

Chapter 2

Reform Impact and Underlying Factors: A Changing Policymaking Process and Changing Education Policies in Japan



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Abstract This chapter charts political changes to the Japanese education policy making process, by analyzing the relative relations and power between four main actors: the ruling and opposition parties in the Diet, influential LDP Diet members with a special interest in the area (*zoku-giin*), civil servants, and lastly interest groups and social groups in civil society. This analysis elucidates the characteristics of the traditional policymaking process under the so-called ‘1955 System’ to the newly fermented ‘Prime Ministerial leadership’ (*Kantei-shudō*). The features of contemporary education policy are set within this framework, before finally commenting on the top-down nature of Japanese education reform from the Meiji restoration until today.

Keywords Policy making process · Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) · Prime Ministerial leadership · Education reform · Education policy in Japan

2.1 Introduction

Since the 1980s, Japan has been shifting from a period of high economic growth to one of economic maturity as it has achieved a mass affluent society. As the country transitioned from a domestic demand-driven Keynesian economy to a foreign demand-driven neoliberal economy, the so-called ‘1955 System’ of politics was gradually dismantled. Consequently, the way that political policies are formed has also changed. This chapter charts political changes to the Japanese education policy-making process, by analyzing the relative relations and power between four main actors. Sections 2.2 and 2.3 discusses the role of four key actors—the ruling and opposition parties in the Diet, influential LDP Diet members with a special interest in the area (*zoku-giin*), civil servants, and interest groups and social groups in civil

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society—in the traditional 1955 System, and through the transition to the emerging ‘Prime Ministerial leadership’ (*Kantei-shudō*). Section 2.4 identifies the characteristics of the resultant education policymaking process, and Sect. 2.5 points out some characteristic patterns that can be observed in education reforms taking place in Japan.

2.2 The Policymaking Process Under the 1955 System

The traditional Japanese policymaking process can be analyzed by focusing on four main actors and their relations and relative power.¹ The first consists of the ruling and opposition parties in the Japanese Diet, the second comprises influential Diet members (*zoku-giin*), who are on committees and participate in debates within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) with a special interest in their sector (education, in this case), the third includes officials in the bureaucracy, and the fourth is made up of interest groups and social groups in civil society.

The first actors involved in policymaking are the ruling and opposition parties in the Japanese Diet. Between 1955 and 1993, Japan operated under the so-called ‘1955 System’—a political system dominated by the LDP to the exclusion of other parties. Diet members in the 1955 system consisted of the ruling LDP, which maintained a majority, and the chief opposition party, the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), which held most of the remaining Diet seats. It was a system that reflected within Japan the ideological conflict that arose from the Cold War. Specifically, it was a conflict centring on the attitudes toward, on the one hand, the Japanese Constitution (1946), which prioritized freedom and the values of democracy, rejecting war and military might; and the Japan-US Security Treaty (1951; revised 1960), on the other hand, which allowed US military bases to be positioned within Japanese territory. The left wing placed importance on the Constitution, while the right wing placed importance on the Japan-US Security Treaty. Thus, the LDP emphasized the responsibility and service of each individual to the nation and society over individual freedoms and human rights.

Generally speaking, the LDP is a conservative party spanning the right-wing, while the JSP was a left-wing, progressive party. Interestingly, the left-right axis of opposition in Japanese politics differed from, for example, the opposition in the UK between the right-wing Conservative Party and the left-wing Labour Party, or the opposition in Germany between the right-wing Christian Democratic Party and the left-wing Social Democratic Party. In the case of Japan, the ideological basis of the right-wing LDP had almost no element of liberal (as in libertarian) thought, such as reliance on anti-nationalist liberalism and individualism, or vigilance against a centrally planned economy and welfare system. Instead, the LDP worked to ensure uniformity and equality among all individuals through the use of national authority,

¹ For further discussion on the Japanese policymaking system that existed from the end of the Pacific War until recent years, see, for example, Kohno (1997), Noble (2015), and Neary (2019).

actively striving for economic growth and national land development through the use of plans, and projected a US-friendly stance rather than nationalism. Conversely, the ideology of the left-wing JSP was firmly rooted in liberalism while at the same time it had only a tangential relationship to west-European social-democratic ideology, which emphasized the realization of a welfare system through the active intervention of the national government. Thus, it was the conservative LDP that represented and consolidated the interests of a wide range of players in the economic and occupational classes, including those on some margins, through the adoption of planned, egalitarian, government-driven economic policies and the distribution of subsidies to small businesses, micro-agriculture, and industries in decline. Through this type of national consolidation, Japan enjoyed a period of domestic demand-driven high economic growth from 1954 to 1974 and the long-term rule of the LDP. Policy-making needed a consensus only within the LDP block but not agreement from the opposition parties. As Schoppa (1991) states, the oppositions can play an indirect role only by breaking the consensus within the conservative bloc. As discussed later, this government-driven, egalitarian stance of the right-wing LDP is also reflected in its educational policies.

Second are the influential Diet members known as ‘*zoku-giin*.’ They are experts in particular areas of policy, such as education, and work within powerful committees that inform the positions and policy aspirations of the ruling LDP, and thus of the government. The Japanese political system formally adopted a Westminster-style parliament and cabinet system of government rather than an American-style presidency. Under this ‘fused-cabinet’ system, the party that holds a majority of seats in the Diet selects the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister in turn appoints the Cabinet Ministers. Based on these constitutional provisions, the Prime Minister is both the leader of the ruling party and the head of the government’s executive branch, which includes only a core of LDP members. Thus, the Prime Minister should be able to demonstrate powerful leadership in both capacities, as in the UK. However, under the 1955 System, both the party leadership capacity and the Cabinet leadership capacity of the Prime Minister was weak. The reason for this is the ruling LDP’s ‘preliminary vetting system’ (*jizen-shinsasei*) of bills that creates a ‘government & ruling party dual system.’ Specifically, although bills are submitted to the Diet by the Cabinet—led by a Prime Minister who was, during the period in question, always from the ruling LDP—there is a convention in which the ruling LDP needs to internally examine and approve all bills prior to their submission to the Diet. In this process various interests represented by *zoku-giin* may reflect in the LDP policies.

A detailed explanation would be as follows: Under the 1955 system, a so-called ‘medium-sized (3 to 5 seats) constituency system’ (*chū-senkyokusei*) operated, in which between two to five Diet members were elected by voters in a single electoral district. As a result, multiple LDP Diet members from a single constituency who advocated different policies and were members of different factions within the LDP would be elected.² There is a ‘Policy Study Group’ (*seisaku chōsakai*) within

² In the LDP, the factions hold enormous power, and the Prime Minister tends to appoint Cabinet Ministers who were recommended by the factions. The public dissatisfaction with the LDP had

the LDP, which has its own subcommittees corresponding to each ministry. These subcommittees summon representatives of interest groups and social groups to meetings in which the officials of each of the ministries explain and decide upon bills. Influential Diet members (*zoku-giin*) who are on committees and have strong ties to industry groups, lobbyists, and bureaucratic agencies that are familiar with the issues taken up by each subcommittee are active in the process of formulating policy through the subcommittees in which they participate (Inoguchi & Iwai, 1987). The LDP Diet members debate bills within these subcommittees (rather than a system in which the Prime Minister, who is the ruling party president, determines policies). Therefore, it was only after an election that the Party could coordinate and decide upon policies. As a result, the actual leadership capabilities of the Prime Minister were weak within the party, and thus government under this system.

The third actor in the policymaking process is the bureaucracy. In fact, all government policies were formulated through a process of coordination within each ministry and among multiple ministries, rather than through meetings between influential Diet members (*zoku-giin*) from the ruling party. This is because Japan, which was a late-comer capitalist nation, engaged in nation-building following both the Meiji Restoration (1868) and the end of the Pacific War (1945) as a central government-driven effort rather than as a civil-society-driven effort. Thus, the bureaucracy took on enormous power in determining policies. To date, there is a network that investigates the trends taking place in all social sectors and social groups and, by assigning personnel to local civil service organizations and related industry groups, distributing subsidies and all manner of official notifications, the ‘guidance’ of the central ministries is communicated to each of these parties. There is certainly merit in a system that, instead of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers who are liable to change over short periods of time, ensures administrative guidance provided by a continuous, stable, and expert bureaucracy which regulates private industry and competition and distributes benefits. Not the least of these merits is the fact that this developmental-state system facilitated Japan’s period of high economic growth (Johnson, 1982).

It must also be added, however, that the ministries were separated by sectionalism and that the bureaucracy tended to represent the interests of the ministry for which they worked. Since in Japan, there is only weak control over the bureaucracy by the Cabinet, a system by which the voting public is represented through delegation of authority to the Diet was not manifest. Instead, there existed a system of ‘representation by bureaucracy’ (*shōchō daihyōsei*), in which each ministry represented the interests of industry groups under its arbitrary jurisdiction. Additionally, the Cabinet was part of what may be termed a ‘bureaucratic cabinet system’ (*kanryō naikakusei*) in which it functions as an organization that coordinates the interests of the ministries and did not actually fulfil the principle of a ‘parliamentary cabinet system’ in setting the direction of ministerial work (Iio, 2007, 2019). Thus, an undemocratic bureaucratic control of policy-related decision-making arose. The sectionalism that existed

been not absorbed by the regime change that should occur as a result of elections, but by the LDP in the form of ‘inter-faction regime changes’.

in the bureaucracy caused an expansion of the budget and many instances of collusion and corruption within so-called ‘iron triangles’ of overlapping interests between three parties: The bureaucracy, which had the power of licensing and authorization; industry groups, and the influential Diet members (*zoku-giin*) who acted as intermediaries between the other two. For example, the bureaucracy provides industry groups with subsidies for protection and development. *Zoku-giin* exert influence over who receives such subsidies and in what amount, obtaining cooperation from the recipient industry groups in the election. Finally, industry groups in return ensure that bureaucrats are given a post in that industry after they retire.

The fourth actor in policymaking consists of interest groups and social groups from civil society. The methods used by interest groups to involve themselves in policymaking have been explained under the frameworks of American ‘pluralism’ and Northern European ‘corporatism.’ The former is a form of policy decision-making that stems from a tradition of individualism and voluntary association, while the latter is a style in which traditional groups compel individuals to join monopolies that represent the interests of each occupation when they participate in the formulation and implementation of public policy. In comparison to the former, which is more liable to achieve special interests, the latter has a high degree of inclusiveness, concentration of interest groups, and is designed to achieve the greater good for all.

The method used to integrate Japanese civil society has been either leadership by the central government and the bureaucracy (‘partitioned’ pluralism) or a corporate society comprising individual corporations competing with each other (corporatism ‘without labor’) (Pempel & Tsunekawa, 1979; Sasaki, 2012). Specifically, under the aforementioned ‘representation by bureaucracy,’ since each bureau (i.e., ministry) has a close relationship with a particular industry group, open pluralism does not arise.

On the other hand, unlike the Northern European style of corporatism, which is based on labor unions (which were the largest interest groups in their respective countries), in Japan, labor movements occur in each individual corporation and the government is not involved in national labor-management negotiations. As such labor movements in the private sector are depoliticized. Thus, in Japan—and particularly in the case of major corporations—a system that includes lifetime employment, a seniority wage scale, and company unions (each individual company engages in its own labor-management negotiations) was adopted and social order was based on individual corporations. That is, social security in Japan has relied on welfare provided by individual corporations rather than welfare provided by the national government. Generally, in Japan, each person works at a single company for the entire course of their career, performing different functions within that company via a system of internal transfers. This is in contrast to the US-European style in which an individual specializes in a single function while changing employers for promotion or to improve working conditions. Since loyalty to the company is fostered by this Japanese system, workers refrain from exerting their rights vis-à-vis the company they work for, and companies avoid having to fire employees. Any system that exists for the purpose of uniting the workers across an entire industry is weak. Instead, workers negotiate with the management of the company they work for, which

encourages competition with rival companies in the market. Thus, for example, the demands made by Toyota's workers are not simply an expression of the workers' interests, but rather reflect the relationship between the workers and management at Toyota as well as the interests of auto industry groups that act as interest groups. The demands of these movements are considered and consolidated by bureaucrats in relevant agencies within each ministry and through a variety of deliberative councils set up by said ministries. This also explains why labor unions demonstrate weak support for the JSP (in contrast to the usually high support enjoyed by social parties by labor unions) and instead support the LDP, a fact that has bolstered the long-standing dominance of the LDP. Moreover, interest groups and social groups excluded from this system by the 'partitioned pluralism' and 'corporatism without labor' phenomena (many of which are groups that are close to opposition parties) have had difficulty participating in the formation of policies.

2.3 The Shift to a Prime Minister Led Policymaking Process

The above characteristics of the four actors were formed under the 1955 System and represent the policymaking process that partly remains in place even today. However, this policymaking process underwent a major shift to a Prime Minister led style of policymaking from the 1980s and accelerated in development during the 1990s due to the inefficiency of resource allocation and the sluggishness of the policymaking process that existed under the 1955 System. Underlying this shift were changes such as the multinationalization of corporations and the globalization of the economic system. Japan also transformed into a country that could maintain, support, and create this type of economic system; in other words, it shifted from being a 'Keynesian state,' engaged in the production of goods and services, to a 'Schumpeter state' that is engaged in the production of new knowledge (Hirsch, 1995; Jessop, 2002).

Specifically, since the 1980s, Japan has entered a period of market maturity following the period of high economic growth, and budget deficits have become a permanent fixture. Consequently, a shift was observed from the 'big government' led by the LDP and the bureaucracy that allocated subsidies to small businesses, micro-agriculture operations, declining industries, and regions that were experiencing depopulation, to a 'small government' that imposes less tax burden and supports the accumulation of capital by multinational corporations to facilitate overseas development. As a result, there was a need for a government that could swiftly deal with the shift to the new economy and the new industrial organization. The new government needed to, for example, sort through and eliminate declining industries that had little relevance in the modern world. To achieve this, it was seen as necessary to change the 'preliminary vetting system' and the so-called 'bureaucratic cabinet system' run by the bureaucracy and factional LDP. Finally, there was increasing

pressure to reform school education to ensure that it trained the type of personnel who could be the driving force behind this new economic system.

The final report (1983) of the (Second) Ad Hoc Council on Administrative Reform, held during the Nakasone administration, called for the privatization of the Japanese National Railways, Nippon Telegraph, and Telephone Public Corporation, as well as administrative reforms and the consolidation of the ministries (which would be later implemented between 1997 and 2001). Unlike the bureaucracy-driven bottom-up system of policymaking, these neoliberal policies continued in the form of administrative reforms designed to create a politics-driven, top-down ‘Prime Ministerial leadership’ system of policymaking, under the more Presidential-like Hashimoto administration (1996–1998) and in the form of structural reforms and the privatization of the postal service under the Koizumi administration (2001–2006). Thus, the conventional method of unifying the public and integrating civil society, that was based on individual corporations, changed. This unfolded alongside the following changes in relations between the four actors involved in policymaking.

First, a two-party system emerged as a result of the establishment of a single-seat constituency system. Changes to the electoral system were aimed at creating a political system in which power would change hands between the ruling and opposition parties. In the conventional medium-sized constituency system electoral system, LDP Diet members competed to allocate subsidies to and guide public works projects to electoral districts in order to garner votes, placing the national budget under enormous strain. In addition, since the medium-sized constituency system gave rise to the intra-party factions, the LDP was unable to achieve full unification. In fact, regime changes were realized because of the 1993 political reforms that led to the adoption of the single-seat constituency system and, since then, there have been two periods during which the LDP has not been in power. As regime change had become possible and more realistic a prospect since 1993, a shift was made to political parties competing for votes based on policy issues. As for the left wing, the JSP mostly joined the DPJ, which was a moderate left-of-center political party. Then to gain political power, the DPJ did not maintain extreme ideological policies such as abrogating the Japan-US Security Treaty. As for the LDP, which had invested its energies into equality and regulation of the market, it has now changed and adopted competitive, neoliberal policies as a right-wing party.

Second, there was a shift from a policymaking process in which diverse interests are consolidated and reflected by influential Diet members to policymaking under prime ministerial leadership. It became possible for prime ministers to increase the duration of their tenure by obtaining support through direct contact with the public, and this reinforced the more presidential style of leadership, closely related to what is referred to here as ‘Prime Ministerial leadership’ (Mulgan, 2019). During this period, Prime Minister Blair in the UK, Chancellor Schröder in Germany, and Prime Minister Berlusconi of Italy also acted as ‘presidential prime ministers.’ Under the conventional ‘preliminary vetting system’ of Japan’s ruling party, the prime minister had previously been unable to formulate original policies and had a limited staff. In order to implement the Prime Ministerial leadership system, Prime Minister Hashimoto (1996–1998) increased the authority of the Executive Secretary to the

Prime Minister; increased the responsibilities of the Cabinet Secretariat, which serves as the prime minister's direct assistant (e.g., national security, public relations, information research, personnel assignment); and created a Cabinet Office that supported the Cabinet Secretariat. The subsequent Koizumi administration (2001–2006) also exploited the full potential of the intra-party leadership role of the prime minister by excluding Diet members in the selection of LDP candidates in single-seat constituencies, even influential ones, after acts of disloyalty, using the powers he obtained as a result of the 'Prime Ministerial leadership' system, and garnering strong public support by holding single issue general elections. The Abe administrations (2006–2007, 2012–2020) created a team at the Prime Minister's Office that consisted of a few individuals who were close to the prime minister, which ensured his strong, long-term administration. Koizumi and Abe oversaw great shifts toward the institutionalization of prime ministerial leadership.

Third, the bureaucracy shifted from a 'bureaucracy-driven' system to a 'politics-driven' system that places increased importance on political leadership. Under the 'bureaucratic cabinet system,' ministers were little more than the representatives of the bureaucracies in their ministries. As a result, in many cases, the ministers simply approved policies created by the bureaucracy, and thus cabinet meetings existed simply to approve policies that had already been worked out by the bureaucracies of the relevant ministries. In contrast, the Hashimoto administration strengthened politician-led policymaking, and a system of controls over the ministries by politicians. This coincided with a reduction in the number of ministries and the adoption of a system of deputy ministers. The ministers, whose leadership abilities were increased due to the adoption of this type of 'politics-driven' system, behaved in accordance with the leadership of the prime minister under the 'Prime Ministerial leadership' system. The shift from a bureaucracy-driven to a politics-driven system continues to this day and includes the period of rule by the DPJ (2009–2012). However, it has also been pointed out that the politics-driven system led to the effective failure of the bureaucracy's functionality. For example, the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy (created in 2001), led by the prime minister and tasked with ensuring fiscal balance, is given the task of determining the general framework of the budget. As a result, powerful restrictions are placed on bottom-up budget demands by the ministries that have greater potential to reflect the needs of the general population. Furthermore, the Cabinet Personnel Bureau (created in 2014) allowed unilateral control of executive positions in the ministries by the prime minister. This made it difficult to engage in policymaking that was based on the needs of the civil society in a bottom-up fashion that was based on political neutrality, a long-term view, and expertise, which were the merits of the bureaucratic system.

Related to this is the fact that due to the 'Prime Ministerial leadership' system, the role of interest groups and social groups in the civil society—the fourth actor—has been increasingly limited. Previously, each ministry had policy councils to provide some breadth of representation to policy directions. However, the Prime Minister's Office has increasingly established its own councils that report directly to the prime minister. They consolidate the demands of all the interest groups that participated in the councils of the ministries and now set the overall direction of policy. The

task of each ministry and its council(s) are now restricted to ‘implementation’—giving concrete form to the policies of the prime minister. This shift certainly has merits. It allows the views of interest groups, that previously were excluded from existing industry groups, to be heard and places more importance on consumers than manufacturers.

Despite remnants of the bureaucracy-led system, the policymaking process that existed under the 1955 System shifted to a ‘Prime Ministerial leadership’ system as of the 1990s, gaining pace after Hashimoto’s administrative reforms completed in 2001. The next question relates to the characteristics of the policymaking process regarding education. This will be taken up in detail in the following section.

2.4 Characteristics of the Education Policymaking Process Today

Discussion on the characteristics of the education policymaking process will focus on the following four points: First, the shift from a Ministry-driven system to a ‘Prime Ministerial leadership’ system. Second, the shift from centralized authority to local authority. Third, the small amount of authority that was transferred to the school level. Fourth, the presence of fixed actors and the recent appearance of new actors in the field of education.

2.4.1 *The Shift to ‘Prime Ministerial Leadership’*

The first characteristic is one that is common to all policy sectors. It is the shift from an education policymaking system, led by Diet members with a special interest in education (*zoku-giin*) and bureaucrats in MEXT, to an education policymaking system under ‘Prime Ministerial leadership.’ The ‘preliminary vetting system’ for bills that was discussed in the above section applied to all policy areas, including education. The Education *zoku-giin* Diet members (technically covering Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) frequently met to discuss bills. Additionally, the members were engaged in various other activities such as issuing regular survey reports, conducting study sessions led by outside experts, sharing information about the status of debates taking place in councils, and exchanging ideas with MEXT bureaucrats (Aoki, 2019; Ogawa, 2010; Park, 1986; Schoppa, 1991; Shimbori & Aoi, 1983). Due to their expertise as well as their unique networks that includes industry groups and local municipalities, MEXT bureaucrats also had and have considerable influence in the policymaking process (see Chap. 7). Since local municipalities have the authority to operate school education, MEXT functions

as the ministry that lays emphasis on policymaking, and thus it has the smallest full-time staff of the ministries.³

The Central Council for Education (CCE; created in 1952) is the policy making council of MEXT that assists in policymaking. Its secretariat is headed by a MEXT bureaucrat. When important policies are formulated (e.g., reforms to the course of study, restructuring the Board of Education system, making changes in the teacher licensing system), the CCE receives inquiries from the Minister of Education, and, after approximately two years, it issues a report after engaging in discussions to consolidate the expert knowledge provided by interested parties and academic experts. CCE committee members are selected by the Minister of Education. They consist of approximately 30 individuals who represent industry groups, the Association of School Principals, the PTA, mayors of local municipalities, academic experts, and managers of private companies. However, few of these members are academics from the field of education. The CCE reports influence the discussions among MEXT bureaucrats and LDP policy study groups (Maekawa, 2002; Murakami, 2013; Ogawa, 2010, 2016).

In contrast to this previously practiced policymaking process, as mentioned in the previous section, a system that is ‘Prime Ministerial leadership’ began in the 1980s and has been gaining momentum since the turn of the century as the conventional method of integrating the Japanese civil society. The integration of corporate society has decreased owing to the deterioration of the economy. Specifically, instead of the CCE, which is part of MEXT, a council that reports directly to the prime minister was created to debate issues related to education. In the early years, this was known as the Ad Hoc Council on Education (AHCE, 1984–1987), which issued four reports during the Nakasone administration (1982–1987). Unlike the uniform and egalitarian style of education that was previously adopted by the LDP and MEXT, the AHCE presented neoliberal policy proposals that placed importance on individuality, choice, and competition in education. However, at the stage during which the AHCE was in existence, there was still a system in place that made it difficult for the prime minister to display leadership. Specifically, the law that established the AHCE stipulated that appointments to the AHCE committee be made up of no more than 25 individuals who were to be determined by resolutions in the Diet. In addition, the secretary-general of the AHCE was the (career bureaucrat) Administrative Vice Minister of Education (Hood, 2001; Nitta, 2008; Schoppa, 1991).

The councils set up by subsequent cabinets were not established due to laws passed by the Diet but rather were ‘private advisory bodies’ to the prime minister whose members were experts selected by them. The secretariat of the AHCE was placed in MEXT, but the secretariat of subsequent councils were placed in the Cabinet Secretariat, and thus staffed more directly by appointees of the central government. For example, the National Commission on Educational Reform (NCER) established by the prime minister (2000, during the Obuchi and Mori administrations) produced

³ According to the regulation for the prescribed number of personnel of MEXT there are approximately 2,000 staff in 2020 including the Agency for Cultural Affairs and the Japan Sports Agency.

17 Proposals for changing education that included many neoliberal policies that had not been considered previously. In other words, basic policies for educational reforms were formulated on the basis of advice provided by a council that reported directly to the prime minister. This policymaking process was further leveraged by subsequent administrations and became mainstream. The role of the CCE became no longer to form independent education policies, but rather to give concrete form to the basic policies of the Prime Minister's Office and the ruling party.

The education 'reform' that was proposed and realized through this 'Prime Ministerial leadership' policymaking process was wide reaching and included the following changes: Reforms to the Fundamental Law on Education and the three education acts that comprise the provisions for how education operates (later realized in 2006–2007), reductions in the fixed number of civil servants and their pay, adoption of methods used in private business, permission of school selection, permission for limited companies to operate schools, changes in the structure of local boards of education, inclusion of moral education as a formal school subject (see Chap. 7; Bamkin, 2018), changes in the university entrance examination system, changes in the pre-school education curriculum, changes to university governance, and changes to the teacher training curriculum. These changes included aspects that were impossible to reform under the conventional policymaking process followed by the LDP Education *zoku-giin*, who had strong ties to education-related industry groups, and MEXT, and they were achieved at a speed that had been previously impossible. However, this 'Prime Ministerial leadership' education policymaking process tended to exclude specialized bureaucratic organizations and academics. As a result, the system suffers from numerous problems. Policy is created with a lack of evidence and insufficient democratic control as the members of the council that reports to the prime minister are selected without educational expertise or democratic legitimacy.

Furthermore, 'Prime Minister led' policymaking was suited to the realization of fiscal tightening since it does not permit the previous bureaucracy-driven process to create a budget based on the needs of the population (and their bureaucratic interest). For example, the Koizumi administration (2001–2006), without creating policy firmly within the education portfolio, forcefully backed fiscal and administrative reforms over a wide range of areas through the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy that was then newly established in the new Cabinet Office. This resulted in a reduction of the national education budget via the so-called 'Trinity Reforms.' In addition, bureaucrats working in the Prime Minister's Office in recent years have consisted of staff sent from various ministries, but consistently over-represented by the Ministry of Finance, which works toward fiscal balancing and fiscal tightening; and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, which works toward integrating the administrative portion of the local government and board of education, reducing the independence of local boards of education; and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, which was attempting to utilize school education as a form of economic policy and personnel training. As a result, these ministries have an enormous influence on education policy, and in turn the influence of MEXT over education policymaking is in decline.

Unlike the educational policy of the LDP, the education policymaking process of the center-left DPJ, who held power briefly between 2009 and 2013, was neither a bureaucracy-driven style led by MEXT nor ‘Prime Ministerial leadership.’ Instead, it was a ‘politics-driven’ style led by the Minister, two Vice Ministers and two Diet Secretaries. In addition, it viewed the CCE as no more than a single source of information that represented a limited number of interest groups and industry groups. Thus, the DPJ sought a novel method of policymaking via meetings held throughout the country and online, as these methods allowed the consolidation of public opinion across a wide range of the public and those involved in education. However, the DPJ administration accomplished only a few policies. Their specific achievements were limited and included the following: payment of government allowances for children aged 15 years and younger; removal of Japan’s opt-out on article 13-2 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) to gradually realize the free secondary and tertiary education it requires; the Act on Free High School Education (2010), which replaced means-tested subsidies for SHS with universal free senior high school provision; and the reduction of the national standard for maximum class size (first year of elementary school) from 40 to 35 students (2011). Nevertheless, although DPJ was in power for a short period of time, they were able to implement important policies that required enormous budgetary outlays. This was because they operated a politics-driven policymaking process rather than the conventional bureaucracy-driven process that emphasized sustainability and stability.

2.4.2 From Centralized Control to Local Control

The second characteristic of the education policymaking process that exists today is the shift from centralized control to local control. The weakening of the power of MEXT under the bureaucracy-driven system that was discussed above was combined with another dimension of the Trinity Reforms—a shift away from centralized control and uniform policy decision-making by MEXT and placed financial authority and the authority to determine education policy in the hands of local municipalities.

As suggested above, in Japan it was the central government rather than civil society that took the lead in creating a modern nation-state during the Meiji Period (1868–1912) and in creating a democratic nation following the end of the Pacific War. In both cases, since the central government placed importance on education, the education standards were both high quality and relatively homogenous, but the system and specifics of the implementation of education were centrally controlled and uniform. For example, the Japanese system of local government is divided mainly into two levels: the prefectural level and municipal level. Until 1999 there was a system in place known as the Appointment and Approval System for Superintendents of Education, in which the appointment of a Superintendent of Education at the prefectural level required the approval of the Minister of Education, while the appointment of a Superintendent of Education at the municipal level required the approval of the

prefectural Superintendent of Education. In addition, school education had a variety of strict standards.

These standards include not only standards on facilities, personnel placement, and the number of class hours, but also those related to educational content. The course of study exists from kindergarten to high school and for all subjects taught, and they include legal restrictions placed on instructors by MEXT. These functioned as the ‘maximum standards’—standards that schools cannot exceed—as well as the ‘minimum standards’—standards that schools need to satisfy. Furthermore, the course of study provides content standards used in the textbook approval procedure when determining whether a textbook is in compliance. Teachers are required to use approved textbooks screened by this process. In addition to these strict laws regarding the conditions and contents of education that are imposed uniformly throughout the entire nation, bureaucrats at MEXT temporarily transfer into important civil servant positions on prefectural boards of education and the boards of education in large cities. MEXT also integrates administrative examples by issuing various types of official notifications and ‘orders’ in the form of ‘guidance’ and ‘advice,’ which is particularly effective because bureaucrats have discretionary powers over the subsidies that are allocated to local boards of education. Thus, while the system is set up so that the establishment and operation of school education as well as the hiring of instructors is undertaken by the local municipalities themselves, the central government places powerful restrictions on them, and exercises informal persuasion. While this certainly has the positive outcome of a guaranteed national minimum by, for example, paying a certain percentage of the salaries of teachers working in schools across the country that provided compulsory education,⁴ it also means that uniform and detailed restrictions are imposed. The relative benefits and drawbacks of this balanced have been discussed by many authors (e.g., Decoker & Bjork, 2013; Gordon et al., 2010; Horio, 1988; Kariya, 2013; Kitamura et al., 2019; Shields, 1990; Tsujimoto & Yamasaki, 2018; Yonezawa et al., 2018).

In contrast, after the 2000s, this centralized control was relaxed as advances were made to give local administrations more substantive authority. For example, the above-mentioned system of appointing and approving superintendents of education was abolished in 2000. Additionally, the ‘Trinity Reforms’ of the Koizumi administration reduced the subsidies paid by the national government and increased the percentage of local taxes that could be used independently (for education and for other expenditures) by local municipalities. This resulted in large cities independently engaging in unique class formation practices that were not bound by national or prefectural standards and the independent employment, transferring, and training of instructors. The leadership of local boards of education that held authority over local education was strengthened. Boards of education are executive bodies that are independent of the mayors of local municipalities, and they are mandatory in each

⁴ Public school teachers’ salaries are paid by the 47 prefectures rather than by the municipality-level authorities (numbering approximately 3,000 at the beginning of the year 2000 but down to approximately 1,700 in 2020) in order to ensure that there were no regional disparities. The national government pays one-third (down from one-half before 2006) of the salaries of teachers at primary and junior high schools.

prefecture and municipality (with some leeway in designated villages). They consist of approximately five members whose appointments are approved by the local councils. Previously, boards of education functioned somewhat as the local branches of the central government (MEXT). However, in 2015 the superintendent of education, who had previously functioned as little more than an administrative director for the board of education, was made the director of the board of education offices and the mayor or governor was granted the power to appoint the superintendent of education. This change was expected to create unity between the superintendent of education and the mayor, who is directly elected by the local citizens, which in turn would promote local authority over education. It must, however, be added that even in recent years, as transfer of authority to local municipalities has advanced, the central government has also increased its control. Examples include the inclusion of moral education, which places more importance on the entire group and harmony than on individualism, as an official school subject from 2018 onward and a textbook screening process that demands that the government's view of territorial issues be included in texts.

2.4.3 Limited Authority at School Level

The third characteristic is the fact that, although authority over policymaking was partly shifted to the local municipalities, no progress was made on shifting this authority to the schools. In 2018, it became mandatory for a School Management Council to be established at each public school. This created a system by which interested parties, such as students' legal guardians and local community residents, could participate in school management such as approving the basic policies of the school. However, unlike many other countries, there is still no organization with broad authority over personnel, and the budget (such as the School Governing Body in England). Only a section of the interested parties have access to a route through which they can actually influence school policy, and this access is not available to all legal guardians and children. As school principals are not required to have particular qualifications or advanced degrees, their expertise may not extend to management or finance, for example. Thus, the leadership of school principals is not autonomous but reliant on the local boards of education.

2.4.4 Actors in the Field of Education

The fourth characteristic of the education policymaking process is the fact that there are actors and interested parties who are unique to the field of education and are absent in other policy fields. The first of these is teachers. The group that historically represented teachers, the Japan Teachers' Union (JTU), has been regarded as being positioned on the left wing of the Japanese labor movement, and it functioned as an

important ideological actor during the 1955 System (during the 1950s the membership rate among teachers was 85% or more). However, it had almost no access to any route that would have allowed it to directly participate in the education policy-making process (Schoppa, 1991). The JTU has no rights under the labor laws that recognized labor unions (e.g., the right to engage in collective bargaining, the right to strike), and, unlike its Western counterparts, it has no organizational autonomy to regulate the hiring of workers and colleagues in the same field, train them, and discipline them, and it does not have the right to control intervention of the government in education. Consequently, teachers are marginalized in educational administration. Under a ‘corporatism without labor’ system, unlike European welfare states in which teachers’ groups are committed to education policymaking and reaching agreements, teachers’ groups in Japan are excluded from the education policymaking process. As a result, the JTU adopted a strategy in which it engages in resistance activities in schools once policies were put into practice, rather than at the stage at which the policies are being formed, which has led to major conflicts (e.g. the Asahikawa Test Case). In recent years, the union membership rate has fallen to approximately 22% (33% including all teachers’ groups; figures for 2018), which has further eroded the unions’ influence. However, when important education policies have been formulated in recent years, MEXT has interviewed representatives of the teachers’ unions in the same way that they generally interview other interest groups and interested parties.⁵

The next party consists of the parents and legal guardians of students. Comparing the characteristics of Japanese school education with those in other countries has shown that, in Japan, the rights or influence of parents over school are weak. There are no laws or regulations that clearly and comprehensively state the parents’ rights in the public education system (cf. Article 10 of the Fundamental Law on Education), and individual regulations are extremely limited (e.g., the explanation process when a student is suspended from school was stipulated in the regulation in 2007). At the municipal level as well as at the central level, there is no system through which parents and legal guardians—either as individually or collectively—can participate in education policymaking, and at the individual school level there is likewise no system through which parents can participate in school administration. The PTA has no influence over school policymaking and is mainly engaged in activities that support the implementation of school policies that have already been determined. On the other hand, in recent years parents and legal guardians have, as is the case in other countries, played a role in ensuring school accountability through the introduction of school choice and school assessments. Thus, rather than participating in education policymaking by communicating with schools, parents and legal guardians promote the execution of school policies—mainly related to academic improvements—and

⁵ As a result of the diversification in learning formats (e.g., ‘free schools’ and online schools) and in the types of schools, it has become increasingly difficult to obtain a consolidated view from the CCE alone. Thus, a process was established by which a wide variety of related groups would be interviewed. In addition, when forming important policies including the field of education, a public comment system at central and local level is also utilized in order to obtain views from a wide range within the general population.

thus their involvement is limited to the supervision of schools and teachers. Similarly, children have extremely limited involvement in the formulation of policies by municipalities and schools. School rules are unilaterally determined without any involvement of either children or their parents and legal guardians. In addition to these procedural problems, in a general sense, there are also many anachronisms. These include a wide variety of restrictions such as the color of underwear, hairstyles, and activities outside of school.

Unlike in some Western countries, religious groups have almost no influence over the formulation and implementation of educational policy in Japan. Again, this is due to the fact that, in Japan, school education has historically been solely managed by the central government and not by civil society or faith-based groups. To begin with, the number of students in Japan attending private schools is very small: approximately 1% of elementary school students, 7% of junior high school students, 30% of high school students and 75% of university students. In addition, the number of private schools established by religious groups such as Cristian and Buddhism is less than half of all private schools. What is more, private schools as well as public schools are required to use textbooks conforming to the course of study, and discretion for private schools to develop original curricula is very limited. In this way religious groups have no serious influence in education. At the same time, in Japan there has been almost no input from private corporations, entrepreneurs, or philanthropists in school administration. If we discount cram schools and extra-curricular activities such as swimming and English language classes taken by students, then we see that the education market—including the establishment of schools—is closed off from private corporate participation. However, recent technical developments have made it possible to provide highly individualized learning to students via information and communications technologies. Private corporations that produce such technologies and products have begun to enter the education market and schools. Because of the Covid-19 crisis since 2020, efforts to provide each child with a tablet, a Wi-Fi compatible environment, ICT devices, and training seminar products have been fast-tracked. Through issues such as digital textbooks, IB exams, test scoring and advisory tasks, and the management of teacher labor time, private corporations are anticipated to begin influencing education policymaking in the future.

In addition, as is the case in other countries (Ball, 2021), international organizations—especially the OECD—influence education policy in Japan. The primary and secondary education curricula have been shaped by the OECD's view of academic achievement that is based on 'key competencies,' which is closely linked to work-related skills. Moreover, the questions used on the National Academic Achievement Test implemented by MEXT at the final grade of elementary school and junior high school have been influenced by the questions on the PISA exam that was created by the OECD.

Finally, although the courts have taken a largely passive stance, they are an actor in the education policymaking process. In Japan, education-related laws do not clearly mention the rights of children and their parents or legal guardians, and MEXT tends to disregard their rights. Thus, the courts have played only a limited role in preventing infringements on the rights of children and their parents and legal guardians. Notable

examples include supreme court decisions such as the following: Limitations on the binding power of the course of study determined by the national government (the Asahikawa Test Case in 1974), arbitrary implementation of school textbook vetting was disallowed (the Ienaga Textbook Case in 1997), and the recognition that students in public schools can refuse educational content provided by public schools that is in conflict with their beliefs (Kobe City College of Technology case in 1996).

2.5 Changing Education Policies and the Changing Education System

Since the 1980s, when Japan entered its period of a mature economy, along with changes to the economic system, the process of determining policies also changed from a bureaucracy-led system to a Prime Minister led top-down system. The process of formulating education policy underwent this same change. Furthermore, the changes in the economic system led to the LDP changing the political ideas upon which it relied. Specifically, in the past, the LDP was a broadly conservative political party while at the same time it adopted policies that regulated the free market rather than those that espoused liberalism, and it placed importance on the entire group and uniformity rather than a respect for individualism and diversity. However, since the 1990s, it has adopted neoliberal policies, which has resulted in the relaxation of a wide variety of national restrictions.

Changes have also occurred in the education policies of the LDP. Previously, taking MEXT policy as that of the LDP, instead of a policy of non-intervention, its education policies demanded strict compliance with a variety of standards set for both public and private schools regarding their educational content as well as their facilities and equipment. In addition, it took on a positive attitude toward ensuring equality and increasing social changes and social mobility. However, since the 1990s, the education policies of the LDP have placed increasing importance on values such as the market, competition, freedom, and choice, and it has become more accepting of disparities. During the previous period of domestic demand-driven high economic growth, the LDP believed that what was needed to support the domestic demand was a homogeneous, robust middle class and its ability to work. In contrast, during the period since the 1980s, when there was a shift to an economy that was dependent upon foreign demand, the LDP has recognized the need for personnel that have the skills required for multinational corporations to develop overseas, personnel that are available at low wages who can support the domestic welfare and hospitality industries, and migrant workers. The systems in place in Japanese school education underwent the following changes.

The first change that occurred in the school education system was the shift from a centralized, traditional system that emphasized homogeneity and equality to a system of diversity. Legally, Japanese school education is the responsibility of each local municipality, although in fact—as was seen above—in the past, MEXT demanded

uniformity throughout the country, thus, the decision-making powers held by local municipalities and schools were limited. Specifically, in order to be recognized as an officially sanctioned school, strict conditions have to be met. A major disadvantage to students is the fact that, if they do not graduate from these officially sanctioned schools, they would be unable to pursue higher education or be employed.

Today, the conventional system that was uniform across the country—i.e., the 6-3 year system of primary and junior high schools—has diversified to the extent that some municipalities have adopted a 9-year system, while others have adopted a 4-3-2 year system. It has also become possible for municipalities to adopt a school-choice system for public elementary schools. The Equal Opportunity in Education Act (2016) recognizes ‘learning sites other than schools’ and other ‘non-official schools’ attended, for example, by students who refuse to attend ‘official’ schools, and so recommends the provision of financial support. In addition, education curricula for exceptional schools, that are only partially bound by the course of study, have been created, and routes for obtaining teacher licenses other than university study have been expanded.

The second change in the school education systems is a shift from general and common education, which placed emphasis on the systematics of the curriculum, to education using a curriculum that placed importance on empiricism and was relatively strong in its relevance to practical work. Previously, education in Japan from the primary to the secondary levels placed importance on general and common education, and it was not divided at the secondary level, unlike the tripartite division system of secondary education in Germany. In addition, secondary education in Japan provided almost no learning that prepared students for the workplace. This was because vocation-related learning was provided by the companies that employed students after they graduated. Thus, in Japan, public institutions providing professional and vocational training—including in public schools—had not developed. Since it was the general rule that Japanese corporations employed only new graduates and employees would be transferred within the company among various departments, including accounting, personnel, public relations, legal affairs, manufacturing, and the like, they did not require school to provide training in particular skills. Schools prioritized teaching students general, common basic traits and skills that are useful in any job, such as perseverance and cooperation.

By contrast, in today’s school education, there is increased awareness of the need to prepare students for the workplace, and a shift is seen from the ‘unitary skill set’ view that required all students to master a common set of basic skills to a ‘plural skill set’ view that requires students to master a particular skill that they will use in the workplace in the future. In addition, there is another shift taking place. This is the shift from a school system that follows a ‘single track’ to a ‘multiple-track’ school system in which there are several routes available at the high school level, some that emphasize advancement to university and others that emphasize vocational education. In the past, the vast majority of high school students in Japan took the general course of study, while today the number of courses in high schools for a diversity of occupations is increasing (e.g., in addition to the traditional industry, commercial, and agriculture choices, there are now choices such as welfare, design, sports, and

teaching). Companies have stopped providing the conventional in-house vocational training and have started to demand that vocational education be provided outside the company. Curricula are now designed to provide links to the local community and systems that allow schools to include the experiences of people in the local community have been adopted as part of the ‘community school’ system. Primary and junior high schools are less frequently providing traditional teacher-led instruction of all students for the purpose of knowledge transmission and are increasingly providing exploratory project-based learning in which students engage in discussion with each other. The assessment of academic achievement has also shifted from the assessment of aggregate knowledge acquired to assessments of interest, enthusiasm, curiosity, editing and compiling capabilities, and presentation abilities. University entrance exams are also moving away from overemphasis on knowledge itself and toward the adoption of diverse assessment methods. University education itself was previously inclined toward a liberal arts education and thus it did not place importance on education that was linked to employment. However, the number of Humanities departments have been reduced and an increase in the number of instructors who have practical experience in the subjects they teach has led to an overall increased emphasis on preparation for the workplace, and the creation of new vocational universities (2017) as well as vocational graduate schools (2003).

2.6 Conclusion

Interestingly and importantly, in spite of the above-mentioned changes that have occurred in recent years, some patterns of Japanese education reform have not changed in the last 150 years. Reforms still follow a top-down pattern, and reform is still channelled through school education. Since the start of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, which marked the beginning of the country’s modern society, Japan has developed using a national government-led and school education-led method. Today, despite the relative decline in the influence that schools have on children because of social and economic developments, the expectation of policymakers and people remains that any problems that may arise in society should be quickly handled via school education. Examples include moral education designed to deal with the problem of bullying, physical education designed to improve physical strength, and multicultural education designed to deal with the increasing number of non-Japanese students in Japanese society. Even today, the national course of study is revised by the national government approximately every ten years, and these guidelines have authority and influence over teachers. Thus, top-down reforms via school education take precedence. Changes implemented at the level of local government appear to be oriented toward appeasing business. The fact that there is little input from civil society in these reforms and that there are few reforms or policies that utilize the potential capabilities in communities are all traditional characteristics of the pattern that exists in Japan. Whether this traditional pattern can be changed and whether a shift can be made from a government-driven system of education policymaking to a

civil society-driven system of education policymaking are problems that remain to be solved.

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