

# Chapter 3

## Thirty Years of Education Reform: Previous Revisions of the Course of Study



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**Abstract** The chapter provides an overview of revisions to the course of study in Japan over the past 30 years. It discusses the institutional framework in which the course of study operates and its legal and administrative status in relation to long-standing debates on its effects on schools and teachers. The contents of subsequent revisions over the past three decades are discussed, focusing on how ability and personality are conceptualised and envisioned in the discourse of each revision. These discussions provide a historical perspective against which to consider the latest (2017) curriculum revision.

**Keywords** Course of study · Ad Hoc Council on Education (AHCE) · New perspective on academic ability · Zest for living · Integrated studies

### 3.1 Introduction: Overview on the Course of Study in Japanese Public Education

This chapter provides an overview of the transformation of the course of study in Japan over the past thirty years, focusing on the views of ability and envisioned personality upon which its reform has depended. The course of study contains the minimum required standard of contents taught in primary and secondary education. It is issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and provided to all schools, public and private, at the elementary and junior high and senior high school levels. Though not discussed here, ‘education requirements’ (*kyōiku-yōryō*) are also issued for pre-school education. The latest full revision is due for implementation from 2020 at elementary level, 2021 at junior high level and 2022 at senior high level.

In the following sections, the status of the course of study is expounded from a legal and administrative perspective (Sect. 3.2), and related to long-standing debates

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on its effect on schools and teachers (Sect. 3.3). These debates underpin a discussion of the transformation of the views of ability and desired character on which the course of study has is based. These are chronologically discussed through each revision (Sect. 3.4). Finally, the closing section provides a critical discussion of the new curriculum revision for the 2020s.

## 3.2 Institutional Framework of Education in Japan and Status of the Course of Study

The School Education Act (1947) stipulates that the Minister of Education shall have the authority to determine matters of public education curriculum (Articles 33, 48, 52, 68 and 77), and to then substantiate them. Further, the Regulations for Enforcement of the School Education Act (1947), promulgated by ministerial ordinance, state that the Minister issues the course of study (Articles 52, 74, 84, 109 and 129). The course of study is formally an administrative announcement (*kokuji*) issued by the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology based on these Regulations.

In consideration of the hierarchical structure of law, the course of study can be seen as a substantiation of the State's obligation to realise the right of citizens to education, which is guaranteed primarily in the Constitution. Article 26 of the Constitution of Japan stipulates that all people shall receive an equal education and places an obligation on parents to have children under their protection receive such education. Article 26 of the Japanese Constitution is interpreted more narrowly than the corresponding right to education in international human rights law. The right to education prescribed in Article 26 of the Constitution is substantiated by statute (primary law enacted by parliament), such as the Fundamental Law on Education (*Kyōiku Kihon-hō*) and School Education Act (*Gakkō Kyōiku-hō*). The more restricted interpretation of the right to education is derived from educational law rather than constitutional law. It is understood as including three factors: the freedom of education from state intervention, the guarantee of good institutions to provide education, and the equality of opportunity in education. The latter is equivalent to the right to education prescribed in the United Nations core human rights treaties, such as Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Kobayashi, 2003: 59–61).

The equality of opportunity in education can be understood as both the right to education as well as the principles of non-discriminatory practices and equality as basic principles of human rights protection. In other words, those who are different may be treated differently in accordance with their needs, but unreasonable, unjustified distinctions should be prohibited. The State is required to take positive measures in order that those who would otherwise have less access to education are enabled to have unrestricted access to educational establishments and receive an equal education. Those clauses should not be interpreted as permitting the selection of children

on the basis of ability, but guaranteeing that the right to education should be undertaken for the child's development and in consideration of the personality of each child (Singh, 2011: paras 35–38). To substantiate Article 26 of the Constitution and provisions of the international treaties mentioned above, Article 1 of the Fundamental Law on Education states the core aims of education. It provides that: Education shall aim at the full development of personality, striving for the rearing of the people, sound in mind and body, who shall love truth and justice, esteem individual value, respect labor and have a deep sense of responsibility, and be imbued with the independent spirit, as builders of a peaceful state and society. The normative perspective of public education suggests that the course of study and its reform must be always based on the aforementioned laws and the constitution above them.

### 3.3 Status of the Course of Study Under the Framework of Educational Administration in Japan

While the State has an obligation to realise the educational rights of people in general and for children in particular, it is parents or guardians who enable children to access education in practice. Nonetheless, two opposing doctrines have emerged from a conflict in the interpretation of the right to education prescribed in Article 26 of the Japanese Constitution: the theory of 'civic (people's) control of education' (*minshu no kyōikuken*) and the theory of 'state control of authority' (*kokka no kyōikuken*).

The former, the theory of civic educational authority, evinces that teachers as professionals in public education shall primarily have a right to determine the contents of public education (Ashibe & Takahashi, 2011: 265–266). More accurately, the core meaning of the right to education is interpreted as the realisation of children's right to learning. The control of education lies with the people (citizens). The State is thus the trustee of the people's right to education, and thus should abstain from excessive intervention in the contents of education (Horio, 1992: 215–217). The authority of education is delegated to teachers who, though unelected, are educational professionals. To secure the freedom of education, the role of the State in the subject area of education should be limited to its institutional guarantee, i.e., to prepare necessary institutions, financial support and so on. The latter, state educational authority, suggests that the government generally, or the Ministry in particular, shall have authority to determine the contents of public education because the government holds *pouvoir constitué* (Sieyès, 1789) as the democratically appointed power.

This doctrinal issue was discussed by the judgement of the Supreme Court in the Asahikawa Test Case (1976). The Court refused both doctrines of state educational authority and civic educational authority as each too extreme and one-sided (Supreme Court of Japan, 1976). The judgement stood at an intermediate position, suggesting that, while teachers have a certain range of discretion as to how they determine the content of public education, the state is also entitled to intervene to

determine the content of public education within a certain scope. The former must be necessary and relevant, but the latter is ultimately required to realise a common national standard for public education, which in turn is required to guarantee the right to education. The judge further emphasised that this middle-ground interpretation holds firmly for primary and secondary education because of limited choice and because children's abilities of critical understanding are limited. Otherwise stated, it does not apply to higher education. In this context, the question of whether the course of study is legally binding was directly considered. The Court ruled that, insofar as it is limited to an outline and framework, a legally binding course of study is compatible with the Constitution (Hosokawa, 1983: 110–111).

### 3.4 Thirty-year Reform of the Course of Study

The reform of the course of study over the past three decades can be understood through debates that firstly discuss the meaning of required academic abilities in a globalised era and secondly through the increasing subordination of education to nationalistic policies. During this timeframe, the course of study has been fully revised four times: in 1989, in 1998 (primary and secondary schools), 1999 (high schools), in 2008/2009 and in 2017. This section begins with an overview of educational reform in Japan in the 1980s, which provides a basis for each subsequent revision of the course of study.

In the 1980s, when Japan became a great economic power, structural reforms in various societal realms, including public education, were required. Against the background of America's enormous trade deficit to Japan, the latter was criticised for its excessive working hours and trade surplus. Despite significant economic growth, numerous educational pathologies were discussed domestically in Japan, including bullying among pupils, violence by teachers, and exceedingly oppressive school regulations (Mizuhara et al., 2018: 181–182). Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone established an Ad Hoc Council on Education (AHCE, *Rinkyōshin*) in 1984. In 1987, the AHCE regarded the devastation of education in the 1980s as 'an adverse effect of high economic growth which post-war Japan had experienced in 1950s and 1960s' (*Rinkyōshin* 1987). Administrative reform in the 1980s was guided by neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism, which had a significant effect on the deliberations of the AHCE. While both neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism lean toward small government, privatisation and competitive market mechanisms, neo-conservatism also emphasises nationalistic sentiments and traditions of the state. These two ideologies have guided educational reform in Japan until today.

#### (1) Revision in 1989

Following the conclusion of the AHRC, a 'new perspective on academic ability' was advocated by MEXT as a guiding principle for revising the course of study in 1989, when that of primary, secondary, and high schools were amended together. The new conceptualisation of academic ability places more focus more on pupils' interest,

motivation and attitudes than knowledge, understanding and abilities acquired. It promotes pupils' acquisition of capacities for self-learning based on abilities to think, make judgements and express themselves. This concept of academic ability is in turn based on four guiding principles: (1) development of a spiritually enriched personality, (2) cultivation of a capacity for self-learning, (3) emphasis on a foundation for each subject and education that respects the personalities of individuals, and (4) respect for culture and tradition, and the promotion of international understanding.

First, the development of a spiritually enriched personality relates to education on lifestyle, moral and civic education, volunteering, and contact with nature. At the pre-primary (kindergarten) level of education, it promotes a lifestyle and attitudes that foster interaction with others. At primary and lower secondary (junior high school) education, moral education through contact with nature and volunteering is emphasised. At upper secondary (high school) level, pupils are encouraged to consider, through moral education, how they should live as a human being, member of a community, as a national citizen and in relation to nature. Second, cultivation of the capacity for self-learning indicates abilities of logical thinking, judgement, expression, creativity, intuitive senses, and information handling. Pupils are expected to be independent learners who can survive the instability of contemporary society through life-long learning. Third, emphasis on a foundation for each subject aims to ensure consistency of curricula from primary and secondary and enable pupils to establish habits of daily life and learning at levels of pre-primary (kindergarten) and junior grade of primary education. Education for respecting the personality of individuals aims to increase a variety of optional subjects and introduce ability-differentiated teaching in secondary education. Fourth, the principle of respect for culture and tradition, and promotion of international understanding was based on the thought that future national citizens living in a globalised era are expected to understand life and culture of foreign countries as well as respect the culture and traditions of Japan. It influenced history education in primary and lower secondary education, Japanese classics and foreign language education in lower and latter secondary education, and patriotic education through use of the national flag and anthem in school ceremonies.

## (2) Revision in 1998

The revision of the course of study in 1998 (for primary and junior high schools) and 1999 (for high schools) was guided by a newly coined concept—the 'zest for living' (*ikiru chikara*). Zest for living, in sum, means the integration of knowledge and developing independent-minded learners with an issue-resolving orientation based on crosscutting and integrated knowledge, which contrasts with conventional knowledge separated into subjects.

Classtime for integrated studies (*sōgō tekinagakushū no jikan*) was newly introduced into the curricula for primary, lower and upper secondary education. The focus of this revision of the course of study had been the fundamental parts of each subject. As the 'foundation' of each subject was carefully selected, the revision became increasingly narrower. On the one hand, without a solid understanding of the basic parts of each subject, students could not have knowledge to integrate. On the other hand, integrated studies was placed in parallel to subjects, so each school was

required to clarify how they were inserted into the conventional curriculum. In other words, though views on the teaching of conventional subjects were maintained as a strong foundation, integrated studies was intended to develop the ‘zest for living’, which guided a revision of the course of study in this time. Each school was expected to make a strong effort both to teach fundamental parts of traditional subjects and to develop the independent-minded learners by carefully placing the integrated studies in the school syllabus.

In reality, it turned out to be an excessive expectation of schools, especially at the secondary level (Bjork, 2016; Cave, 2016). Moreover, the decrease of time for learning conventional subjects was severely criticised at a time when a supposed decline in academic achievement was being reported by various media outlets.

### (3) Partial revision in 2003

Administrative measures taken to combat supposedly declining academic achievement were understood as transforming the emphasis from the ‘zest for living’ to conventional academic skills, which led to further criticism against the government for inconsistency. In 2003, the course of study was partially modified. Three points can be specified in this partial revision.

First, the character of the course of study as a minimum standard of public education was clarified and teachers came to be expected to teach the contents, but were also encouraged to add some materials in consideration of pupils’ circumstances and ability. The second was improvement of integrated studies emphasising ‘integration of knowledge’, which indicated an expectation that the period would draw in and integrate knowledge and skills learnt in other subjects for application in real life. In substance, each school was requested to formulate a comprehensive plan on integrated studies. Given that some schools had used this time for exam preparation for the entrance examination, reform measures to implement integrated studies were required. Third, teaching in accordance with the individuality of pupils was emphasised. The revised course of study showed ability-differentiated teaching and supplementary tutoring as examples.

In sum, as the partial revision in 2003 provided further substance on the vision of the 1998/1999 course of study, whose fundamental principles were maintained. However, criticism against the educational reform in the 1990s focused not on the outcome of the introduction of integrated studies, but on supposedly declining academic abilities. As such, the partial revision in 2003 reinstated a degree of focus on traditional subjects.

### (4) Revision in 2008

The courses of study for kindergartens, primary and junior high schools were revised in 2008 and for senior high schools in 2009. The five points of the significance of the reform during that time can be summarised as: (1) further advancing of the ‘zest for living’ as a basis of the curriculum, (2) a new view of three-layered learning ability, (3) a skill of international standard of communication and literacy, and (5) common compulsory subjects prioritised over optional ones.

In the revision of 2008/2009, the development of key competencies was pursued, which are considered to be a requirement in the twenty-first century knowledge society. The new view of three-layered learning ability was proposed which consisted of (1) acquiring basic knowledge and skills, (2) applied thinking skills, decision-making, and expression, and (3) attitude towards self-initiated learning. Based on these, pupils were expected to reach an ‘international standard’ of communication and literacy, high standard of morality, and to be fulfilled with the ‘zest for living’. Interestingly, this was long before the OECD took an interest in character and morality. There was a feeling that the skills introduced in this revision would be challenging for teachers to put into practice in the classroom.

#### (5) Revision in 2017

The latest version of the course of study came into effect in 2020 for elementary schools, 2021 for junior high schools and 2022 for senior high schools. All subjects were revised with the aims of independent-minded and dialogical deep learning (Mizuhara et al., 2018: 257). The revised course of study focuses on the development of abilities with broad utility based on the idea of ‘what pupils will be able to do’. To substantiate the curriculum, schools are required to conduct curriculum management in consideration of the circumstances of pupils, and to introduce an active way of learning and assessment in each subject. It aims to develop pupils’ generic skills and competencies, which means development of abilities applicable outside school in addition to acquiring knowledge.

The revision of the course of study in 2017 was influenced by the concept of ‘key competencies’, proposed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). ‘Key competencies’ correspond to sophisticated applied academic abilities with general versatility. In concept, it includes applying knowledge taught in conventional subjects to issues which we face in daily life as well as life-long continuous learning by reflecting on choices and decisions. The revision of the course of study in 2017 was guided by the intention to drastically reform the knowledge-acquiring-oriented concept of learning.

Three pillars are suggested as the basis of abilities and skills which pupils are expected to obtain: (1) acquiring knowledge and skills, (2) developing capacities for thought, decisions, and expressions, and (3) cultivating a personality that aspires to independent learning.

First, ‘acquiring knowledge and skills’ is primarily related to those learnt through conventional school subjects, but it does not mean memorising knowledge divided by subjects. Rather, knowledge and skills to learn are required to have an organic link and be applied in authentic situations. For example, in the case of history, pupils are expected to learn ‘why an event happened and its subsequent influences’ rather than memorise ‘in which year what event happened’.

Second, ‘developing capacities for thought, decisions and expressions’ corresponds to processes of thinking, decision-making, expression, and creativity in response to a problem. The overall process can be divided into three phases: (a) a phase of finding, in which pupils find an issue, determine its range, plan a settlement of the issue, behave with predicting result, and reflect on the process to influence

finding and resolving subsequent issues, (b) A phase of establishing a thought, in which pupils form their own idea, express it by text and dialogue on the basis of scrutinised information as well as create an idea as a group through communicating with others, and (c) a phase of innovating, in which pupils are expected to find new significance and shape a new value.

Third, ‘cultivating a personality that aspires to learning’ is related to so-called ‘meta-cognition’. It corresponds to an ability to control emotion and behaviour and maintain amicable relationships with others, attitudes to respect diversity and collaborate with others, contribute to creating a sustainable society such as leadership, teamwork, sensibility, and humanity. In sum, meta-cognition in this context means an objective understanding of one’s thinking, practised as reflection in a class.

Both before and after revisions, moral education was prescribed to be conducted throughout the curriculum. That is, all subjects and integrated studies are intended to include learning for moral education. Through a partial revision of the course of study in 2015, the designated classtime for learning moral education, on which pupils were previously not assessed, was reformed as a subject within the curriculum. Moral education became a subject to cultivate morality as an independently-minded individual together with others. Since the revision, teaching must adhere to a ministerially approved textbook. As this reform was led by the nationalistic group in the Liberal Democratic Party, it is criticised as it may result in an indoctrinating patriotic education (Bamkin, 2018).

### **3.5 Concluding Remarks: Critique of the Recent Reform of the Course of Study**

This chapter has explained the right to education and the legal basis on which the course of study operates. Subsequently, it reviewed previous reforms of the course of study for the past thirty years from the 1980s to the present. This reform has been guided by the concepts of a ‘new perspective on academic ability’ and the ‘zest for living’. It has not only covered the contents of each subject but also discussed changes in how ability and personality are conceptualised and envisioned for each revision. The period for integrated studies was newly introduced, and moral education became a subject where pupils’ learning outcome is assessed.

While the course of study is based on the idea of ‘fully developing the individual character imbued with the qualities making up a peaceful and democratic nation and society’ (Article 1 of the Fundamental Law on Education), criticism of the recent and on-going educational reform arises on this point. The content of the course of study has been increased and deepened. However, strictly controlling the content of education and methods of teaching may result in excessive limitations on the practice of schools and teachers, especially where it runs counter to professionally shared interpretations of the nature of the course of study shown, for example, by support for professional freedom to determine the content of teaching in the Asahikawa Test



Case, albeit within the framework of public education determined by the state. Given that discretion given to teachers has been unreasonably narrowed, there is a risk that standardised public education may be provided by a centralised state without enough consideration for the situation of each school or pupil (Nakadaira, 2019: 130–131). In addition, moral education, introduced as a subject in 2015, weakens the democratic spirit of the Constitution of Japan, which is rooted in individual freedoms, towards an institutionalisation of service to society (Takahashi, 2020: 346). Not only moral education but also the course of study as a whole should be based on respect for individuals rather than indoctrinating pupils into an ‘ideal human personality’ which the government seems to expect.

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