Recent Development in Secondary Education in Japan:

Neoliberal Educational Policy and Social Disparity

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This paper will describe a recent educational policy and its effects in Japan. In the 1980s, the Japanese government adopted some neoliberal social policies, including social welfare, medical services, and education. One of the most prominent changes in education is the introduction of the 6-year integrated public secondary school system, launched in 1999. It was originally designed for students who hoped to engage in a wide range of learning activities without being interrupted by a high school entrance examination. However, 6-year integrated schools have recently been successful in sending their students to prestigious universities, thus changing the way parents make school choices. Competition for "good" education now begins at the age of 10 all over Japan. In addition, this educational policy was executed during the economic deflation period. It will be a new symbol of social disparity in Japan.

Keywords: Educational Policy, Secondary Education, Neoliberalism, 6-Year Integrated Secondary Education

I. INTRODUCTION

After 1945, the Japanese society was considered a relatively equal or classless society. Sociologist Donald Dore pointed out that although Japan seemed to be a classless and equal society, all 18-year-old children were stratified one day—the day of the entrance examination for higher education[1]. As Dore discussed, Japan was considered a meritocratic society. Human resources were assigned tasks according to their academic achievements. However, in the last couple of decades, this landscape of education and social structure in Japan has been gradually changing.

In the 1980s, Japan moved with the international tide of neoliberalism and neo-conservatism and began to change its educational policy. The Interim Council of Education was called together directly under the Prime Minister, and its final report was published in 1986. The basic ideas discussed in the report were elasticity and diversification of educational system. According to these ideas, the Law of School Education was revised in 1998, which made it possible for public

sectors and local educational authorities to establish the 6-year integrated secondary education program.

Before 1998, some private and national secondary schools had offered the 6-year integrated program (IP), which aimed to educate the best and brightest students on how to pass the entrance examination to prestigious universities. When the 6-year integrated system was launched, there were strong opinions that a new system should provide a wide range of learning experiences, using the time spared by not preparing for the high school entrance examination, and it should not provide a preparation for the entrance examination for universities. The Lower and Upper houses of the Diet confirmed that this system should not provide a special preparation for the entrance examination for tertiary institutions.

However, as the educational climate has been gradually changing in this decade, some of the public schools with a 6-year IP, especially the ones located in urban areas, have been successful in sending their students to prestigious universities. These successes have greatly influenced the way parents make school choices. If parents decide to choose a secondary school with a 6-year IP for their children, it is often said that they have to start preparing from the fourth grade. Additionally, this preparation requires parents to pay extra cost. This phenomena or competition for "good" education can now be seen everywhere in Japan. Making a school choice at the age of 12 might be considered a new symbol of social disparity in Japan.

In addition, this new system needs to be carefully considered, because it was executed during a period of economic deflation and declining birthrate. Looking back at the history of education in Japan shows that the educational system has been developed and supported by economic growth until the 1980s. Economic growth required multiple new types of human resources, which resulted in a science-orientated educational policy and the development of a similar kind of school system. However now we cannot expect high level of economic development and we have to consider new types of human resource development.

II. BACKGROUND

This section will discuss secondary education with a 6-year integrated program. Before the discussion, the research objective needs to be defined. Because educational systems usually are highly culturally embedded or domestic, and the implication of a word or concept in one system may differ from or not be identified in the others, confirming some basic information and concepts is necessary.

1. ARTICULATION

In Japan, the secondary education system is divided into two terms: three years from the

seventh to ninth grade, called junior high school, which is a part of 9-year compulsory education; and three years from the tenth to twelfth grade, called high school. In order to enter high school, students are required to take an entrance examination. The 6-year IP makes it possible to provide students with a seamless curriculum.

2. HOW MANY SCHOOLS HAVE A 6-YEAR IP?

We will mainly focus on pubic secondary schools with a 6-year program. Before the revision of the Law of School Education in 1998, some private and national secondary schools offered a 6-year program. Some of these schools did not admit students who graduated from other junior high schools. Additionally, some private high schools admitted only a small number of students (1 or 2 classes). However, these cases were exceptional because these schools were located only in big cities like Tokyo and Osaka.

After 1998, the Ministry of Education and Science declared that it would be desirable to establish 500 secondary schools with a 6-year IP. The number of high school districts in Japan is almost equal to 500. It means that it is possible for most children and parents, even if they live in a rural area, to get an alternative school choice at sixth grade.

3. WHAT IS A "PUBLIC" SCHOOL IN JAPAN?

Geoff Whitty demonstrated an aspect of the marketization of education using Burchardt's way of classification of public-private welfare[2].

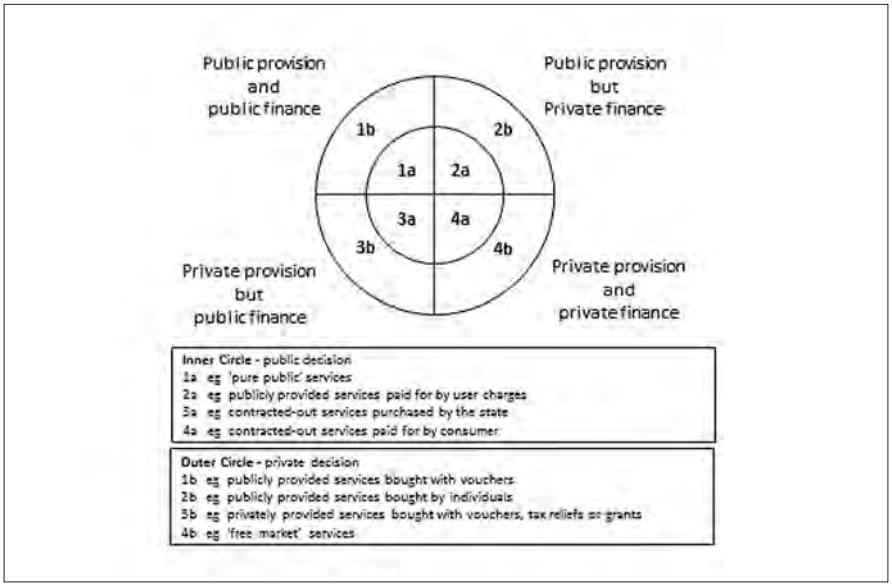


Fig. 1. Classification of public and private welfare activities (Burchardt et al., 1999)

Figure 1 not only focuses on education but also on welfare activities. It may be useful to point out some characteristics of the relationship between "public" and "private" in education. However, it seems that this schema works well only in highly marketized areas or countries. It is, however, difficult to explain what is happening in Japan.

Activities marked on the right side of the circle do not exist in Japan. Area 2 is considered as "New Public Management," and we cannot find examples of this type of secondary education in Japan. We also cannot find any cases belonging to Area 4. Education in japan, even in private schools, is supported by public finance, and is under the control of the government. Therefore, we could say that all schools in Japan are public schools.

However, private schools have an autonomous curriculum. In addition to the national curriculum, private schools may provide special activities or programs. Through this limited freedom and the limited time they have at their disposal, private schools in Japan have tried to enhance their appeal.

Schools are usually categorized according to their founders.

Public	Public schools are established by the local government. High schools are usually established by prefectures or cities and elementary and junior high schools are usually established by cities and towns.
National	National schools are established by the central government. These schools are attached to national universities. Most national universities have attached schools as experimental schools. However, the number of national high schools is under 20, including the ones that provide special needs education. As experimental schools, these schools have a relative freedom in making curriculum decisions.
Private	Private schools are established by a school corporation and partially supported by public finance. These schools have the freedom to offer special activities or programs.

From this perspective of curriculum management, the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the three types of schools can be explained through the following equation:

Private > National > Public

One of the reasons behind the introduction of a 6-year IP was to bring a school-based curriculum or reforms to revise the secondary education curriculum of public schools. Through a series of reforms, the government, including local governments, tried to enhance the appeal of public schools, especially in the age of neo-liberalism.

4. Success of Private Secondary Schools

Private secondary schools, which offer a 6-year IP, have been successful in sending their students to prestigious universities. It obviously does not mean that the quality of education is

better, but there exists a "league table" of high schools in Japan. Almost every year, soon after the entrance examinations, some magazines report which high schools have the highest number of students who passed the entrance examination of prestigious universities, especially Tokyo University. This kind of information has changed the way parents make school choices.

III. BASIC STRUCTURE OF A 6-YEAR IP

1. PURPOSE OF THIS SYSTEM

According to the Ministry of Education and Science, the purpose of a 6-year IP is to provide students and their parents with a chance to learn under a 6-year coherent curriculum and to create an education that believes it is important to nurture the characteristics of each student. In order to accomplish this philosophy, the Ministry of Education and Science revised the Law of School Education and selectively launched the new system. The final target is to establish 500 secondary schools with a 6-year IP.

2. TYPES AND NUMBER OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS WITH AN IP

There are three types of IPs, which are described in the following table.

Type A 6-year program	The school provides a 6-year program to all students.
Type B Juxtapose or Joint Style	The school provides a 3-year and a 6-year program. Some students opt for the 6-year program, while some others choose the 3-year program.
Type C Cooperative Style	The school provides a 6-year program in collaboration with some junior high schools in the area. The junior high schools may admit their students without an entrance examination. Most schools of this type are established in rural areas.

Figure 2 shows the number of schools in Japan with a 6-year IP. As is seen from the figure, there were 450 schools in 2012. The number of type A schools was 50 and type C schools was 82. The number of type B schools, the juxtapose style, had been on the rise, and there were 318 such schools in 2012. Seventy percent of the schools with a 6-year IP were of type B.

3. TYPICAL CURRICULUM OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS WITH AN IP

As mentioned above, the curriculum of a 6-year integrated secondary school was designed to provide a wide range of activities and learning experiences.

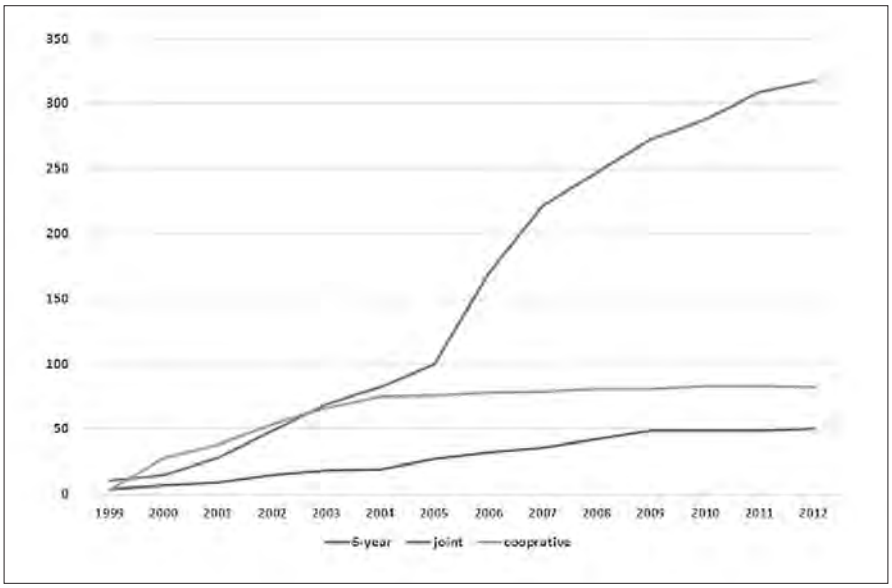


Fig. 2. Number of secondary schools with IP

When this system was established in 1999, the Ministry of Education and Science provided certain guidelines for the curriculum:

a. Offering a chance to learn by experience
b. Using local area resources or materials
c. Providing global education
d. Providing educational ICT tools
e. Incorporating environmental learning or sustainable development
f. Incorporating traditional culture
g. Giving enough time to students who want to gradually deepen their knowledge, not quickly

Most schools have tried to create a unique curriculum according to these points.

However, in this decade, circumstances surrounding school education have been gradually changing. Although schools consider it important to maintain their unique visions and curriculum, they must also seek relatively short-term learning outputs. Even if they maintain their excellent vision and curriculum, if parents and students do not choose their schools, they will find it difficult to keep managing the school. In other words, the influence of neo-liberalism has been gradually growing. Schools can no longer be indifferent toward the way students and parents make school choices.

IV. CASE STUDY OF A 6-YEAR IP

In this section, the case of a school with a 6-year IP in Miyagi Prefecture, northern part of Japan, will be discussed.

This school had been one of the most prestigious public girls' high schools and had more than 100 years of history. In 2010, it was reorganized as a secondary school with an IP. It was simultaneously changed into a coeducation secondary school. It admitted 80 students to the seventh grade and 160 students to the tenth grade. Since 2012, it has been admitting 105 students to the seventh grade.

The vision of this school is to educate students and help them gain a high level of intelligence with tolerance and an open mind, a spirit of innovation, and make them creative and capable of contributing to the development of the world.

In order to attain these high ideals, this school provides a special curriculum: Scientific Research (SR), International Studies (IS), Career Studies (CS), and Thinking Method (TM).

SR involves cross-curricular activities, mainly across scientific subjects, that focus on the environment and use a wide range of scientific methods. Through these activities, students can acquire a scientific perspective and problem-solving ability.

IS involves cross-curricular activities, mainly across social science and language subjects. Through these activities, including attachment programs abroad, students can learn about multiculturalism and gain presentation skills as well as other skills.

CS involves career guidance activities. Through these activities, students reflect upon themselves and consider what they should learn in the future.

TM is only offered to seventh grade students. This involves activities that can help students acquire logical and critical thinking skills, writing skills, presentation skills, etc. TM is related to the other three programs.

These cross-curricular activities are well organized along with the activities of the existing subjects. This helps students become lifelong learners and global citizens.

On the other hand, the management of this school thinks it is crucial to realize the "desired results." Most parents of the students in this school are highly educated, with relatively high incomes, and are more interested in comparing the education that their children receive with that provided to children in other schools. Moreover, our data shows that they are interested in academic achievement, especially the achievement of passing the entrance examinations of tertiary institutes. Therefore, the management should pay attention to short-term as well as long-term learning outcomes. This may be considered a dilemma of such secondary schools.

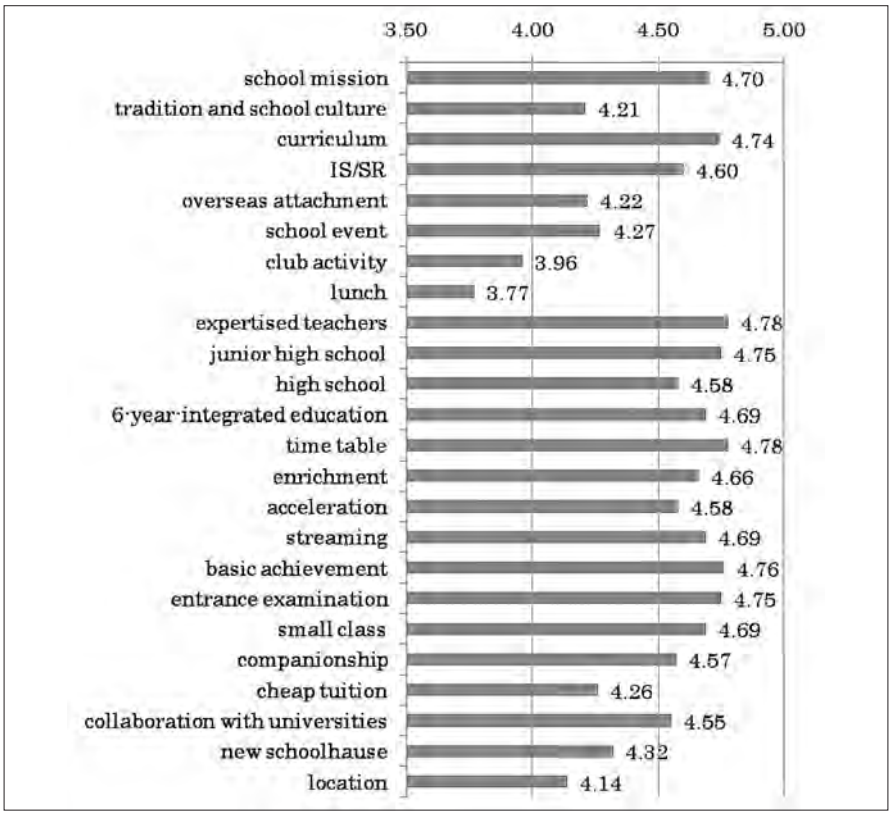


Fig. 3. Attractive points for parents (2010)

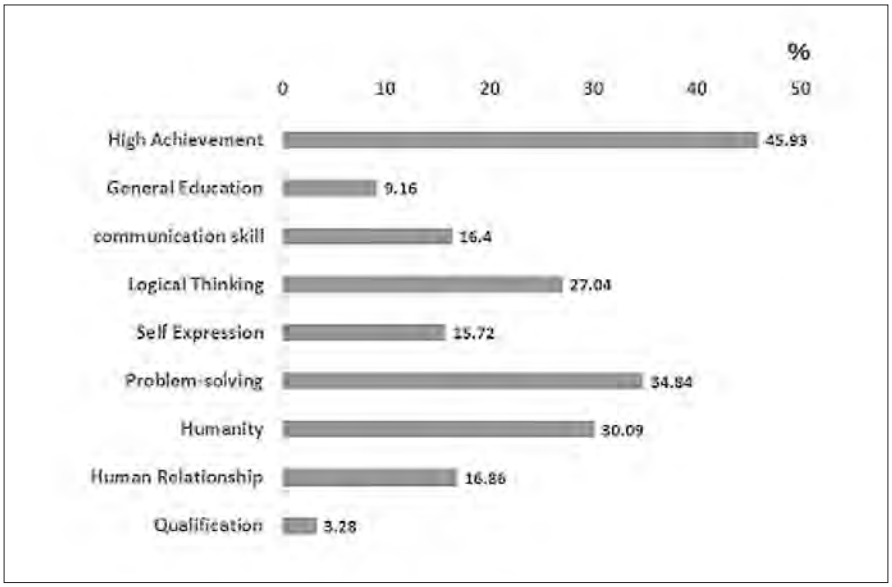


Fig. 4. Desirable learning outcomes for parents (2010)

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The 6-year integrated secondary education was introduced to provide an alternative to the existing school education system. It originally aimed to ensure just an alternative way of learning. Through learning by experience, we should make the next generation of students learn important global and local issues in schools. This new system brought elasticity and diversity to secondary education. Additionally, it was a symbol of reforming the traditional way of school education and learning.

In this decade, neo-liberalism, which tends to consider education as a commodity, is seemingly causing the degeneration of the essential parts of this system. It has now become a worldwide movement[3]. Education, which is highly centralized and is controlled by bureaucrats, should justly be deregulated and diversified. However, if this tendency is excessively emphasized, the learning activities of children will become distorted, and public schools may become occupied by a special group, that is the upper middle class, which is an educated class and has relatively high incomes, but sometimes shows conservative ideas.

In addition, in order to pass the entrance examination of a 6-year integrated secondary school, it is said that children and parents should start preparing from the fourth grade. This requires parents to pay extra cost and is not cheap[4]. If that is the case, it will foster and extend social disparity. As mentioned above, the 6-year IP provided by a small number of private and national schools before 1998 had helped only those living in large urban areas. However, the establishment of public secondary schools has now engendered and spread competition almost throughout Japan.

Nevertheless, we need to reflect upon the nature of secondary education and the kind of learning experience we should provide. Without this kind of fundamental reflection upon the philosophy of education, secondary education will lose its roots and transform in a short time. Public secondary education in particular has a mission to educate and develop a sound nation. Therefore, as a national policy, we have to ensure a wide range of the learning outcomes.

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