

# The Future of “Japanese Schools” as a Community: Points of Discussion on the Liberalization and Personalization of Education and the “Small Schools” Debate\*

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*As arguments for the liberalization of education grow more heated, how are we to approach Japanese schools as a community? This paper clarifies the basic concept of the “small schools” theory typified by the METI “Future Classrooms” (functionalist and individualist reorganizations), and organizes the relevant points of debate. In particular, the paper examines the issues of individuation and personalization represented by individual optimization of learning, promotionism (an attendance-based credit acquisition) and retentionism (an achievement-based credit acquisition), merit promotion and social promotion, and grade and class systems. Based thereon, the paper presents a perspective on the reconstruction of the communality and publicness of Japanese schools.*

**Keywords:** Japanese schools as a community; “Future Classrooms”; individualized/personalized education; merit promotion and social promotion; communality and publicness of education

## Introduction

The raison d’être of schools has come under question during the COVID-19 pandemic. On February 27, 2020, then-Prime Minister Abe Shinzo issued a sudden request for schools throughout Japan to close. The emergency closure period, originally intended to run until the end of March, was extended thereafter, lasting as much as three months from March in the case of some schools and regions. Forced to stay at home, both adults and children spent the early part of the closure period searching for the functions of schools, in particular so as to reevaluate the meaning of the space and connections provided by schools. However, as

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schools remained closed, many public schools in particular remained unable to shift to online classes, provoking distrust of schools and teachers. Elsewhere, as the activities of private schools and extrascholastic educational services and NPOs were shown to be handling the situation flexibly and rapidly, “de-schooling” and “small school” theories also came to the fore, no longer taking for granted in-person attendance and arguing for outsourcing which would slim down school functions and roles.

In international terms, Japan has been slow to arrive at ICT environments and usage within education, a situation laid bare by the school closures. In response, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) moved up its plans for the “GIGA: Global and Innovation Gateway for All” school concept, which would enable students from elementary through high school to use individual ICT terminals such as tablets or computers at school. Japan is thus making efforts to advance ICT activities rapidly at schools throughout the country.

Moreover, the provision of exactly the same content in response to the learning gaps and diversity of experience which arose among children during the school closures was critically addressed as “misapplied equality,” with increasing arguments for the need for education suited to individuals. These discussions emphasized individually optimized learning in connection with the use of ICT. They have also come to address the shift in promotion principles from *promotionism*, an attendance-based credit acquisition, to *retentionism*, an achievement-based credit acquisition, and the potential revision of the grade and class system, in order to achieve free learning unfettered by place or time.

Here, let us note that the problems faced by schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and many of the issues discussed therein were already latent in Japanese schools before the pandemic. Schools in Japan are strongly characterized as “schools as community,” responsible not only for intellectual education but also for the cultivation of socialization, morals, etc., with the close-knit group of the class as the unit of daily life.<sup>1</sup> For example, so-called special activities, along with lesson study, a system for teachers’ group learning, have been packaged as Japan-style education and exported to developing countries. Elsewhere, problems have been raised with the orientation toward “whole-person” education, which tends to demand excess dedication and labor from teachers, and with the claustrophobic nature of the group focus, which easily promotes bullying. Relaxed educational regulation and liberalization are now being welcomed in some quarters based on criticism of Japan’s surface-level equality and homogeneity.

School systems internationally have been changing from a content basis to a competency basis, such as the OECD key competencies and individual countries’ focus on generic skills in their curricula. As though stimulated by these international trends, the 2017 revision of Japan’s Courses of Study proposed competency-based reforms, attempting to reform curricula and learning in primary and secondary as well as higher education. The new Courses of Study incorporate an orientation toward “big schools,” making positive use of the characteristics of “schools as community” of Japanese schools and educational practice, such as the whole-person educational orientation, the emphasis on dialogue-based and collaborative learning in subject study, and the reevaluation of extracurricular activities. On the other hand, in recent years and particularly through the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) has begun to expand its influence on educational policy. METI’s “Future Classrooms” vision for educational reform is oriented toward “small schools,” with

education given over to “private-sector” corporations and groups, including social businesses, or to technological innovation such as AI. The context of this vision includes distrust of teachers and schools. The debate on “small schools” has recurred since the liberalization of education and relaxation of regulations under the name of respect for individuality as proposed by the Ad Hoc Council on Educational Reform of the 1980s, an advisory body answering directly to then Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, and the so-called three-in-one reforms which took place (contemporaneous with the debate on decreasing academic ability) around 2000, transferring finances for compulsory education costs from the national government to the provinces, as well as the structural reform of compulsory education in which the system was made more flexible and its quality guarantee enhanced.

As the “small schools” theory, with its deep connections to the problem of freedom in education, comes to the fore, how are we to approach the issue of Japanese schools as a community? This paper clarifies the basic concept of the “small schools” theory typified by the METI “Future Classrooms,” and organizes the relevant points of debate. With additional reference to the effect of the coronavirus crisis, which has highlighted the issue of social distance, on connection and communality in Japanese schools, the paper presents a perspective on the reconstruction of Japanese schools as a community.

## **1. Structure and directionality of the reform concept of the “small schools” theory**

### **(1) Schools wavering amid social fluctuations**

Let us touch on the social context in which reforms toward the “small schools” theory are being proposed. “Reforms for the sake of reforms” involve the risk of fixing things that are not broken in the first place, and the academic basis and educational desirability of the narrative that having schools cultivate “new capacities” and soft skills based on changes in the industrial structure is also effective in terms of economic policy are likewise debatable. However, modern Japanese society has been undergoing social fluctuations of unprecedented quality since before the pandemic, and it is a fact that children’s living environments and the functions and roles of schools are at a turning point. At the root is the redrawing of the boundary between schools and society.

Although the capacities (competencies) demanded of people in society are on the rise as society becomes more complex and more fluid, the human formation functions of households, regional communities, and workplaces are contracting, so that naked demands for competency from society are falling on the doorstep of schools, with increasing expectations for the practice of education and pressure on its productivity and efficiency. Elsewhere, the uniqueness of this practice and the privileged nature of schools and teachers, the main actors of education, are wavering.

In order to do something about this situation, instead of further worsening the dysfunction of schools on the ground through excess burdens leading to the inability to perform high-quality work, based on extreme overwork and poor conditions, the space of schools should be designed as a public space opened to the participation of parents and guardians, local residents, experts, corporations, NPOs, and others (“big schools” through cooperation with civil society). Elsewhere, regarding schools opened to society in this way, there are also

concerns that through adopting “private-sector” methods and attitudes, while rationalizing/downsizing schools and slimming them down by giving them over to non-school educational industries which provide private-sector services, schools and education will become commercialized/marketized (“small schools” open to the market) as a part of industry, rather than simply making use of the strength of the private sector therein. While today’s schools, which tend to be conservative, lacking in flexibility, formalized and ritualized, may present a problem, if the convenience of adults in the form of the pursuit of economic efficiency and market value is prioritized, children’s learning, growth, and pursuit of happiness may well be marginalized in favor of market freedom and speed.

With the “Future Classrooms” of METI as a hint, let us organize the basic structure of the reform concept embodied in the “small schools” theory.

## **(2)The facts about METI’s “Future Classrooms” concept**

The METI “Future Classrooms” concept proposes three pillars of reform in order to foster change-makers in an era where the future is often unclear.<sup>2</sup> The first pillar is “introduction of a STEAM-based approach to learning,” proposing the need for learning which circulates both the mastery (knowing) of subject and specialized knowledge across the sciences and humanities and the discovery (creating) of unknown problems and their solutions through interdisciplinary application of knowledge along with creative and logical thought within exploratory and project-based learning (PBL). The second pillar is “introduction of self-help or individually optimized learning,” in which children can independently select their own optimal learning opportunities in accordance with their differing cognitive characteristics, interests, and learning stages.

In order to advance the above initiatives, the “Future Classrooms” recommend the use of EdTech (educational technology, etc.) developed by private-sector corporations. The “introduction of a STEAM-based approach to learning” includes not only STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) but an A for liberal arts; however, this is reinterpreted as design-based thinking, with the emphasis on the cultivation of human resources able to work in high-tech industries supporting industrial competitiveness, which is to say learning a deeper understanding of science and technology through manufacturing and experiments using robotics and programming. They also indicate the need for the promotion of STEAM learning program development and the digital content through industry-academia-governmental collaboration, and for the construction of a STEAM library enabling collaborative study among students learning the same content at different schools and participating in content improvement as well.

In this way, not only is PBL realized with individual optimization for students’ interests, but in terms of extracting time for PBL, independent study and mutual learning using AI-type drills are effective for knowledge acquisition and can also reduce the time required. The individually optimized learning as individual instruction powered by AI and data in this way can replace uniform, single-group, unidirectional classes. Further, as the use of EdTech makes it technically easier for individual children to select the learning that suits them best and the learning pace suitable for them, the current system in which children in the same grade gather in the same classroom to attend a standardized number of uniform classes can be reviewed, the concepts of “grade,” “class,” and “promotionism” can be relaxed, and “achievementism” can be introduced.

The third pillar is the organization of infrastructure in order to proceed with the above two. In addition to the introduction of achievementism above, in order to organize school ICT infrastructure (one computer per student, etc.), analyze work actual status, boldly discard excessive work, reform teacher workstyles to reconstruct work environments with a digital-first attitude, and continue cooperation in learning with extramural human resources, the pillar includes the development of a training program that will make teachers themselves into change-makers as well as the creation of schools in seamless contact with society, lowering the barriers to cooperation between schools and industry, private-sector education, research institutes, and regional society.

### **(3)The logic and dynamism of reform toward “small schools”**

The METI “Future Classrooms” proposal is bursting with the narrative of boldly introducing EdTech in collaboration with corporations, in linkage with MEXT’s GIGA school concept of providing a computer to each student as a piece of stationery rather than a teaching tool. The basic logic therein can be characterized with the directionalities of splitting school functions for division among various extramural agents and of orienting in response to individual needs, essentially a functionalist and individualist reorganization of public education.

These directionalities can also be found in the reforms toward less restrictive regulations which have been repeatedly enacted in Japan, in response to which concerns about self-responsibility, the marketization/commodification/privatization of education, and expanding inequity have been voiced, with these reforms considered to originate outside education and in particular within the world of economics.<sup>3</sup> However, the current reforms are developing with roots in oppositional calls for reform from inside schools as well, such as teachers’ workstyle reforms and reforms of Japan’s false equality in education as “an oppositional movement arising because the public sector cannot present a framework satisfying the multidimensional demands of the private sector,”<sup>4</sup> voices which have only been growing stronger during the pandemic. The legitimacy of this functionalist and individualist reorganization is supported by progressive educational discourse which normatizes freedom and individuality, with its ideals in the Jena Plan and Dutch education, and also provides motivation to educational reforms from the ground up.<sup>5</sup>

Workstyle reforms and individually based support are unquestionably necessary. However, we must not overlook the fact that the background issues of overburdened teaching staff and expanding multidimensional demands on schools are related to the marketization of education which has expanded as education policy regulations are relaxed and to the expanding non-public demands on education made by parents and others in a stance of privatization and consumership. Converged on the perspective of future advantages for children (efficacy for exam preparation, etc.), the tendency to select private schools and extramural educational services has become general, reinforcing merit-based practices in schools in response to these consumer needs and expanding parent support. If reforms take place along the conventional lines of policies relaxing regulations and marketization of education, teachers’ sense of futility will be unalleviated and diversification will be relegated to standardization/hierarchicalization under the one-dimensional measurement of merit. To avoid this, with a perspective positioned in communality and publicness, it is important to guide the discussion not toward public education dissolution theory under the name of downsizing and de-schooling but to-

ward the deconstruction of public education as a reorganization of school culture.

On this point, the proposal put together upon discussion of the next Courses of Study revision a decade or so down the road in the Central Council for Education by Imamura Kumi, Iwamoto Yu, Kouyama Shinichi, Jinno Genki et al. (“On Primary and Secondary Education in the New Era Looking Toward the ‘Post-Pandemic’ Future,” material submitted to the Central Council for Education, Elementary and Secondary Education Subdivision, Special Subcommittee to Consider the Ideal Nature of Elementary and Secondary Education in the New Era, July 2, 2020) emphasizes high school students’ participation in social activities and includes the potential to construct young people’s growth as citizens, dispersed social networks, and new public collaboration through authentic learning in linkage with regional creation. However, this proposal emphasizes schools opened to the information society (marketization) and regional society (the new public), linking these originally contradictory issues in preestablished harmony through “hybridization” enabled by advanced management. In addition, it divides the matters so far handled by school education into welfare, social, and academic functions and points out that these cannot be handled by the current overstrained school resources and teaching staff alone. Its emphasis is thus on management toward “acquisition and optimization of resources” making use of external personnel, with a focus on opening schools to the outside. Therefore, this ambivalent proposal also reveals a mechanistic functionalism, taking the direction of handling subject study via ICT and other school functions via NPOs etc., with expanded consultant-like functions from the exterior such as coordinators ensuring ICT support and social resources as well as curriculum management personnel; this leads to concerns that measures to increase teacher staffing and improve working conditions will fall by the wayside.

The functionalist and individualist reorganization of public education can be criticized as neoliberalist reform furthering the marketization and privatization of education; above all, however, it is unlikely to lead to the pursuit of learning quality, respect for individuality, and schools open to society aimed at by reformers of good conscience. Below, along with an examination of the potential conclusions to this kind of reorganization, is a consideration of the often-overlooked meaning of schools as community and the roles of teachers.

## **2. Mechanistic functional theories of learning and organizations**

### **(1)The pitfalls of stage theory-based views on learning**

Because basic knowledge and skills are required for students to engage in active learning, the stage theory which proceeds from “mastery” to “use,” positing that this knowledge can be efficiently taught first in lecture format after which thinking, judgment, and expression capacities can be fostered through group work, is well established and has high affinity with the flipped classes drawing attention in online format. Further, in METI’s “Future Classrooms,” subject study is in any case reduced to the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and can thus basically be left to individually optimized study apps. Elsewhere, the ability to think, creativity, and social nature are assigned to PBL study programs and digital content learning, while elements such as the communication skills for cooperation with others, system thinking, and design thinking needed by children participating in PBL are individually identified for direct instruction. In this way, the “Future Classrooms” concept reveals a mechanical

division of knowledge and the skills which process it.

To begin with, from the 1990s through the 2000s, even as the keywords changed among “a new perspective on academic ability,” “period for integrated studies,” “utilization capacity,” and “competencies,” educational reforms continued in the direction of a focus on independence and the capacity for thought. Regardless, Japanese children continued to reveal issues of low study motivation and frequent blank answers on free-response questions in international achievement tests. In addition, many people point to the tendency of young learners to await instructions and their deficiency of deep thinking. This is thought to be significantly related not only to school education but also to the reduced spaces and functions cultivating growth outside school as well; however, amid the “reform” pressure, as a result of the rationalization and streamlining even of customs and practices which had been tacitly functioning well with suitable redundancy, practices in the guise of new challenges aimed at reform, which may have appeared efficient at a glance, have been enhancing the tendency to develop in directions which are not in fact effective, constituting one of the causes of the problem.

The stage-theory view of learning is also evident in the “Future Classrooms” concept and is now being questioned practically in scientific research on cognition. This theory treats knowledge as information which can be mechanically uploaded, turning thought into a skill which can be individually extracted and directly trained. The acquisition of knowledge is not simply a matter of inputting fragments of knowledge as a computer might. The learners themselves connect their own life experiences and background knowledge with the newly learned material, construct meaning, and acquiesce (understand) with emotions, thus managing not to forget (to retain) the knowledge and learning to apply (transfer) it as well.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, context plays a major role in regulating whether ability can be used or not. The context of learning at school is too far removed from that of everyday life, leading to the formation of book-learning which does not function in lived experience outside school; when learning knowledge and skills, it is necessary to emphasize the need to make use of them and the significance of learning. Direct instruction of generic skills without any context is unlikely to be effective. Thinking skills are decided in accordance with content, not the other way around.<sup>7</sup> The only way to cultivate the capacity for thought is to think deeply over and over again; therefore, something worth thinking about and the need and context for thought are important.

It is the fundamentals of human growth, such as independence and the capacity for thought, that require time and effort, but these are left to rational intervention in and out of school and packaged to appear convenient, eliminating the white space which is not rationalized or systematized, depriving children of the chance to learn and think on their own. As a result, ironically, their capacity for thought fails to function in life, leading to standardized subjectivity due to a lack of the experience of thinking in contexts without rails or right answers.

Learning for mastery encompasses various contexts: mechanical mastery is different from mastery with understanding. Elemental and relatively simple skills such as calculation can be learned through drills, but with no guarantee of a real sense of quantity or the understanding of concepts. In particular, children who struggle with calculation often have a background of struggling with the understanding of operation images, sense of quantity, or the principle of decimal positions. Relegating the fundamentals to AI drills with no consideration for these is-

sues may well result in abandoning children who struggle with learning.

Moreover, attention is also required on the point that taking part in meaningful activities including the use of knowledge and skills promotes re-understanding, relearning, and firm acquisition of knowledge. Among the practice of teachers in Japan is a deep learning approach to the fundamentals, such as theorizing on the origins of kanji characters and encountering the human sensitivity and ideas found therein, or visualizing exponential change and predicting risks in everyday life therefrom, thus allowing students who struggle with math to encounter it anew and learn it again with significance, mending the self-esteem previously damaged by math.<sup>8</sup>

## **(2) School perspectives based on division of labor and the role of teachers**

The theory of division of labor of formerly all-in-one school functions, found not only in the “Future Classrooms” but also in part in the MEXT discussion toward a “curriculum opened to society,” is supported by the stage theory-based view of learning described above. That is, they promote replacement with ICT and cram schools by informatizing knowledge, as well as replacement with private-sector social education programs by turning thinking capacity and social nature into quantifiable skills. Ultimately, the welfare functions (protection and care) which is difficult to rationalize as information or skills will remain as the work of schools and teachers, hollowing out the professionalism of teachers as education specialists.

These trends are also related to the progress of schools’ retreat from intellectual education, and to the educational discourse which has developed in parallel to grasp the dichotomy of academic ability and care. The concept of “academic ability” in Japan has been a normative one, clarifying not only academic results but the content of the capacities to be cultivated in schools, that is educational objectives. However, its use in educational debates has been criticized as enhancing education based on an emphasis on goal achievement outcomes, with a shift in focus in educational discourse from “academic ability” to “learning” in the 1990s. While this concept of “academic ability” was nominally placed outside school education and education research, with its desirable contents (educational objectives) left unquestioned, the extramural education industry expanded, furthering the trivialization of the view of “academic ability” to testing ability. As a result, in the 2000s, from the debate on falling academic ability, attention to learning outcomes increased; when the concept of academic ability was reintroduced, it was more deeply divided into the marketplace concept with enhanced significance placed on test grades (measured academic ability) and the concept of the capacities and goals to be cultivated in schools within normative discourse on educational policy and education (ideal academic ability). The concept of academic ability as the ideal was then expanded limitlessly by the impetus of the competency base, becoming the concept of “competencies,” including non-cognitive competencies, social nature, and morality.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, as the problems of low academic ability and child poverty expanded, the meaning of schools as a living space was heightened and the concept of “learning,” which emerged as a criticism of the outcome-oriented “academic ability” concept, developed to include criticism of the “capacity” theory in general in the form of individualized meritocracy, and was then expanded as a relational concept including a meaning of care as well as intellectual education and socialization.

In this way, the connotations of intellectual education leading to the expression of humanity, originally expressed with the concept of “perspective formation” in securing the right to learn and academic ability, regressed in terms of the concepts of both academic ability

and learning. Trivialized to “increased academic ability” and “guaranteed academic ability” for the sake of making results look good in schools and career actualization, securing academic ability came to be seen in opposition to securing care for and approval of students, the latter oriented toward the securing of the right to live and the pursuit of happiness.<sup>10</sup> The securing of learning in the coronavirus crisis is also used in various senses depending on the context, such as testing ability (career actualization), competencies (human resource cultivation), care (securing a place to live) and so on, while the principle of securing the right to learn has hollowed out the internal fact of cultural transmission.

With the above development of the educational discourse as a background, public education is now being split between the two poles of “schools as human resource cultivation institutions (training socialization)” and “schools as living spaces (welfare).” While marketization and the inclusion of diversity may appear in opposition at first glance, both have affinity with the orientation toward liberalization (downplayed equality awareness in the name of securing minimum common goals and individuated/diversified objectives and outcomes) and with making the school class system more flexible. Moreover, both tend to weaken the pursuit of communality and depth of understanding in intellectual learning, as well as the orientation toward securing the right to learn in its connection to securing growth and development as school functions.

The “small schools” line taken from the 1990s on, with its reduced emphasis on academic ability in terms of five-day school weeks and “relaxed education,” has led to the filling of children’s time with lessons, cram schools, and the expansion of the education industry. In spite of the calls for “relaxed education” in schools, if anything, given the overall environment of children’s learning and life, they came to experience less leeway and relaxation than ever, outside as well as inside school. Precisely speaking, while study time for the lower academic ability level fell, reflecting class inequality, the upper level lost relaxation in life with the earlier start of competition.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the competitive and exam-focused views of academic ability and learning and consumerist view grasping education as a service, which have expanded outside schools, are flooding into the public-education arena of schools and impoverishing children’s learning environments. Downsizing must be pursued along with an attempt to deconstruct the directly evident consumer society and “school-ified” learning presented to children outside schools.

The contents, programs, and services provided by the so-called “private sector” have their own specialized problem awareness and strengths; but even when effectively combined, some students will fall through the cracks. In particular, they are unlikely to reach truly struggling students with complex needs. The use of the private sector’s strength is meaningful when, based on the “all-encompassing” capacity of Japanese schools as communities and spaces of coexistence, they can create suitable mitigation to prevent claustrophobia therein and reorganize collegial connections.

For example, if apps such as AI drills promoting individualized optimization of learning are effective, rather than the aspect of the “AI teacher” inside the tablet assisting students to learn, the important point is the gradual mutual learning and personalized/collaborated learning created when the individuals buried within the group of the full-class format (the bundle of vertical relations between teacher and children) are cut out and can connect naturally with the classmates around them. That is how educational effects are created along with a mellow classroom atmosphere, fulfilled by this mutual support and learning among chil-

dren.

It is through the relation to learning that connections and care can be opened to otherness and public relationships rather than being limited to the desire for approval, and through the relation to connections and care that learning can take on the quality of promoting human growth. For example, in Japan elementary school teachers in particular have worked to create classes in which each student's thought and awareness are deepened, while keeping up with the children's stumbles and creating class communities. As noted above, this has also created a practice attempting to realize both knowledge acquisition and cultivation of the capacity for thought. Taking care of children's deep-level complex needs and protecting the right to learn, they explore the ideal balance of learning with connection and care. The meaning of the work schools and teachers have taken on, or can take on, enabled by living together with children in the space of schools, must be reconfirmed.

### **3. Points of debate regarding practice and policies toward respect for the individual**

#### **(1) Aspects of education suited to the individual**

The individualist reorganization of Japanese public education which has put on speed during the COVID-19 pandemic involves discussion focused on the problems of individuated/personalized education and of retentionism/promotionism. However, the discussion on these topics tends to remain vague on their historical background and the regulation of their concepts. Here, let us organize the discussion points as a basis for debate.

First, individuation and personalization suggest freely individualized progress study, but concerns about expanding inequality arise when inflected toward entirely individuated/personalized objectives. However, it is also possible to consider objectives held in common with individual methods used to allow each child to reach them (individuation/personalization of method). In the case of education suited to the individual, it is important that discussion of the matter be divided by what level of individuation and personalization is actually called for.

Additionally, we may also note a difference in the orientation of the concepts of "individuation" and "personalization."<sup>12</sup> "Individuation" in education, or individualized education, refers to the diversification by ability of educational content, study speed, and promotion criteria. Individual differences are usually approached as the difference in time required for learning (quantitative difference), linked with tracked class formation (uniformity) and freely individualized progress study. In addition, individuation is given concrete form as linear programmed instruction in which study progresses quantitatively based on one-dimensional measures such as IQ and academic achievement. Advanced study also tends to be implemented as "acceleration," simply moving ahead with study content.

Elsewhere, "personalization" in education, or education for individuality, refers to diversification by individual internal needs and spontaneity as a whole. Individual differences are usually approached as differences in interests and learning styles (qualitative difference), linked with diverse group organization (plurality) such as multi-age groups and with free-topic study. Moreover, personalization is given concrete form as multifaceted/integrated project study which deepens qualitatively, based on multidimensional measures such as Multiple In-

telligence. Advanced study also tends to be implemented as “enrichment”, relearning already covered content in more depth and breadth.

This distinction between individuation and personalization is intended to discern the different directionalities existing within initiatives promoting them as one item; in fact, their principles and methods develop in close connection. For example, if the emphasis in the principles of personalization is on mixed-year class groups rather than tracking by ability, freely individualized progress study may be put into practice to a limited degree that does not overemphasize merit promotion such as skipped grades, potentially encouraging mutual learning. Conversely, the principles of individuation may be put into practice along the directionality of solving advanced problems on the same material (vertical value pursuit) rather than that in which enrichment may disrupt assumptions through teaching others and deepen understanding (horizontal value pursuit), expanding gaps and divisions within the classroom.

Regarding individuation/personalization, respect for individual differences (disparities) tends to end up not as an extension of individuality but as an expansion of inequality; this has been repeatedly pointed out in research within educational sociology.<sup>13</sup> In Japan in particular, unless considered as part of the problem of the hierarchy created not only by test scores and academic background but also company affiliation and title (the fixed class system and hierarchy created by the vertical and membership society), children’s individuality and schools’ particular features will be swept up in positioning within the hierarchy, and the diversification of education will easily lead to soft social divisions and hierarchization. Based on this risk, in response to excess vertical hierarchization and horizontal homogenization, even with horizontal diversification on the opposing axis,<sup>14</sup> the securing of common objectives must not become lax, and the method leading there must be a focus on individuation and personalization in accordance with individual needs. In addition, while setting the objectives in common does not coexist with setting them individually, setting the objectives in common can be integrated with personalization of the objectives; it is important to take qualitative account of the individual status of objective realization (horizontal value) such as individual children’s preferences and methods of understanding, which tend to be overlooked in ensuring standardized objectives (vertical value). This will also call for a reappraisal, from the perspective of the individual specific contexts of children’s learning along with content theory, of the educational objective theory which has been caught up in the psychological and abstract concepts such as competency and attitude which have supported this hierarchization and homogenization.

Further, individuation and personalization in the context of relieving the claustrophobia of not being allowed to do what one wants, or the liberalization of the drive forward of vertical value with accelerated content, carry the danger of expanding inequality; in the context of creating schools with multicultural coexistence, however, there is also the practice of individuated/personalized education with the motifs of social inclusion and securing the right to learn, encouraging children to come to school and guaranteeing even the slightest practice worth learning. Rooted in the teachers’ culture of Japan, which focuses on children’s lives as well as their learning and tries to ensure their growth as a whole person, if attention to each child individually is developed in the context of struggling against inequity and poverty and creating multicultural coexistence, more flexible timetables and assignments may lead to a reappraisal of the normalcy of school culture, while permitting diverse cultures and even deviant behavior. In this way, schools will become more inclusive, leading to the securing of the

right to learn as well.<sup>15</sup>

Important conditions under which the practice of individuated/personalized education can lead to quality learning include, through initiatives toward individuation/personalization and mixed-age groups, teachers forming connections through team teaching, etc., seeing children in different contexts from normal classes, and reconsidering their own taken-for-granted practices, thus creating collegiality among teachers and individual teacher growth. Highly free practices call for higher instruction skills in teachers and schools. Therefore, differences in practices tend to occur due to the teacher or school; in Japanese public schools, where personnel are regularly rotated, practices may easily lose significance when the initial leader is removed. The closed nature of schools and classes and the difficulty of living in them are also related to one-man-band, poorly communicated teachers' practices. It is with mutual learning and collegiality among teachers through all-school initiatives and school communality watching over children as a team that teachers' skills will be enhanced; approaches making the most of children's individuality will avoid isolated learning and lead to abundant learning spaces where individuals can make loose connections.

As noted above, AI drills promoting individual optimization, supplemented by connections in the classroom, and initiatives for the individuation/personalization of children's learning, through the creation of teachers' collegiality, create outcomes through the activation and expansion of schools' so-called social capital.

## **(2)The historical development of promotionism and retentionism**

As arguments call for a shift from mass/uniform/standardized education to free and individually optimized education, they also demand a shift from promotionism to retentionism. However, historically it has been age-based social promotion and promotionism which have had a high affinity with progressivist education, closely linked to individuated/personalized education.<sup>16</sup>

Promotionism and retentionism are concepts involved with the principles of school enrollment, to see how the completion of the relevant curriculum is judged; elsewhere, merit promotion and social promotion are concepts involved with the principles of grade advancement such as the conditions for moving up a grade and graduating. Promotionism and social promotion call for the requisite curriculum to be studied within a given year, but without stringent requirements on the results or outcomes of the study. Elsewhere, retentionism and merit promotion call for a certain degree of achievement on objectives as well as having studied the curriculum, and may involve repeating grades.

Social promotion focuses on the formation of social nature and personality through living and learning in class and other aspects of school as a community, said to be founded in the British compulsory education system which was triggered by the Factory Laws protecting children from child labor. Because the simple commonality of age within the group allows for leeway in objectives and content, the objectives and curriculum can be flexibly set in accordance with children's needs and spontaneity; thus, this stance originally had an affinity with progressivist education.

Elsewhere, merit promotion emphasizes the definite mastery of knowledge and skills, said to be founded in the German compulsory education system which was intended to create good citizens and effective personnel for the sake of the country. Groups are formed based on different objectives and content, requiring a structuralized/systematized curriculum; thus,

this stance originally had an affinity with systematist education.

In the early days of compulsory education, Japanese schools ran on a grade system in which merit promotion was absolute. Thereafter, around 1890, the year of the Imperial Rescript on Education which became the basis for nationalist Japanese education through the Second World War, the enrollment rate increased and schools became inclusive of many more children. In November 1891, when the “Regulations on Class Formation” were issued, after a stage in which a single teacher handled multiple grades of children in a single classroom (mixed-grade classes), the “class system” became established. This was then connected with the same-age grade system, and by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century classes by same-age grade were normalized.

The establishment of the same-age class system developed in parallel with the expansion of school functions. As education became a mass practice and the school system was organized, the curriculum content was also expanded and systematized; in particular, in Japan, the development of educational policy emphasizing nationalist moral education was behind the shift from the grade system to the class system. In addition, in Japan, in order to have children involved in village society enroll in school, the formation of school life involved group activities, events, and rituals as an extension of the customs of the village community. Japanese schools have thus been strongly characterized as a community with classroom groups playing the major role. Taisho new education, developed in the Japanese democratic and progressive education movements, conceived of the classroom groups originally introduced as methods of nationalist indoctrination and educational streamlining as spaces for educational character formation where cooperative self-governing social relations could be learned.<sup>17</sup>

In this way, as the same-age class system and social promotion became generally accepted, the concept of “grades” went beyond the number of years in school or age to take on a merit-promotional sense of the appropriate content level for a given age. As a result, the discussion has come to set uniform mass classes against individuation/personalization with regard to same-age groups studying the same content at once. At the same time, an attitude was created positioning and interpreting merit promotion, originally highly influenced by the merit system and selectivity, within the context of the principles of equality and securing a right to learn, that is having all children definitely acquire a given level of academic ability. The concept of “retentionism” in the first place was created by adding the principle of securing academic ability and a right to learn to merit-based promotion in Japan, raised in order to emphasize the securing of a common level of academic ability, with no child left behind, rather than moving ahead freely with study.<sup>18</sup>

Through the relatively equal realization of educational opportunities and standards, from the 1980s or so on, educational issues shifted from quantitative expansion to the pursuit of quality; arguments for personalizing and liberalizing education appeared in response to the uniformity and rigidity of the school system. Along with this movement, merit promotion and retentionism came to be linked with progressive arguments calling for the knowledge acquisition function of schools to be streamlined and downsized, leaving room for time spent on realizing hands-on learning and project-based learning inside and outside school and making class boundaries more flexible in the name of respect for the individual. During the coronavirus pandemic, attention has focused on the theory of the shift from promotionism to retentionism. However, the tendency is to idealize the single point of liberalization within merit promotion and its original affinity with the merit system, in the absence of the implications

of securing a right to learn present in the word “retentionism”, without a concern for the original educational meaning of promotionism.

Promotionism becomes hollow when lessons that cannot move forward are blamed on “delayed learning” and it is assumed that following the yearly instruction plan provided by MEXT or the Board of Education is equivalent to securing a right to learn. We need to bring to life the concept of retentionism as a solid guarantee of the learning outcomes to be realized through lessons. On the other hand, retentionism is at risk of creating a situation in which the only thing that matters is being able to solve written test problems, and advancing to the next level. Moreover, the naïve emphasis on allowing children who can move ahead to do so freely, without adults’ determination to leave no child behind, may well lead to gaps in academic equality and divide learning.

During the period of the pandemic when all schools were closed, some children underwent disrupted lifestyles or serious neglect. When reviewing the entire curriculum across subjects, we also need a perspective securing their intellectual and cultural lives at school, within public connections and a space with peace of mind; this requires attention to how children experience school as a learning and living space (the curriculum-as-lived). We must focus on the meaning of school as a group lifestyle, making use of the essence of promotionism, which guarantees learning and growth within the long span of connections and life. This will also lead to making use of the educational culture of teachers in Japan, the intellectual education leading to moral education, created within the overlap of learning, connections, and care.

#### **4. Community in Japanese schools and the retrieval of publicness**

##### **(1) Deconstructing the communality of Japanese schools**

The context of “education that makes the most of each individual” is a call for freedom from the rigidity of formal equality and thorough age-based social promotion, and the claustrophobia of “the class as a teacher’s kingdom”. The emphasis on connection and communality in opposition to individuation and personalization also tends to link to conservative trends, but we require a perspective deconstructing the communality of Japanese schools.

Japanese education tends to be collectivist (conformist) in the aspect of school life, and at the same time individualist (self-help style) in the aspect of learning.<sup>19</sup> What appear to be collectivist mass classes may, in the uniform and unidirectional case, actually be a bundle of individual desk-based study relationships between the teacher and each of the children, with learning depending on the effort of each child. Liberalizing and subjectifying learning tend to be placed in opposition to the claustrophobia of the class group, going along with the idealization of freely individualized study such as that which took place at the *terakoya*, the informal schools for commoners which existed in Japan before the modern school system was introduced. However, this culture of freely individualized study was established on theories of the Japanese spirit and the irrational doctrine of diligence, which reduce everything not to objective systems and structures but to subjective feelings; at the root it is related to the conformity of Japan’s vertical society.

Among the products of Japanese conformity and self-help-ism which have been highly regarded abroad are the false equality which guarantees all children a given level of educa-

tion, whole-person-oriented education, and/or the diligence and excellence linked with spiritual cultivation. However, these strengths have equivalent weaknesses. That is, Japanese education has suppressed individuality and freedom through its uniformity, often creating group pathologies and struggles such as bullying. It also tends to lead to the repeated criticism of being “biased toward intellectual education” and to attitude-based principles and dismissal of subject classes appearing as the dichotomy of a greater focus on persons than on knowledge; it produces irrational spiritualism, doctrines of diligence, and cramming.

Based on the weakly established individual, the weakness in promoting dialogue with heterogeneous others, and the immaturity of rationality and democratic publicness in Japanese society and schools, an important issue is the reorganization of school culture around the focus of “personalization.” However, it is important that this be carried out not as normatizing personalization or as individuation extracting “molecular individuals”, but as singularization of unique individuals as a whole person.<sup>20</sup> We must reconstruct classes and school communities as integrated wholes composing learning and living groups aimed at establishing the rational individual through public discussion (self-formation of perspective) and living spaces including approval of the individual existence as is (care). We must respect and enrich the specific, individually named nature of each of person, not the abstracted virtue-like label of “individuality.”

Regarding the class system, possibilities for reviewing the same-age class system include making the structure more flexibly inclusive with a personalized orientation, forming sustainable vertical mixed-age groups in extracurricular activities, etc., and in elementary schools, creating mixed-age classrooms blending two grades at once. The school communality would be softened, from the class group (regulation) to the learning community (relation), and then to a space for intellectual life (sharing space).<sup>21</sup> Students would belong loosely to multiple groups and would be able to choose their main space to belong to (emphasis on plurality in the school community).

Public discussion with others and learning about the self would advance the “collaboratization of intellectual education” which contributes to self-formation of the awareness, intellect, and thought that form the basis for judgment, and the “personalization of moral education” involving mutual recognition and respect for mutual existence and individual human nature with regard to others different from oneself. Against the conformity tending to go with the flow of society in the vertical society of Japan<sup>22</sup>, and the self-help-ism tending to spill over into spiritualism depending on individual effort, the perspective required is one, with an emphasis on publicness, rationality, and diversity (recognition of otherness), which constructs strength, relations, and spaces where students and teachers can be themselves while aware of the surrounding atmosphere.

## **(2) Possibilities for the publicness of school education**

Through the COVID-19 pandemic, how will the standards of Japanese schools and society shift, and how will norms shift with them? With the calls to stay at home, society as a whole has experienced *hikikomori* shut-in status as the norm, while messages encouraging social distancing and avoiding crowds remain in force. It is likely that staying at home will provide an opportunity to come face to face with the “home” where one finds oneself (household, friend groups, society), and that this situation, which creates physical distance among people as well as between people and the groups they belong to, will make a signifi-

cant impact on connections in society and how Japanese schools as communities work.

In an environment where some degree of online connection is possible while maintaining physical distance, each household or individual begins to make connections with one another and society in new and different forms. This may extract the “individual” from existing systems and groups, creating an opportunity to question the “expectations of society” which are the source of the pressure to conform. Elsewhere, this may be a society without intermediate groups and protective film, where society and each individual must face off, where one must choose and decide for oneself, where risks are individualized and slacking is out of the question, disturbed and constrained by collective knowledge and atmosphere online.

This situation must, in order not to fall into isolation, self-blame, and social division, establish new relations and social systems and create multi-layered communality and public spaces. In response to the vulnerability of each individual, it will be the task of society and schools, while providing a secure safety net, to cultivate and guarantee a sense of human rights that respects each person as an irreplaceable individual, a sense of self-efficacy open to the social interest created by the real sense of participating in society, and the approving relations and individual breadth of lifestyles (capability) leading to the pursuit of well-being in a context natural to the individual.

In response to the accelerating changes in society, beyond the human timescale, one aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic reminds us of the importance of slowing down the time to the pace of human life, the time in which we live as human beings and enjoy cultural life in appropriate harmony with nature. It is important to pursue “living better” not as the closed-off pursuit of endless rationalization, streamlining, and personal benefit, but in a form including the values of “leeway,” “taking the long route,” and “sharing.” Beyond the public/private dichotomy and with regard to the education reforms of recent years calling for the liberalization of education, issues include how to position parents’ freedom of education and their needs in public education and how to open them up to publicness, given their tendency to close around parents’ own children’s benefits.<sup>23</sup> With a foothold in the shared experience within the history of human beings of the coronavirus pandemic, because, if anything, we all have anxiety to some degree and do not know what the right answers are, we must escape the sense of being a passive recipient of services, with parents and local residents involved in schools, developing a sense of personal involvement and sharing, neither “for oneself (and one’s child)” (private benefit) nor “for everyone” (self-sacrifice), but ourselves creating, along with the children involved, “our own schools,” “our own society,” moving toward publicness and democracy. It is important to look forward, through the reconstruction of the publicness of education, while supported by the high-quality social relation capital created by the people involved with schools as relevant parties and the community, to the establishment of a truly free, open, and diverse public education, in which the teachers who share school life with the children can also take on challenges autonomously.

\*This paper is a recomposition along the main arguments in Ishii Terumasa’s *Mirai no gakko: Post-corona no kokyoiku no redesign (Future schools: The post-coronavirus redesign of public education)* (Nippon Hyojun, 2020).

## Notes

1 For the historical characteristics of “Japanese schools” as a community, see Kimura Hajime, *Ga-*

- kko no sengoshi (Postwar history of schools)* (Iwanami Shoten, 2015).
- 2 See METI, “Secondary Recommendations by the Study Group for Learning Innovation, “Future Classrooms,” and EdTech” (2019), etc.
  - 3 See Fujita Hidenori, *Gimu kyoiku wo toinaosu (Reconsidering compulsory education)* (Chikuma Shobo, 2005), etc.
  - 4 Miyadera Akio, “Jiyu wo/jiyu ni sodateru: ‘Kyoiku no shijika’ to kokyosei no airo (Raising freedom/freely: The ‘privatization of education’ and the bottleneck of publicness),” in Hirota Teruyuki ed., *Jiyu e no toi 5: Kyoiku (Questioning freedom: Education)*, Iwanami Shoten, 2009, p.88.
  - 5 See Richters, Naoko, and Tomano Ittoku, *Kokyoiku wo ichi kara kangaeyo (Thinking about public education from square one)* (Nippon Hyoronsha, 2016), etc.
  - 6 See National Research Council (US), *How People Learn* (Japanese translation by Mori Toshiaki et al.)
  - 7 See Ishii Terumasa, *Saizohoban Gendai America ni okeru gakuryoku keiseiron no tenkai (Re-expanded edition: Development of the theory of academic ability formation in modern America)* (Toshindo, 2020), etc.
  - 8 Imaizumi Hiroshi, *Shuchu ga umareru jugyo (Lessons creating concentration)* (Gakuyo Shobo, 2002); Nakamoto Masao, *Shin gakuryoku e no chosen (New edition: Challenging academic ability)* (Kamogawa Shuppan, 2005), etc.
  - 9 See Ishii Terumasa, “Gakuryoku rongi no genzai (Current discussions of academic ability)” in Matsushita Kayo ed. *‘Atarashii noryoku’ ha kyoiku wo kaeru ka (Will ‘new abilities’ change education?)* (Minerva Shobo, 2010), Ishii Terumasa, *Ima motomerareru gakuryoku to manabi to ha (What are the academic ability and learning called for now?)* (Nippon Hyojun, 2015), etc.
  - 10 Regarding the split between academic ability and care, Takada Kazuhiro explores attempts to re-approach the principle of securing academic ability in connection with welfare in *Wellbeing wo jitsugen suru gakuryoku hosho (Securing academic ability in a form that realizes wellbeing)* (Osaka University Press, 2018), while the construction of logic that connects the securing of care and that of the right to learn based on the theory of recognition is explored in Yamada Tetsuya “Gakko kyoiku to shonin wo meguru mondai (Problems concerning school education and recognition)” and Kumashiro Takehiko “Kyoikugaku no shoninronteki tenkai? (A turn toward recognition theory in educational studies?)”, both in Tanaka Takuji ed. *Shonin (Recognition)* (Hosei University Press, 2016).
  - 11 See Kariya Takehiko, *Kyoiku kaikaku no genso (The illusion of educational reform)* (Chikuma Shobo, 2002), etc.
  - 12 Regarding individuation and personalization, see Miyamoto Ken’ichirou, *America shinposhugi kyoju riron no keisei katei (The formation process of American progressive teaching theory)* (Toshindo, 2005), Iwanaga Masaya & Matsumura Nobutaka, *Saino to kyoiku (Talent and education)* (Open University of Japan Education Promotion Council, 2010), Kato Yukitsugu, *Shoninzu shido, shujukudo betsu shido (Small-class instruction, instruction by level)* (Vivre, 2004), etc.
  - 13 Kariya Takehiko, *Kaisoka Nihon to kyoiku kiki (Class society Japan and the educational crisis)*, Yushindo Kobunsha, 2001.
  - 14 Honda Yuki, *Kyoiku ha nani wo hyoka shite kita no ka (What has education evaluated?)*, Iwanami Shoten, 2020
  - 15 Mori Naoto, “Koseika kyoiku no kanosei: Aichi-ken Higashiura-cho no kyoiku jissen no keifu kara (The possibilities of personalized education: From the records of educational practice in Higashiura Town, Aichi)” in Miyadera Akio ed. *Saikento: Kyoiku kikai no byodo (Reexamination: Equality of educational opportunity)* (Iwanami Shoten, 2011); Sawada Minoru, “Kyoka ni okeru jiritsu-gata gakushu ni kansuru jugyo kenkyu (Lesson study on independent study in subject classes)” in *Koseika kyoiku kenkyu (Personalized Education Studies)*, Vol. 5, 2013.
  - 16 For the context of promotionism/age-based social promotion and retentionism/merit promotion in the history of thought, see Umene Satoru, “Gimu kyoiku seido no futatu no katachi (Two forms of compulsory education systems)” in *Kyoikushi kenkyu (Studies in Educational History)* Vol. 2,

- 1956, as well as Miyamoto, op. cit., etc. For the history of its development in Japan, see Sato Hideo, *Kyoiku no bunkashi 2: Gakko no bunka (Cultural history of education 2: School culture)* (Aunsha, 2005).
- 17 For example, practices questioning schools and classes as group life units emerged from children's lifestyles, such as the lifestyle training theory of Nomura Yoshibei, a teacher at the Ikebukuro Children's Village Elementary School, and the *seikatsu tsuzurikata undo* or lifestyle writing movement which attempted to form children's consciousness, form groups, and improve lifestyles through writing essays about life and reading them aloud (Nakauchi Toshio, *Seikatsu kunrenron daiippo (First steps in lifestyle training theory)*, Nippon Hyojun, 2008).
  - 18 Tsuzuki Aritsune, *Kyoiku shinrigaku no tankyu (Exploring educational psychology)*, Kaneko Shobo, 1973. Nakauchi Toshio's *Gakuryoku to ha nani ka (What is academic ability?)* (Iwanami Shoten, 1983) also finds elements of the ideology of securing the right to learn in the French system of repeating grades and supplementary learning classes, and in the concept of problematizing the promotion to the next grade of children who have not mastered the content.
  - 19 See Nakauchi Toshio, *Kyoiku hyoron no susume (Recommending educational criticism)* (Kokudoshisha, 2005); Sato Manabu, "Gakko to iu sochi (The equipment called schools)," in *Gakko kaikaku no tetsugaku (Philosophy of school reform)* (University of Tokyo Press, 2012); Katagiri Yoshio, "'Nihon-gata kyoiku ron' no kanosei (Possibilities of 'Japan-style educational theory')" in Fujita Hidenori et al. ed. *Kyoikugaku nenpo 10: Kyoikugaku no saizensen (Annual book of Japanese educational research 10: On the front lines of educational studies)* (Seori Shobo, 2004); Yamagishi Toshio, *Kokoro dekkachi na Nihonjin (The Japanese and their big hearts)* (Chikuma Shobo, 2010).
  - 20 Sato Manabu, "'Koseika' genso no seiritu (The establishment of the 'personalization' illusion)," in Morita Hisato et al. *Kyoikugaku nenpo 4: Kosei to iu genso ((Annual book of Japanese educational research 4: The illusion of individuality)*, Seori Shobo, 1995.
  - 21 The tenor of discussion on the communality of learning is in fact shifting through the theory of learning groups (Yoshimoto Hitoshi, *Kun'ikuteki kyoju no riron (The theory of disciplinary teaching)*, Meiji Tosho, 1974), the theory of the learning community (Sato Manabu, *Manabi no kairaku (The joy of learning)*, Seori Shobo, 1999), and the theory of individuation and collaboration (Richters & Tomano, op. cit.).
  - 22 The social anthropologist Nakane Chie conceptualized the characteristics of Japanese society as a "vertical society" (Nakane Chie, *Tate shakai to gendai Nihon (The vertical society and modern Japan)*, Kodansha Gendai Shinsho, 2019). According to vertical society theory, a feature of the formation of functional groups in Japan is the emphasis on a shared "space" such as a workplace, rather than the commonality of "qualifications," which are individual attributes. With the first person arriving in the space as the peak and the later arrivals below them, the order composes vertical relations; beyond the difference in qualifications, the vertical relations of the shared space form interpersonal relations along with emotional dependence. Small, closed-off groups sharing the space then form larger groups and organizations like strung beads. In contrast, for example in the UK or India, the emphasis in organizational formation is on having the same qualifications, such as social class or caste, tending to lead to horizontal layers. For example, bureaucrats in Japan develop strong senior-junior vertical relationships within their own "village" (the group sharing the space), while societies connected by qualifications such as the UK develop stronger horizontal networks of common classes such as the upper middle class to which bureaucrats, university professors, and industrialists belong.
  - 23 Hirai Yusuke, "Kindai-gata gakko kyoiku system no yuragi to kyoiku no kokyosei no yukue (The wavering modern school education system and the future of publicness in education)," in *Kyoikugaku kenkyu (Educational Studies Research)* Vol. 85 No. 2, June 2018.