

Is Social Justice Found in Japanese Education? The Yutori Curriculum and After

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Abstract

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has implemented various curriculums, so-called the Course of Study, over the past few decades. The Yutori curriculum, which was introduced in the 1990's, aimed to improve flexible thinking by reducing the amount of study materials. After finding lowered scores on the PISA 2003 and 2006 (Nakayasu, 2016), the Yutori curriculum was criticized as a failure. Although the MEXT has implemented a new Course of Study to improve the learning ability of the next generation, the Yutori graduates are still left behind in the Japanese society and they are labeled as 'failures'. Japan needs to shift its values and philosophy at the fundamental level rather than being ignorant to the fact of lacking social justice. Recommendations for the Japanese educational system are noted.

Keywords:The MEXT, The Course of Study, Yutori, PISA, Social Justice, Japan, Global Citizen

A Brief History of the Education System in Japan

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereafter referred to as MEXT) started issuing the Course of Study in 1947 "as a national standard of Japanese school curriculum [through] kindergarten to senior high school" (Nakayasu, 2016, p. 136), and has been continuing to do so each decade since. In the postwar years of the Course of Study, the MEXT implemented a form of education which consisted of high-pressure and rote-memorization approaches that "crammed as much knowledge as possible into the head of Japanese students" (Nakai, 2014, p. 4) in order to catch up to the other developed countries, as Japan was rapidly growing its economy. However, this form of education caused schools

to force the students to do intense amounts of work without enough preparation. Consequently, many of the students could not keep up with the speed of the lessons, causing low self-esteem and depression (Ijiri, 2008).

In the 1980's, the MEXT started adopting a concept of "*Yutori*" education curriculum in responding to the concerns from a number of educational leaders in Japan that "Japanese schools produced graduates that had strong basic academic skills but lacked creativity, independence, and the desire to be lifelong learners" (Fish, 2016, para. 3). *Yutori* is a Japanese word meaning "relaxed" or "pressure-free" (Nakai, 2014, p. 2). The MEXT aimed to implement an educational policy that "gives children room to grow" by adopting the concept of *Yutori* (Nakai, 2014, p. 2). The *Yutori* curriculum encouraged schools (especially public schools) to reduce hours of instruction and let the students use the extra time to explore themselves outside of the school to acquire various skills such as problem-solving (Ijiri, 2008). However, because schools were not well prepared for the transition into this style of education, the *Yutori* curriculum confused both the teachers and students. This confusion led to several serious issues such as declining PISA rankings, an increase in bullying in the classrooms, and increase in the number of juvenile crimes committed.

Having scored higher on the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) in previous years, the Japanese government became anxious about the declining score and future of Japan. Hence, the Course of Study issued after 2008 promoted an increase in hours spent in the classroom and focused on the concept of 'Zest for Life', replacing the former *Yutori* system (Kurihara, 2009). The results of PISA 2012 were dramatically improved and Japan was acknowledged as one of the top educated countries again (Nakayasu, 2016).

Although the test scores improved, there is no clear evidence that students were able to improve their morality or strength to attain happiness in their life because these are not measured. In the same way, the generation of the *Yutori* curriculum should not be judged as a failure based on its PISA scores. However, the modern Japanese society values one's grades in the school as if the scores decide the students' life. Unfortunately, there are many youth, who experienced *Yutori* curriculum as students, and today have no jobs or motivation to get jobs after they graduated from secondary school. The *Yutori* students experience difficulty with controlling their emotions.

Even though there are youths struggling from being labeled as '*Yutori* Failure', the government does not seem to be compassionate enough to address the issue. In order to avoid repeating former mistakes, the government has now implemented a new educational policy to raise 'better' human resources. Can this situation be considered as just? Was the *Yutori* curriculum really a failure?

Was the *Yutori* Curriculum a Failure?

The *Yutori* generation is defined differently, but generally it is considered as the population that was born between the late 1980's and the late 1990's and received education from public schools that followed the Course of Study issued between

1998 to 2010. The ages of the *Yutori* generation vary from around 20 to 30 years old today. Thus, the *Yutori* generation will be taking over the helm of Japanese economy in the coming years. If it is true that the *Yutori* generation are failures, then it is natural to predict that the future in Japan will be face difficulties. According to the Central Education Council, the *Yutori* curriculum was implemented with the aim to raise children with the abilities to problem solve using their own judgement. To enhance this notion, the curriculum promoted a rich humanity, one that enables would enable students to control themselves and create harmony with others (The Central Education Council, 1995). Have the *Yutori* generation been able to achieve these goals?

The results of PISA 2003 showed a possible decrease in the students' ability to learn effectively. Following suit, The Cabinet Office of the Government of Japan reported increase in the numbers of students dropping out of high school from 1998 to 2001. This trend continued until 2009, where a slow decline began (Cabinet Office, 2010a). Up until 1998, the most common reason for dropping out was 'to change their career' which means that the students most likely continue to study at different schools or educational institutions after they drop out. However, after 1999, the students quit school because they felt 'incompatible adopting the learning environment in school'. Ever since then, this notion has been one of the top reasons for dropping out of school (Statistics Bureau, 2014).

Likewise, the number of juvenile crimes started to increase in 2001 and has remained consistent to this day (Cabinet Office, 2010b). The reports of the Cabinet Office over the past decade indicate that crimes committed among 14-16-year-old children was at its highest (Cabinet Office, 2010b).

After the *Yutori* graduated from schools, including the university, some students were unable to find a job and ended up becoming a NEET, which means "not in education, employment, or training" (Nakai, 2014, p.1). The population of NEET citizens (ages between 15 to 35 years old) is currently increasing and exceeded 700,000 in 2014. This is about 2.1% of the national population aged 15 to 35 years old (Cabinet Office, 2015c). The most common answer why they chose to become NEET was 'illness or injures'. Other reasons included "study and prepare to apply for jobs [and] could not find jobs" (Cabinet Office, 2015c, p. 38-39).

The statistical data indicate that the *Yutori* curriculum was not able to attain the goals of creating a comfortable environment for everyone to learn harmoniously. This caused an increase in students either dropping out or committing crimes. Not all students were able to acquire vital skills which resulted in a typically directionless life for many youths. Although it may not be an apparent problem since there are many *Yutori* graduates who are successful in the Japanese workforce, it is unethical to abandon those who failed. The government needs to take action to empower the NEET and *Yutori* generation in order for Japanese society to flourish in the next couple of decades.

The Post *Yutori* Curriculum and Students

On reflection concerning the *Yutori* curriculum, the MEXT decided to adopt the concept of “Zest for Life” which is “embodied in the current Course of Study as enhancement of verbal activities, math and science education, cultural/traditional education, moral education, experiential learning activities, foreign language education and vocational education” (Nakayasu, 2016, p.139). No matter how many times the MEXT changes the concept of education, if it is not human-centered, it will not have true success.

In a number of articles, it is said that this new concept of Zest for Life is different from any former style of education because it focuses on not only enhancing learning skills, but also includes a strong component of moral education. However, bullying in schools is still high and unlikely to be reduced soon (Cabinet Office, 2015a). The Cabinet Office of the Government of Japan reports that only 13% of students ages 10-15 have not been involved in bullying while more than 40% have experienced more than six instances of being bullied and/or bullying (Cabinet Office, 2015a, p.21). Furthermore, “numerous cases of violence in the school have been reported since 2006, and it still keeps at the high rate even today” (Cabinet Office, 2015b, p.26).

Even though the new concept of education took over the *Yutori* curriculum, it barely changed the atmosphere of the schools and learning environment. The Course of Study with the concept of Zest of Life might have helped to improve the PISA scores, but what does it mean for the children? How does it help them shape their lives? What we really need to prioritize is the happiness of children and make sure that they become strong enough to overcome difficult circumstances. A positive result for the PISA should be viewed as a mere result, but there should be more emphasis on the students’ well-being.

Actions Needed to be Taken as Global Citizen

I strongly agree with the concept of “Global Citizenship” that was advocated by Daisaku Ikeda and also firmly supported in the Declaration of the World Summit of Educators (Declaration of the World Summit of Educators, 2016). According to the Declaration, global citizenship means

seeing ourselves as a part of humanity as a whole and understanding that our actions have an impact on other people and parts of the world.

Therefore, active global citizenship means taking proactive steps to build a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world (2016, p. 1).

This definition of global citizenship implies the significance of each individual and their ability to change the world. It is a crucial concept to keep in mind when we create an educational policy. Children should not be educated to become one of the sheep to follow the standard Japanese economic trends, instead education should become a key to bring about the student’s potential to become whoever they want to be.

Policy Recommendations

In order to address the issues in the Japanese education system, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Set a goal to reduce the NEET population by 50% and create strong support system in local communities by 2030 as a result

It might be difficult to eliminate the NEET issue entirely because about half of the NEET population has an illness or injury, making it difficult to work. However, for those people who feel lost or unmotivated to work, they can definitely have a chance to change their life by having a societal support system. Utilizing the local community is necessary for this to take place. There are already organizations established by the government, but many of them treat the NEET population as those who have medical difficulties, when in fact many are healthy. We need to break our prejudicial stances and begin creating one-on-one relationships based on trust through dialogue.

2. Create safe learning environment to reduce bullying, school violence, and juvenile crimes by 50% in 2030

In Japan, less than 65% of elementary schools have school counselors (Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau Child Student Section, 2013). It is very essential for the growth of elementary school students to acknowledge the importance of understanding their emotions. Therefore, making school counselors more accessible for adolescent students could be a big first step in preventing bullying, school violence, and juvenile crimes.

Also, it is very important to include local communities in order to achieve this goal. The school must have an open-mind to "respect the role of family, community, and the physical environment as elements of education" (Declaration of the World Summit of Educators, 2016, p.2).

3. Gather educators to prepare for the new Course of Study implementations

The Course of Study, including the Yutori curriculum, has not been successful primarily because there is a huge gap between the vision of practitioners and policy makers. Therefore, when a new policy is to be made, it is crucial for both policy makers and practitioners to gather and discuss their vision of education in order to prevent the Course of Study from becoming simply a hallow ideal. This notion should be implemented whenever the Course of Study adopts new ideas such as *Yutori* or *Zest for Life*. The definition of these concepts must not be ambiguous but clear enough for people to grasp the ideas. When a new educational policy is issued, teachers should hold a discussion inviting parents and local community figures. This will promote a better understanding of the new policy and encourage support in establishing a comfortable learning environment for the students.

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