Other problems with implementation were the lack of appropriate teaching materials and the difficulties teachers encountered in adjusting to the new approach embedded in the new integrated curriculum. Lack of training also diminished the quality of the new curriculum. In addition, lack of specifications in objectives made assessment difficult, which could hardly be assimilated into the whole assessment system in Japan. Integrated learning has become a dead end in itself in Japanese schools. Abiko (2003) points out that the new curriculum has problem solving and survival skills listed as its stated objectives, which are so abstract and vague. Many schools were not prepared to set achievable objectives from these broad and abstract concepts of skills; in turn, the intentions of the curriculum were viewed by the teachers as vague and lacking direction. Mizukosi (1998, 1999) also points out that the new curriculum of integrated learning does not establish a clear assessment for teachers.

Development of Integrated Practical Activities in China

The implementation of the Integrated Practical Activities in China's school curriculum was similar to the implementation schedule of integrated learning in Japan. First, Japan introduced reforms in 2002, a year after curriculum reforms were introduced in China (the major curriculum reforms were announced on June 8, 2001). The policy document in China, named "Reform Guide for the School Curriculum in Basic Education (experimental)," outlined the direction for educational reforms in 21st century China. It showed changes from an examination-oriented education toward an education that aims for quality in learning. The document emphasizes nurturing student creativity and cultivating their ability to apply practice as the two main educational goals. The creation of the new curriculum, Integrated Practical

Activities, as a core and compulsory subject in 90% of the primary and secondary schools aimed at achieving these two main goals in the educational reforms. In 2007, China announced its educational plan, entitled, “Educational Plan 11th Five-Year Plan 2006–2010,” which reiterated its commitment to the promotion of quality-based education. The creation of Integrated Practical Activities aimed to move the focus of education from examination purposes toward an education that aims at quality learning beginning in the 1990s. China had some experience in organizing school learning around the concepts of “extracurricular activities,” which were implemented in the 1980s, and “activity curriculum,” which was created in the 1990s. These two curriculum innovations have built the foundation for the new integrated curriculum in theory and practice.

Guo and Wu (2003) summarize the key pedagogical functions of Integrated Practical Activities in China. First, the new curriculum assists students in learning from multiple perspectives. Second, it establishes links between school learning and social life experiences so as to minimize the alienation between the needs arising from real life and school knowledge. Third, it encourages a multiple approach in organizing learning for students. In 2009, China’s MOE compiled books containing cases of good practices in schools for dissemination purposes. This was accompanied by the establishment of a reward system for teachers who excelled at implementing the new curriculum. It seemed the new curriculum had been working well with the school teachers and had become part of the school curriculum’s infrastructure. Second, the contents and objectives of the new curriculum in Japan and China appear very similar. Integrated Practice Activities in China has several domains of learning: enquiry-based learning, community and regional learning, information technology, and physical education; the new integrated curriculum in Japan has similar areas of learning. Both curricula have information technology, which covers the ability to collect data, conduct analysis, and provide an interpretation. The curriculum guide for Integrated Practical Activities in China has clearly outlined the nature of practical activities based on the direct experience of the students, using the personal experience of learning, social living, and building linkages. The new curriculum emphasizes integration and application of school knowledge. Learning is organized around the life experiences of the students and their practical implications (Zhong and Fang, 2004). Third, with regard to education management, both systems in Japan and China are centralized with the presence of a MOE in both countries. Furthermore, both rely on their ministries and ensure the publications of the curriculum guide, its contents, and assessment. All these publications are mandatory for all schools in Japan.

From the discussion above, both Japan and China have become more aware of the importance of the practical and useful aspects of school knowledge. Below is a comparison of the changes in the time allocation for each subject between primary 6 and junior secondary 3.

Based on [Table 2](#), China shows more commitment to the role of the new curriculum in educational reforms in the 21st century. Four core subjects are listed, and in China,

Table 2. Changes in time allocation to subjects between primary 6 and secondary 3 in Japan and China

China (primary 6 years and secondary 3 years)	1. Language	1904–2094
	2. Integrated Practical Activities; local and school curriculum	1524–1904
	3. Mathematics	1238–1428
	4. Physical Education	952–1047
Japan (primary 6 years and secondary 3 years)	1. Language	1727
	2. Mathematics	1184
	3. Physical Education	810
	4. Integrated Learning	685

(Ministry of Education China, 2001; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan 1999)

the regional and school curricula and the Integrated Practical Activities are treated with equal importance. In Japan, integrated learning is fourth in the priority list and the total curriculum time is less than half of that in Chinese schools. In 2008, the time allocation in the school curriculum was further cut back from 685 hours to 470 hours, whereas no reduction has been applied in China and the new curriculum is still regarded as a core subject in the school curriculum. Integrated learning has been developed further within the SBCD activities in China. In some schools that we observed, the new curriculum has been further diffused and accommodated in other core subjects.

Below are our observations from two visits to a primary school. Our focus is on the SBCD and its linkages with the new integrated curriculum in China.

Enhancing Integrated Practical Activities via a School-based Curriculum

In China, SBCD was formally accepted as part of the curriculum structure in the last century. In the June 1999 Third National Educational Conference, a document entitled “Decisions on Further Developing Quality Education with Deepening Educational Reforms” was announced. The document shows that three levels of curriculum decision making should be established at the national, regional, and school areas to reconstruct a new curriculum system with respect to its structure, contents, and assessment. The MOE also announced new curriculum reforms for basic education and clearly stated the three levels of curriculum management that should be established in China, emphasizing the orientation of the new curriculum structure as aligned with the needs of the students and the schools. The document clearly states the proportion of time on school-based curriculum as 16% to 20%, including the regional and school Integrated Practical Activities (MOE, 2001). It also marks the inclusion of SBCD as part of the school curriculum structure and mandatory for all schools to follow, as well as states the time to be allocated

for the new curriculum. In other words, the new curriculum has been assimilated into the curriculum structure of the schools. Unlike the previous curriculum structure, which was largely managed and controlled by national agencies, the new curriculum is more open to influences from the regions, communities, schools, and teachers. Schools and teachers, therefore, can plan and review the adequacies of the curriculum, and plan, design, and develop new curriculum innovations for their students. Thus, SBCD becomes a national endeavor with the participation of the majority of teachers around the country, which has a positive impact on enhancing teacher professionalism.

The authors of this chapter visited a primary school twice, in August 2007 and October 2011. School A is in Changchun City, Jilin Province in the northeastern part of China and is attached to the Normal University established in 1948, also in the city. This school was selected because the principal is a curriculum development expert, having edited and compiled several books on SBCD and Integrated Practical Activities. The school is considered as a model research-based school and has received widespread publicity in China. Furthermore, it is a well-established school in the country. Using this case will allow us to understand how Integrated Practical Activities have been implemented in schools in China. School A has several stated aims for the new curriculum. First, it should be open and should develop the unique characteristics of the students. Second, education should aim at nurturing the students' broad and healthy outlook. Third, the quality of the teacher education program should be enhanced. Fourth, the suitability and developmental nature of the curriculum should be focused. Four levels are identified: school, students, teachers, and curriculum.

Three levels of evaluation should then be conducted: student evaluation, teacher evaluation, and school evaluation. Evaluation of student learning should focus on motivation and its need to be satisfied. Teacher evaluation should focus on professional development and on whether decision-making processes are democratic or not. School evaluation should focus on the systematic approach for SBCD. School A has integrated all subject curricula with the Integrated Practical Activities and ensured a whole school approach is adopted (Xiong, 2009)

The authors used the school-based curriculum materials as the basis of our analysis because curriculum materials used to be developed by the central agencies in China and textbooks were assigned and mandatory for all schools. However, in 2001, the curriculum reforms clarified curriculum management and required a wide variety of high-quality learning materials. This primary school had reorganized learning between moral education, life education, and social education. New domains of learning were established with more clarity and school-based curriculum materials were developed and piloted.

In 2006, 48 teachers were selected from two educational districts and development work was started. Five phases were identified (Xiong, 2009):

1. Teacher development seminars and activities (first half of January 2006)
2. Determining contents and framework (second half of January 2006)

3. Clarifying objectives and materials, drafting of learning materials and teacher handbook (February 2006)
4. Piloting the materials in the lessons of the 48 teachers (March to June 2006)
5. Teacher Development Activities (July 2006)

This case illustrates that teacher participation in developing the curriculum enhances teacher commitment and awareness of their changing role, promotes school-based research on pedagogy, and improves spiritual and values education. School has also prepared other school-based learning materials and curricula such as the Information Technology Program for Primary Schools because they found the official and popular textbooks and learning materials unsuitable for use in their school. These school-based development works and learning materials were not found in Japan at all. School and teacher participation in preparing and producing high-quality learning materials was in contrast to the diminishing role of the SBCD in Japan. All these factors contributed to the successful implementation of the Integrated Practical Activities in China.

All these school-based and teacher-led curriculum development activities were contrary to the policy change on implementing integrated learning in Japan. In China, it seems that the new curriculum found a home in numerous schools and teachers.

CONCLUSION

This paper outlined in some detail the new curriculum on integrated studies in Japan and China. Comparisons were made on its contents and implementation strategies. The paper also illustrated the different approaches adopted by the educational authorities of the two countries but with different effects and impact. SBCD emerged in Europe and the USA, but was transferred to Japan and China in the 1990s. The SBCD movement has received criticisms on its centralized systems, in particular, the lack of democratic participation of the majority of school teachers. Both Japan and China adopted integration as a key focus for reforms in the 2000s. This chapter analyzed the development of the new integrated curriculum and its problems in implementation in Japan. Its failure was marked in the policy changes when the time allocated to the new curriculum was drastically reduced. Conversely, in a primary school in northeast China, the implementation strategies were different. Teachers participated in its experimentation and were active in developing new learning materials. This type of participation ensured a good level of ownership and commitment on the part of the teachers. Their participation also became part of the infrastructure in developing a school-based curriculum for students. School-based approaches allow room for teachers' participation which, in turn, increases ownership and commitment. The two cases here, however, are illustrative and are not conclusive about the failure in implementing integrated learning in Japan. Moreover, we cannot claim that what happened to a primary school in northeast China implies the success of the new integrated practical activities in all schools in the country.

More large-scale research projects should be conducted to evaluate the success and failure of the new curriculum innovation in both Japan and China.

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