

The latest trend in the reform of high school education in Japan: Focusing on the curriculum reform

Tomohito Harada
Hyogo University of Teacher Education

1. Basic features of recent educational reforms in Japan

In Japan, there are the Courses of Study, national standards for curriculum for each stage of education from the kindergarten to high school. The Courses of Study is revised roughly once in every ten years in order to respond to changes in society. In the past half century, the Courses of Study for high schools were revised in 1960, 1970, 1978, 1989, 1998, 2008 and the latest version was published in March 2018. The basic principles of this revision can be seen in the 'report' of the Central Council for Education submitted in December 2016, and the report's major feature is to propose the biggest reform in high school education.

The reasons are as follows. In Japanese elementary schools, the emphasis is placed on pupil-centered learning and the aim has been not only to develop basic academic abilities in subjects such as Japanese Language and Arithmetic but also to develop 'zest for life' (similar to the OECD's Key Competencies) to solve problems collaboratively and to participate in civil society activities by way of 'the period for integrated studies'. In contrast, in secondary education, in particular in high schools which provide upper secondary education, the focus has been largely on teaching and learning to prepare students for the university entrance exam in the form of lectures given by teachers. Consequently, the Japanese high schools have produced a number of students who can deal with problems that can be answered by either yes or no and problems with correct answers but who are not good at writing essays based on one's judgment and interpretation and expressing one's opinion. It is reasoned with this, citizens who can survive the 21st century which is full of uncertainty cannot be developed and therefore the focus is to be placed on the educational reform at the high school level.

2. Two pillars in the high school education reform

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been promoting diversification of high school education. As of now, 98 per cent of those leaving the junior high school in Japan proceed to enrol the high school including the correspondence course, which suggests that high school education is now effectively quasi-compulsory education. However, partly due to the diversification policies, there is a significant gap in students' academic abilities and how to

secure the quality of high school education is now a major challenge. In Japan, because the single-track schooling system which was established after World War Two has been in place for more than seventy years, there is deeply rooted public opposition to the introduction of a double-track schooling system in which those who wish to proceed to the university and those who want to start work are clearly separated. Also the implementation of the 'high school basic academic abilities test' (the certificate of completing high school education) proposed by the high school education subdivision of the Central Council for Education is fiercely opposed by high school teachers – in Japan it is not easy to fail students with a poor level of basic academic abilities – and whether the test will be implemented or not is not clear.

Against this background, the reform in high school education in Japan, which has officially started has two major pillars. The first pillar is a reform of the university entrance exam system and the other is a reform of the Courses of Study. Given that the university entrance exam system exerts strong influence on high school education, a reform in the Courses of Study only will not bring about much substantial effect. Therefore, the aim is to reform both in an integrated manner. As for the reform in the Courses of Study, the first objective is to cultivate abilities to think, judge and express and the promotion of active learning which utilizes perspectives and methods unique to each subject is demanded as a way of achieving this objective. As for the reform of the university entrance exam system, it has been decided to abolish the current 'National Center Test for University Admissions' which consists of multiple choice questions which are marked by the computer and to replace it with a new 'University Admissions Common Test' which tests abilities to think and judge by introducing some essay questions from 2020. A special team for each subject has been set up to prepare for the new common test and the teams have started to design exam questions and trials based on their work have been carried out.

3. Features of the reform of high school curriculum: The cases of social science related subjects

In this section, using two social science related subjects, Geography and History, and Civics (by the 1989 revision of the Courses of Study, social studies at the high school was divided/reorganized into Geography and History, and Civics), the features of the reform of high school curriculum are detailed. There are three major points.

First of all, the subject composition was significantly changed. In the case of Geography and History, until the revision, 'World History' was a compulsory subject with 'Japanese History' and 'Geography' as electives. After the revision, two new subjects, 'Comprehensive History' which effectively integrated modern and contemporary historical parts of 'World History' and 'Japanese History', and 'Comprehensive Geography' were set up and both were made compulsory. Behind this change were the fact that 'World History' was unpopular among high school students – because it dealt with a wide range of time periods and areas and because it had a large number of terms – and aggressive attempts by the Association of Japanese Geographers and the Geographic Education Society of Japan to regain grounds in response to the huge decrease in the number of students taking

'Geography' because 'World History' was made compulsory. Following these, as a way of cultivating historical awareness appropriate for the globalizing age, 'Integrated History' in which students learn modern and contemporary history of Japan and the world in an integrated manner was set up and made compulsory together with 'Integrated Geography' which includes sustainable development such as the use of geographical information system and enhanced disaster prevention education. In addition, above these subjects, three electives entitled the 'Inquiry in Geography', 'Inquiry in Japanese History' and 'Inquiry in World History' were set up. As the subject titles suggest, in these subject the emphasis is placed on learning by exploring a theme using materials, not on the acquisition of factual knowledge about geography and history.

In Civics, the former compulsory subject, 'Contemporary Society' was abolished and a new compulsory subject 'Public' was set up. The feature of 'Contemporary Society' was found in the analytical comprehension of society we live in from a variety of perspectives such as politics, economy, society and culture. In 'Public', the emphasis is placed on subjective involvement in the formation of sustainable society and state while collaborating with others. This probably reflects the fact that 'Moral Education' has been made a subject in elementary and junior high schools; it appears that more emphasis is placed on participation and responsibility as citizens. One of the major factors behind this is the lowering of the voting age from 20 to 18 years old in 2016. There are no major changes in 'Ethics' and 'Politics and Economy,' two electives placed above 'Public' in terms of its content.

The second feature, which is not about changes in the subject composition, is that three pillars of a) knowledge/skills, b) abilities to think, judge and express and c) capacity to learn/humanity are introduced as a way of setting objectives in each subject. These three pillars are to be made explicit learning objectives for each unit and to be used in the creation of rubrics as the basis of assessment. While assessment criteria have been introduced in elementary and junior high schools from early on, this is the first time they are introduced to high schools and it is expected there will be a fair amount of confusion and stagnation in spreading the use of assessment criteria.

The third feature is a requirement to encourage learning through pursuing or a solving a task by making the most of 'perspectives and ways of thinking' which are unique to each subject so as to develop knowledge/skills and abilities to think, judge and express to live and work in society. Previous Courses of Study ordered to improve lessons, there are no description in details. In this revision, however, concrete questions and ways of using themes in terms of geographical and historical perspectives and ways of thinking and perspectives and ways of thinking related to contemporary society are presented. In other words, it presents practical strategies for transforming learning of social science related subject in high schools which was ridiculed as 'talk and chalk' to students' 'subjective/dialogical and deep learning'. This suggests that the MEXT is very serious about the reform of high school education combined with the reform of the university entrance exam system. The effects of this educational reform will become clearer by around 2030 and it is fair to say that the totality of the quality of high school education in Japan is now being questioned.