Citizenship Education In Japan After World War II

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ABSTRACT  Citizenship education in Japan after World War II has taken on different forms at different times and can be divided, broadly, into three periods: 1947-55 for experience-oriented education, 1955-85 for knowledge-oriented education, and 1985-present for ability-oriented education. In each period, it is possible to analyse citizenship education at four levels: A) in the community, B) in school as a whole, C) in school subjects, and D) in social studies, or geography/history/civics. In the first period, citizenship education comprised types A, B, and C and stressed A and B. In the second period, it comprised types C and D and stressed D. And in the third period, it comprised all four types and stressed A and D. As a result, we can identify two characteristics:

1. Citizenship education in Japan has shifted its emphasis from “education for (community-) citizens” and “teaching students social science disciplines concerned with building the Japanese nation” to, finally, “citizenship education for all citizens”.

2. The principal focus of this paper is an historical overview. But this analysis suggests significant issues about the current condition and future characterisation of citizenship education. It is likely that diverse perspectives will continue to be developed in debates about the nature of citizenship education in Japan.

Three distinct periods

This paper reviews the history of postwar citizenship education in Japan and clarifies and briefly discusses its characteristics.

In Japan, of course, the end of World War II was a very significant turning point. Education in Japan changed from being militaristic to aiming for a democratic approach. We call Japanese education after WWII the “new” education, where “new” conveys two meanings, namely, “different” and “democratic”. The Courses of Study established by the Ministry of Education set an example of “new” education in 1947 and so this is when democratic citizenship education started in Japan.

Within this determination to establish a democratic focus, modern Japanese education has been centrally planned. The Ministry of Education decides the Courses of Study, provides the basic framework for curricula, and approves the textbooks. But each school implements education according to individual interpretations of the Courses of Study and textbooks, so education in each school has both uniform and diverse characteristics. The national education system, of
which citizenship education is a part, is based on uniform features but there is considerable diversity in understanding and practice.

The recent history of citizenship education in Japan Citizenship education in Japan after WWII can be divided into three periods:

1947-55: experience-oriented education
1955-85: knowledge-oriented education
1985-present: ability-oriented education

In each period, Japanese education was implemented based on the principles of the educational thought of that period.

The first period: Education of the first period reflected a commitment to the principle of pragmatism, which originated in United States, especially in the educational ideas of John Dewey. The new subject of “social studies” characterized the first period of education. Social studies education was the core of the new education. Citizenship education in the first period was mainly implemented as integrated social studies.

Social studies education of the first period adopted problem-solving methods, such as research and discussion, and taught about social life and society in general. In the classroom, teachers and children considered the problems of community life and social life and gained social experience in solving problems. They learned about “their own society” and developed “the attitude and skills to participate positively in their society in order to build a democratic society” (Ministry of Education, 1948, p.13).

Typical social studies practices were “yubin-gokko (playing the post)” and “yamabiko-gakko (echo school)”. In the practice of elementary social studies yubin-gokko, the teacher organized a postal structure as an activity for children to experience. In yamabiko-gakko, the teacher organized investigation activities so that children could make questions through free composition and answer them.

In these situations, the children were performing the activities. The teachers mostly did not lead the practice. Most people criticized these practices and some described them negatively as merely “crawling about”. They argued that in these practices, children only learned ordinary commonsense knowledge accidentally, and they demanded that social studies teachers teach social science systematically.

The second period: Education of the second period was characterised by the principle of intellectualism, which originated in academic disciplines. The Ministry of Education revised the Courses of Study in 1958 in a way that meant that moral education (dotoku) was separated from social studies. Social studies education was split into geography, history, and politics/economy/society.

Each subject, which was characterized by basic and core knowledge and academic skills related to each of the disciplines, was composed of a set of knowledge and skills. This provided students with core knowledge in the form of a common Japanese culture. Citizenship education of the second period meant firstly that students gained knowledge that was deemed necessary for the Japanese nation. Japanese language education provided knowledge of language as the core knowledge of Japanese. Mathematics education provided an understanding of numbers as the basic and core knowledge of mathematics. Science education provided an understanding of nature as the basis of natural sciences. Social studies education provided knowledge of the nation and society as the basis of geography, history, and social sciences.

The objectives of school subjects consisted of four elements: i) knowledge and understanding, ii) thinking and judging, iii) skill and ability, and, finally, iv) will, interest, and attitude. The general objective of elementary social studies education in
1978 was “to guide the children to deepen their basic grasp of social life, to nurture understanding of and affection for our land and history, and to cultivate the foundation of citizenship necessary as members of a democratic and peaceful nation and society” (Ministry of Education, 1978, p.31).

In the practices of social studies education children gained the basic knowledge that teachers selected from textbooks and then arranged and taught that knowledge in ways that they felt to be valuable. Citizenship education in social studies stressed common national knowledge.

The third period: The form of education prevalent in the third period stresses the importance of the principle of interrelationships. School education focuses on instilling “abilities necessary to live a long life”, which means that students are “to find a problem by oneself, to learn about it by oneself, to think about it by oneself, to judge it independently, to acquire methods of learning and thinking, to tackle problem-solving and inquiry activities independently and creatively, and to deepen one’s understanding of one’s own way of life” (Ministry of Education, 1998, pp.2-3). This objective is to be reached through each subject and through a special time called the “period of integrated study”, which the Ministry of Education set up in 2002.

Each subject has two aims: to achieve its own particular objective and to pursue the general target of school education. Social studies education teaches a fundamental knowledge of geography, history, and society as common culture and trains children’s abilities. As each subject must achieve its own particular objective while pursuing the general target of school education, it can lose direction, but each subject develops a new system that enables it to achieve these two aims simultaneously. We organize four elements of objectives in each subject into a united structure of ability.

Citizenship education in the third period requires an individual to become actively involved within a small or large society, using a common culture in each subject. The emphasis on citizenship education has changed from focusing on common knowledge as a Japanese nation to the ability to construct a society.

Types of citizenship education in Japan

We can summarize citizenship education developed by the Japanese education system after 1947 in four types.

Type A: the main function is to work for the good of the community. It is based on the community and schools could often be thought of and referred to as “community school”. In any community, there are problems. In school education, children wrestle with some of those problems and attempt to help solve them so that the community will work well.

Some schools make a local educational plan in order to do research on the community, to classify problems in the community into political, economic, health, aesthetic, and educational ones etc., and to select some of these problems as educational subjects. Typical plans of this period are “Kawaguchi (-city) plan” (in Saitama prefecture near Tokyo) and “Hongo (-town) plan” (Hiroshima prefecture). In recent years, this type has been promoted as voluntary activities in the community.

Type B: citizenship education throughout the school. School education comprises all the standard subjects, extracurricular activities for “dotoku” (moral education), special activities of school events, and the “period of integrated study”. It is organized so that all educational activities help to bring children up as citizens. For
example, children may run a student council by themselves. They work on problems and solve them under the guidance of their teachers. In each activity, school prepares children to work in society later in their lives.

Learning in each subject is organized to cover the activities that citizens perform, such as writing letters, reading maps, and conducting arguments with others. School subjects are regarded as vehicles for teaching citizenship activities. Additionally, the subject of “social studies” specifically offers a social means of performing citizen activities.

For this type, the school curriculum was organized as a “core curriculum” in the second half of the 1940s and the first half of the 1950s. Social studies was organized as a learning activity so that children could solve problems in their lives and would acquire social knowledge and understanding and learn to act as citizens. The subject of social studies has its own special aims, which are related to the acquisition of fundamental social knowledge and understanding, social skills and abilities, and general aims, such as those attributes required for citizens or by the nation. Representative plans were the “Nara (school) plan” (an elementary school attached to Nara Women’s University) and the “Akashi (school) plan” (an elementary school attached to Kobe University). Since 1999, this type has been reorganized into the “period of integrated study”.

Although in type C ‘social studies’ plays a central role, it does also allow for the provision of citizenship education through ‘mainstream’ school subjects such as Japanese or science. Type D promotes citizenship education in each field of distinct school subjects. The school subjects of geography, history, and civics have constituted the principal range of knowledge and practice most closely relevant to social studies since 1955. Each field provides its own specialist knowledge. Geography teaches knowledge of space, history teaches knowledge of time, and civics provides knowledge of society, politics, economics, and international relations.

Of the four types, type D covers citizenship education in the narrowest range while type A covers it in the broadest range.

Features of citizenship education of each period

The first period (1947-55) comprised types A, B, and C. In particular, types A and B were stressed. Citizenship of types A and B was regarded as a form of education that emphasised the significance of citizens’ actions. Citizenship education was carried out so that citizens’ actions might be promoted in real life. This education did its work in the social context, on as wide a scale as possible. The features of citizenship education in the first period were problem-solving methods and the continuous organization of learning activities. We could call the citizenship education of the first period “education through citizenship”, in Kerr’s terminology (Kerr, 2002, p.209).

The second period comprised types C and D, which are regarded as promoting the knowledge and understanding necessary to a citizen in the context of a nation-state. Citizenship of these types was covered very narrowly. It was likely, therefore, that there could be an educational effect that was noticeable in schools that promoted this approach. However, the society characterized by citizenship education of types C and D became static and inactive. The features of the citizenship education of the second period were segmentation of citizenship, emphasis on knowledge and understanding, and definite organization of teaching. We could call the citizenship education of the second period “education about citizenship” (Kerr, 2002, p.209).
The third period covers all four types of citizenship education. The subject of “social studies” emphasizes education; and cross-curricular education emphasizes citizenship education. Citizenship is regarded as relating strongly to an understanding - and promotion - of participation in society. This is not to suggest that action alone is regarded as significant. Rather, participation is emphasised in the context of the four elements of the objectives of social studies education: i) knowledge and understanding, ii) thinking and judgment, iii) skill and ability, and iv) will, interest, and attitude. Citizenship education in this formulation is undertaken so that children acquire knowledge about and an understanding of society, the ability to consider and make judgments concerning problems in society, the skills and abilities to perform their role in society, and the will, interest, and attitude to participate in society. Education performs its social work through voluntary activities in the community: learning to activate the community in the “period of integrated study” and, in social studies lessons, solving social issues and problems in order to construct a democratic society. The features of citizenship education in the third period are as follows: a structure capable of constructing a democratic society, an emphasis on levels of capability and its growth and development, and the setting up of these educational aims. We could call the citizenship education of the third period “education for citizenship” (Kerr, 2002, p.210).

Citizenship education in the post war period

The nature of citizenship education in Japan has changed as it has passed from the first through the third periods. From education intended to teach citizens’ actions in a community, it developed first into teaching geography, history, and social sciences as a Japanese nation, and then into teaching abilities needed to live as a citizen. There was a shift in the educational framework of citizenship education from activity, through knowledge and understanding, to ability; that is, from education through citizenship, to education about citizenship, to education for citizenship.

Citizenship education in Japan has been discussed in this article historically but the issues raised here suggest themes that are relevant to contemporary and likely future contexts. The development of citizenship education after WWII in Japan indicates the “multiple dimensions” of citizenship (Cogan and Derricott, 1998, p.11, 117). The variety of thinking and practice explored here needs to be considered further if we are to make sense of the current proposals for reconceptualising citizenship education and/or developing specific implementation strategies.

This year, 2005, is the 60th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. It is our fervent hope that there will be “No more Hiroshimas and no more Nagasakis” and that peace will exist throughout the world. We hope that a better understanding of the nature of citizenship education will help us to achieve that aim.

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