

Chapter 12

From Enthusiasm to Caution: Remaining Questions Surrounding the New Curriculum



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Abstract In lieu of a conclusion, this short closing chapter expands on some of the remaining questions surrounding the new curriculum and its implications. In particular, despite enthusiasm for the new curriculum and its potential to respond to a certain conception of the new knowledge society, uncertainty and the need for caution arise from the wider policy landscape and overall context of education. Evidence suggests that the new curriculum was drafted in reference to well-established pedagogic principles and genuinely aims for a child-centred education, building on previous attempts by the Ministry of Education. This trajectory of change is adjusted based on the global consensus of a shift towards a ‘new knowledge society’. In doing so, MEXT tends towards a humanistic position on the new knowledge society. Simultaneously however, the curriculum operates in a broader policy context which has incorporated decentralization and performativity mechanisms related to examination results, along with their potential to ‘activate competition’ between prefectures and perhaps at lower administrative levels. Nonetheless, study of the curriculum remains important as a signal of intent of the Ministry of Education, and as a set of guidelines for teachers, school administrators, and educators in local settings. Further research is needed ‘on the ground’ in schools to better understand how these translations are unfolding.

Keywords Educational reform · Structural reform · Education administration · Japanese education · Course of study

This book set out to examine

1. The reasons for reform and prescriptions of the 2017 course of study.
2. The implications of its call for ‘active learning’ pedagogy for schools and classroom teaching in a range of subjects.

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3. The main debates arising from the revised course of study against the broader context of Japanese education, including:
 - (a) Implications for equality
 - (b) New insights into the policymaking process
 - (c) Its suitability for learning in the new knowledge society.

The background of the educational policymaking process in Japan and recent reforms of the course of study are discussed in Chaps. 2 and 3 respectively. The reasons for reform and its prescriptions are discussed throughout Chaps. 4–10. Chapters 4 and 5 provide an overview of the main tenets of the new course of study (COS), which will form the basis of Japanese compulsory education through the 2020s. Chapters 6–10 discuss the implementations of its call for active learning pedagogy and assessment for growth in a range of school subjects. Turning to wider debates intertwined with the COS and its revisions, Chap. 11 discussed the implications for equality of opportunity in education provision and, by extension, in Japanese society. These chapters together have highlighted, on the one hand, enthusiasm for the progressively-minded curriculum rooted in pedagogical theory and, on the other, caution over its place in an increasingly competitive education system, greater pressure on teachers and students, and its potential to exacerbate growing inequalities. These tensions are examined in relation to the new knowledge society in the wider domestic and global contexts, before looking forward towards future research on the new curriculum.

12.1 The Rationale and Potential of the 2017 Curriculum

The overt rationale for active learning is to move from the acquisition of knowledge to the integration of knowledge for understanding whilst fostering competencies such as ‘learning to learn’ and creativity, developing the ability to transfer learning into new domains and adapt it for jobs and practices that may not yet exist. The key pedagogic features can be summarized under the rubrics of active learning and assessment for growth. Early policy formulation (MEXT, 2014) cast the net wide, suggesting that active learning could encompass such approaches as learning through discovery, problem-solving learning, learning through experience, and learning through investigation, as well as group discussion, debate, and group-work in classes. Classroom examples in the various subjects in Chaps. 4 and 6–10 discuss responses to these exhortations on the ground.

There is an extent to which this new curriculum for the 2020s breaks new ground, incorporating competencies, and reinvigorating efforts towards child-centred classroom pedagogy. It is likely that many policymakers and educationalists in the Ministry of Education (MEXT) subscribe to pedagogic aspects of the rhetoric espoused by international government and non-governmental organizations that such learning will enrich the lives of children attending school in Japan, providing strong scholastic foundations whilst reducing exam pressure. Progressive educationalists have tended towards enthusiasm for such curriculum content.

Enthusiasm is also warranted because of the resources enjoyed by the Japanese school system and amongst its community of teachers. Teachers in Japan are well positioned and resourced in many important ways to rise to new pedagogic challenges. Schools have adapted around successive policies to fulfil requirements whilst continuing to provide instruction to meet their professional standards. Even without top-down intervention, Japanese teachers have initiated countless innovations. Many teachers are committed professionals who co-create knowledge of teaching partly in semi-professional communities. The long-established practices of lesson study and other civic education research associations have allowed innovation to take root (Fernandez, 2002; Lewis, 2002). Creativity is what Kanae Nishioka calls the ‘gem of Japanese education’ (Tanaka et al., 2016: 147), though this quote was taken from a study working in the context of a laboratory school most likely operating with a differing context to the majority of public schools (Cave, 2018). Local boards of education have also operated as a ‘soft middle layer’ (DeCoker, 2002), in which policy can be softened by their staff who operate on the basis of experience on the ground because they are generally promoted from teaching positions (Bamkin, 2021; Chap. 7).

On the other hand, MEXT has been taking smaller steps towards child-centred ‘learning for understanding’ over multiple decades. The Ministry of Education defined a ‘new perspective on academic ability’ in 1993:

It is important for teachers to see children as willing to improve themselves to live [their lives] better, and to possess a range of unique qualities and potentials for their individual growth. Children’s self directed learning must be respected to realize their unique qualities. These are supported by intrinsic motivations for learning. (MOE, 1993: 14)

The CCE in 1996 called for:

an ability to identify problems, learn and think independently, make autonomous judgements and act accordingly, and solve problems; self-discipline, cooperation with others, empathy for others, emotion, and rich humanity; and health and stamina for robust living. (MOE, 1996)

Policies along these lines can also be found in the experiential elementary science curriculum of the 1990s and the *yutori* ‘education with less pressure’ of the turn of the millennium. The genesis of the Ministry’s concern with exam pressure was much earlier and lay in international pressure against the six-day week, led by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and other bodies. Soon afterward, Japanese politicians were ready to announce the ‘end of catch up’ with the West, prompting (a return to) a conception of schooling not solely for economic development, but working to underpin fulfilling individual lives. Speaking of the Ministry of Education, Takayama summarizes that it was in the late 1970s when a:

major shift in educational reform discourse was registered, where educational changes for quality over quantity, flexibility over bureaucratic rigidity, individuality and freedom over conformity, and spirituality over materiality were called for. (Takayama, 2021: 230)

As such, ‘active learning’ can be seen as a new term brought into policy discourse to further an agenda that pre-existed in some quarters of MEXT. Along these lines,

Kobari's (2018) disillusionment with the prospects for active learning are based in the historical perspective, which finds similar child-centred ideas proposed regularly since as far back as the Meiji era. Whilst not averse to active learning, his caution towards the possibility for real change rests on the actual lack of change in what he sees as prior iterations of similar policies.

Moreover, curriculum policy filters into the wider social and policy context. Indeed, despite the enthusiasm of theorists and practitioners considering active learning in the school and classroom, and the resources available in the education system, it can be questioned why educational inequality continues to increase in Japan (Chap. 11). This can be partly explained by zooming out to see curriculum policy against a broader education policy landscape, in which competing policies override or divert attention and time from active learning and assessment for growth; and is partly due to complex global influences which shaped these policies, infusing them with economized notions of education.

12.2 The Broader Education Policy Landscape

Not all policies are made equal. They overlap and enter the school with relative differences in importance, where they coalesce, 'cluster, override, clash and confuse' (Ball, 2012: 7). Active learning and assessment for growth thus enter a policy landscape of the school awash with countless (Braun et al., 2010) other policies with relatively more or less coherence and strength. The three broader issues of decentralization, competition, and the concept of performativity are overviewed briefly to illustrate the importance of wider policy debates to the implementation of active learning and assessment for growth under the new course of study.

Power has shifted from MEXT towards the central government under prime ministerial leadership. The early 2000s also saw a simultaneous shift towards the empowerment of local government. The relative advantages and drawbacks of decentralization in relation to MEXT were discussed in Chap. 2. Executive local governments (particularly at the prefectural level) are increasing their leverage over boards of education, which are *de jure* legally independent bodies. Such decentralization could incentivize greater competition in education, both by rich localities providing additional financing for education and by 'activist' mayors and governors hoping to boost educational performance along the measurable scale of exam results. Boards of education are at risk of being subordinated to political interests at the local level. In recent years, municipal boards of education offices have been increasingly relocated into town hall buildings. This is symbolic of experiments with organizational overlap in various configurations.

Prefectural and municipal boards of education, particularly when under pressure from a strong governor/mayor or their appointed superintendent of education, have latent or actual potential to pressure principals and teachers to achieve politically beneficial results, such as test scores. The political 'currency' (Ball, 2018) of test scores has been known to corrupt educational decision-making at every level in

Anglo-American contexts (e.g., Koretz, 2017) once competition is ‘activated’, e.g., through the use of test scores for league tables or performance-related pay. In these situations, teacher activities are diverted away from pedagogy and towards those activities which increase the most valuable metrics and toward the counting of those metrics. Ball has explained some of the micro-level processes that exert power over teachers to perform in circumstances where comparisons are activated through the notion of performativity.

Performativity is the exertion of social technologies that cause teachers and school administrators to feel they need to compete for a centrally governed series of rewards and sanctions, allocated in accordance with end-goals defined outside of the instructional field of knowledge. The restructuring of education around the value of exam results in Anglo-American contexts currently stands as the archetypal example. In Ball’s terms, performativity is:

a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of “quality” or “moments” of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation. (Ball, 2003: 216; quoted in Katsuno, 2016: 3)

This latent potential exists through the board of education, which is vulnerable to target setting and political intervention by the executive local government.

A large-scale survey by Benesse (2016: 11, 13) showed, amongst mixed results, trends towards more formulaic teaching. ‘Individualized learning’ in class, as reported by teachers, dropped steadily between 1998 and 2016 at elementary school (ES), and remained about the same over a similar period at junior high school (JHS). Cross-curricula activities drop slightly throughout compulsory education. Particularly relevant to the active learning debate (and to its predecessors) is the indication in the same data that the proportion of lessons ‘following the textbook’ increased dramatically between the first survey in 1998 and 2007. This is the opposite of what curriculum policy, as expressed in the course of study, intended. Since 2007, results for this measure have reduced slightly, but despite the strengthening of active learning policy, the results show no sign of dropping back down to the level of ‘following the textbook’ reported in 1998. Along a similar trend, reported hours spent providing individual help to students at desks *in class* remained stable between 1992 and 2007, then reduced dramatically between 2007 and 2016 at ES; and steadily decreased since 1998 at JHS. Tellingly, teacher working hours between 1997/8 and the latest results illustrate a relentless climb (Benesse, 2016; also see MEXT, 2017). Teachers are spending more time working, but also less time on the complex pedagogic tasks called for under successive curriculum revisions. Though speculative, research on Anglo-American suggests that this might be explained in reference to performativity, that teachers are working for test preparation, other peripheral work, or externally imposed targets alongside efforts to teach to (their) professional standards.

Whilst the decision-making in schools in Japan was historically centred on the relatively democratic teachers’ meeting, MEXT has bolstered the directive power of

the principal over the past two decades or more. Simultaneously, many prefectures have implemented teacher evaluation policies through the office of the principal. Unfortunately, the only study on performativity in Japanese schools of which I am aware (Katsuno, 2016) focuses on the work of senior high schools. This cogent and rigorous study finds that the enactment of teacher evaluations drives a wedge between teachers, partially isolating them and activating competition, ultimately refocusing teachers' attention on student test scores. As demands on teacher time are increasing, staffing at schools is decreasing (Katsuno, 2019), following a neoliberal logic that more can be extracted for less investment through deregulation.

On the other hand, the Japanese education system incorporates limitations on the scope for performativity in the sense theorized in Anglo-American contexts (Ball, 2003, 2012), by limiting the extent to which competition is 'activated'. In public elementary and junior high education in Japan, there are no disaggregated exam datasets to facilitate quasi-market school choice in public education, even in the regions of Japan that allow school choice. Teacher employment by the prefecture moderates the capacity of schools to accumulate talent capital. Classroom teachers rotate every 3–6 years and school administrators rotate more frequently, orienting individual educators' allegiance primarily to the municipality or prefecture (where promotion and placement decisions are made) rather than to the school. Performance pay is currently linked to teacher evaluation. In turn, the extent and consistency with which teacher evaluation is connected to student performance data remains an open question.

The increased concern for exam attainment may seem surprising alongside a curriculum whose 'unprecedented' reform includes a clear commitment to assessment for growth, rather than for grading children. This makes sense only when the curriculum is placed into the broader policy landscape. Assessment to underpin children's growth is a soft policy, whereas policies to increase exam results are more aggressively promoted, at least at the junior high level. Otherwise stated, one is an exhortative policy, the other is imperative and potentially disciplinary (Ball, 2012). The call for assessment for growth occurs alongside discourse on the value of exam attainment. This is valuable to teachers, principals, boards of education, and local politicians because it feeds the national political desire for a high rank in the international rankings, economizing education as a currency for political accolade. The discourse on the economization of education can be traced to global flows of policy.

12.3 Global Policy Influences: Humanist or Economized

Powerful intergovernmental organizations reached a consensus on the school curriculum during the 1990s. The OECD, which has been referred to as the *de facto* 'world ministry of education' (Meyer & Benavot, 2013: 123, cited by Spring, 2015: 64), defined a new knowledge economy in which learning has a monetary value and is pursued by individuals or states entrepreneurially. The OECD thus works to define the most valuable knowledge to developed economies. It is this influence

that has shaped Japan's National Academic Achievement Test (*Zenkoku gakuryoku gakushū jōkyō chōsa*) to more closely resemble the structure of PISA, including the incorporation of exam questions to test the application and understanding of knowledge.

International tests such as PISA not only decontextualize knowledge taught in schools, but also infuse 'key competencies' favoured by the OECD, including 'a combination of an eagerness to learn, good learning habits, initiating active learning, and learning how to learn' (Kariya, 2011: 94). Drawing on Kariya's work, Keita Takayama argues that it is precisely these kinds of competencies that are 'less susceptible to school's pedagogic interventions and more strongly shaped by children's socioeconomic difference at home' (2013a: 73), more efficiently co-opting the school into an arbiter of Bourdieusian (1984) distinction, as a system which rewards those with psychosocial resources in the family, which is closely correlated with wealth and thus class. This was even more stark in the Japanese case because, historically, the survey attached to the National Academic Achievement Test included questions on individual students' academic and health activities out of school but did not collect data on family circumstances. As such, the children who perform poorly are correlated as those who, for example: do not speak with family members about school-life, do not eat breakfast everyday, who do not like reading and who do not have high aspirations, who do not check items before leaving home and who do not follow school rules; rather than as those born into the class-based circumstances that have elsewhere been shown to predict those habits and attitudes (Kariya, 2012). Students who perform poorly may be said to do so because they work less because they care less, responsibilizing (Kaneko, 1999) students and families for their circumstances. Moreover, schools with cohorts who acquire the requisite knowledge outside of schools at home or in *juku*¹ can spend more time developing higher order cognitive skills, whilst schools with cohorts learning the required knowledge in school need to use the available time to ensure exam readiness, which tends to favour 'the basics' (also see Kobari, 2018). Takayama argues that the overall assessment mechanisms in Japanese education are converging with the key visions of the OECD, albeit adjusted for local conditions.

Initially, MEXT created the term 'zest for living' to continue its own humanist project of less pressured and child-centred learning. Arai (2001, cited in Takayama, 2021) has suggested that the term was influenced, at least in terminology, by the UNESCO (1972) report *Learning to be*, and that its contents were influenced by subsequent UNESCO reports. This reinforces the global origin of some concepts brought into domestic policy by MEXT. However, whereas Takayama discusses the OECD *alongside* UNESCO, there are also differences between the OECD conception of education and that of UNESCO (Spring, 2015).

¹ Juku is often translated as 'cram school'. Whilst many juku are cram schools, the purpose of premier juku extends beyond cramming. It is not unusual for such juku to implement engaging pedagogy to pre-teach and expand materials in advance of the public school curriculum, incorporating the public school into a resultant spiral curriculum. Juku can be enjoyable and social(izing) environments for children, depending on various factors.

The UNESCO worldview of education begins from many of the same premises as that of the OECD. The definition of the new knowledge society—in light of changes in technology, automation, information processing, and the reformation of borders—and the need for education to respond to its ascendancy are common to both narratives. However, rather than seeking economic development directly, UNESCO frames education as an indispensable force for peace, freedom and social justice, aiming for ‘a deeper and more harmonious form of human development and thereby to reduce poverty, exclusion, ignorance, oppression, and war’ through a ‘process of forming whole human beings—their knowledge and aptitudes, as well as the critical faculty and ability to act’ (UNESCO, 1996). Rather than being trained to perform in a fixed global economy, humans are valued as critical participants in the creation of democratic systems; and arguments based on human dignity are valued more than those based on efficiency. Borjian (2014: 13) provides a comparison by epithets:

If [UNESCO’s] motto is learn how to live peacefully with the different ‘other’, the [OECD’s] mantra is learn how to swim in order not to sink. Whereas the former seeks to teach learners the learning of who to be, the latter sings the beauty of individualism that can only be achieved by efficiency and competition.

It is the humanist worldview which resonates most comfortably with prevalent teaching practices in Japan, such as with creativity, lesson study, and building classroom communities. It is also this view that resonates with those in the departments of MEXT responsible for the finer details of the curriculum and those from the teaching community appointed to its curriculum panels. The synergies found with active learning and the strength of existing practice in Japanese schools are evidenced in Japan’s recent leadership of the OECD’s articulation of ‘good practice’ in classroom pedagogy (Takayama, 2021).

On the other hand, economized discourses of education shaped policies driven by the central government’s positions on decentralization and on the implementation of the National Academic Achievement Test. Despite indications of an aversion to national testing, MEXT implemented the establishment of such a test as a means of re-centralizing standards in education in the face of increasing decentralization (Takayama, 2008, 2013b). It was a case of bureaucratic rationality (Kato, 1994) over ideological policy preference. Though beyond the scope of discussion here, MEXT implemented the National Academic Achievement Test strategically to retain its oversight of other aspects of educational administration which had come under bureaucratic threat. Other compromises were required, but, to the extent possible, the direction of the articulation of curriculum policy by the Ministry has drawn on humanistic strands of global policy led by UNESCO.

In summary, active learning and assessment for growth were largely welcomed by those in the teaching community and by progressive education specialists, who could participate in policymaking, to an extent, through the Ministry of Education as relations between the Ministry and the teaching community thawed through the 1990s. Concurrently, the wider policy landscape was reformed by policies for economic development, coinciding with fiscal austerity and wider wealth gaps in society and increasing child poverty. These reforms work to activate competition

between regions, teachers, and students in Japan, within an international olympiad for the global currency of PISA (or PISA-like) exam results. The extent to which competition has been activated in comparison to other developed countries remains an open question, and one for future research to explore. This wider policy renders the higher aspirations of the new curriculum an ‘exhortative’ policy, to be considered in the spare time between the pressure to perform by ‘imperative’ or ‘disciplinary’ policies. Despite mechanisms specific to Japan which limit the activation of competition, there is a growing concern that time for schools to invest in new pedagogies and formative assessment practices is increasingly a luxury of privileged schools, whose work dovetails with family resources and the work of *juku*, the provision of which varies according to price and the family commitment expected.

12.4 In Lieu of a Conclusion: Looking Forward

This short closing chapter has expanded on some of the remaining questions surrounding the new curriculum and its implications. Despite enthusiasm for the new curriculum and its potential to respond to the new knowledge society, uncertainty and the need for caution arise from the wider policy landscape and context of education. Evidence suggests that the new curriculum was drafted in reference to well-established pedagogic principles and that it genuinely aims for a child-centred education, building on countless previous steps by the Ministry of Education in the same direction. This trajectory of change is adjusted based on the global consensus of a shift towards a ‘new knowledge society’. In doing so, MEXT tends towards a humanistic position on the new knowledge society. Nonetheless, the curriculum operates in a broader policy context which has incorporated decentralization, along with its potential to ‘activate competition’ between prefectures and perhaps at lower levels. The use of PISA-like examinations in teacher evaluations and their leverage in local politics has tended towards an economized vision of a ‘knowledge economy’. More broadly, the shift away from government and towards governance (or ‘controlled de-control’, du Gay, 1996) of education focuses policy on the outcomes of education rather than on the process (Nitta, 2008).

Study of the curriculum remains important as a signal of the intent of the Ministry of Education, and as a set of guidelines for teachers, school administrators and educators in local settings. Their interpretations of the curriculum are translated into practice, albeit within the broader policy context, in which teacher evaluations and other comparisons are threatened by the simplicity of the currency of exam results, which undermines assessment for growth and reduces the time available to teachers to work on less important agendas defined in the course of study. Further research is needed ‘on the ground’ in schools to better understand how these translations are unfolding. Such research also requires nuanced analysis to capture the politics that occurs in the tensions between global policy circulations and domestic government, and in the cracks between the various bodies of the Japanese government. In particular, the relationship between the central government and the Ministry of Education

has shifted over the past two decades, as has the relationship between the Ministry and local boards of education, and between boards of education and executive local governments.

Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic has postponed the opportunity for the study of active learning, assessment for growth, and other aspects of the new curriculum in normal circumstances on the ground. However, any expectation to return to enacting policies along the same trajectory as before the pandemic is ultimately unrealistic. Taking a long-term perspective, the pandemic has accelerated the integration of digital technologies into Japanese elementary and junior high schools (Iwabuchi et al., 2022). Before the pandemic, debate was slow, though entirely digitized editions of every textbook (Kyōkasho kenkyū, 2021) and some digital supplementary resources such as videos were available. Adaption to digitally enhanced teaching will require changes to pedagogy and most teachers have undertaken an unplanned crash-course on (at least) its potential. As in other countries, these experiences have also provided teachers with insights into digital poverty, realizing, for example, the restrictions of siblings or households sharing digital devices and the difficulty for students studying in the same room as other family members.² Needless to say, digital poverty is one face of a more general landscape of increasing child poverty and increasing income inequality, in Japan as in most rich nations. This could serve to increase the salience of poverty in discussions on school education. Discussions of technology and of child poverty will continue alongside those of the curriculum and wider changes in the policy landscape, influenced by multiple strands of global policy circulation.

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² See Coleman (2021) for an early bibliography in the UK context. Iwabuchi et al. (2022) outline the most salient concerns and policy responses.

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