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## Social Justice and Capacity for Self-Development in Educational System in Japan

### Abstract

This study is part of an integrated research project entitled '*Comparative Studies on Social Justice and the Capacity for Self-Development in Educational Systems*'. The purpose of this sub-project is to investigate how Japanese educational institutions realize social justice and enhance Japanese students' capacity for individual self-development. This is an historical investigation reliant upon the analysis of documents, field studies and in-depth interviews. However, because of the specific Japanese social and cultural background, the preliminary analysis of this study showed that although equal opportunity in education is often highly stressed and discussed, social justice is rarely used in their educational policies and researches.

Therefore, first of all, this paper will explore concepts of social justice and equality in education within the Japanese social and cultural background. Secondly, this paper will concentrate on the relationship between social justice (educational equality) and capacity for self-development in the educational system in Japan including the themes of early childhood education, elementary education, lower secondary education, upper secondary education, technical and vocational education, higher education, teacher education, disadvantaged schooling, new immigrants' education, and life-long learning. Finally, as a basis for comparative studies, this study will present Japanese ideas of realizing social justice and strategies for enhancing students' capacity for individual self-development.

Keywords: social justice, capacity for self-development, Japan, educational policy

### Introduction

The study is a part of an integrated joint research project (3 years) financed by the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) in Taiwan entitled '*Comparative Studies on Social Justice and the Capacity for Self-Development in Educational Systems*'. This study (first year) will concentrate on the relationship between social justice (educational equality) and the capacity for self-development in the educational system in Japan including these 10 themes: early childhood education, elementary education, lower secondary education, upper secondary education, technical and vocational education, higher education, teacher education, disadvantaged schooling, new immigrants' education, life-long learning. Hence, it is an overview of the Japanese education system and particularly focuses on upper secondary education.

However, the question is why Japan? There are three reasons. The first one is Japan has a similar school system to Taiwan, for example, the 6-3-3-4-year system. The second one is the proportion of normal to vocational schools in upper secondary education is quite similar. The third one is that after 2000, almost at the same time, both Taiwan's and Japan's higher education entered the universal stage. According to a comparative study of the stages of higher education between Taiwan and Japan (Liu, 2014a), which was based on Martin Trow's 'Three Stage Theory' on the

development stages of higher education (Trow's conceptions of elite, mass and universal higher education, hereinafter referred to as Trow's theory) (Trow, 2007). This comparative study also shows that the enrollment rates of upper secondary education in both countries are extremely close to each other, and remain at the high level of over 90%. As Mei Kagawa, Hideyasu Kodama & Shinichi Aizawa (2014) stated the era of 'High-school-education-for-all' has arrived. Also both countries faced several issues such as Diploma Disease in recent years.

Based on these 3 reasons, we choose Japan as an object of research, and we believe that through the comparative analysis, Japan's strategies and implementations regarding social justice (educational equality) and capacity for self-development in educational system can serve as a reference for Taiwan's educational reforms.

The next question is why we want to talk about social justice and capacity for self-development in the educational system as well as focus on the upper secondary education? The reason is because the most important policy in Taiwan in recent years, called the 'Twelve-Year Basic Education Policy' (TYBEP), is implemented. Currently, the upper secondary education in Taiwan is about to enter a major change. After planning and designing TYBEP for 30 years, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan finally officially announced in 2011 that the policy will be implemented in August 2014. TYBEP's original title is the Twelve-Year Compulsory Education Policy, but it is not compulsory education, in fact. TYBEP is a unified term, including the existing nine-year compulsory education and three years of the upper secondary education. In other words, TYBEP is just a 'quasi-compulsory policy of the upper secondary education' (Liu, 2014b).

Besides, TYBEP consists of 3 visions, 5 ideas, 6 objectives, and 7 divisions of 29 sub-policies (MOE, 2016). Hence, the content of TYBEP is too large and complex, making it difficult for the public to understand. Regarding social justice and capacity for self-development, one of TYBEP's visions is 'No Child Left Behind'; and one of its ideas is enhancing students' capacity for individual self-development. Moreover, social justice is just one of its objectives and based on these visions and ideas. The main sub-policies (approximately 95%) are about upper secondary education, such as introducing the school district system, reforms for the full exemption of entrance examinations, and narrowing the gap of school fees between public and private high schools. It shows that MOE not only aims to equalize the quality of education, but also ensure equal opportunity in upper secondary education.

However, in Japan, there is no such policy like TYBEP. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how Japanese educational institutions realize social justice and enhance Japanese students' capacity for individual self-development in the upper secondary education. This will be an historical investigation reliant on the analysis of documents, field studies and in-depth interviews. However, because of the specific Japanese special social and cultural background, the preliminary analysis of this study showed that although equal opportunity in education is often highly stressed and discussed, social justice is rarely used in their educational policies and researches. Therefore, first of all, this paper will explore concepts of social justice and equality in education within Japanese social and cultural backgrounds. Secondly, this paper will concentrate on the relationship between

social justice (educational equality) and capacity for self-development in the educational system in Japan including themes of early childhood education, elementary education, lower secondary education, upper secondary education, technical and vocational education, higher education, teacher education, disadvantaged schooling, new immigrants' education, and life-long learning. Finally, as a basis for comparative studies, this research will present Japanese ideas of realizing social justice and strategies of enhancing students' capacity for individual self-development.

### **Findings: social justice and capacity for self-development in educational system**

First of all, this section will analyze the concepts and ideas of social justice and capacity for self-development in Japan.

#### *Concepts of social justice and equality in education*

As mentioned above, social justice is closely related to the capacity for self-development and Miyadera (2014) also maintained that:

'The cultivation of students' capacity for individual self-developments largely rely on the establishment of society with fairness and justice. Without social justice, students probably could not receive proper education result from their personal or family socio-economic factors. Then naturally their capacity for individual self-developments could not be nurtured.' (Miyadera, 2014).

However, although the Japanese know that social justice in education is very important, the preliminary analysis of this study showed that equal opportunity in education is often highly stressed and discussed. However, in contrast, social justice is rarely used in their educational policies and researches. On the other hand, because the Japanese Constitution sets forth the basic national educational policy, as follows: 'All people shall have the right to receive an *equal education corresponding to their ability*, as provided by law' (Article 26). There is also an obvious tendency for Japanese researchers to have passionate concerns about the interpretations of '*equal education*' and '*education corresponding to their ability*'. Hence, after World War II, in the history of the development of educational policies in Japan, a significant opposition between egalitarian (based on *equal education*) and meritocracy (based on *education corresponding to their ability*) existed, and resulted from the different interpretations of law. In particular, with the increasing enrollment rate of upper secondary schools, Okada (2013) pointed out that meritocracy, based on an Aristotelian distributive justice, was gradually considered as taboo in the Japanese one track school system where an egalitarian approach has been emphasized (Okada, 2013). In other words, do not directly use the term of social justice does not mean that Japanese researchers do not pay attention to this issue. According to the results of our interviews, it is probably because the Japanese special social and cultural background has led people to think it is not easy to achieve the highest value and idea of social justice, and so they tend to avoid the difficult controversy on social justice.

Therefore, according to Rawls's '*A Theory of Justice*', Miyadera (2014) criticized the Japanese government's directions of policies in terms of 'educational

justice'. He directly stated that after 2012, the Japanese government has been tending to not only ignore social justice, but also widen the gap between the rich and the poor. As indicated in the following, although there are some policies regarding the exemption of school fees and scholarships, the Japanese government's directions of market-oriented and competition-based policies as well as reforms of educational diversity indicate that the class divisions as well as the gap between urban and rural areas are connived. These directions and reforms of policies result in more diversification of upper secondary education, and may cause more unfairness and inequality in the educational system. Furthermore, this may lead to the reverse of development of educational egalitarianism intended to support the disadvantaged.

Besides, although the Japanese Constitution sets forth the basic national educational policy, as follows: 'All people shall have the right to receive an equal education *corresponding to their ability*, as provided by law' (Article 26), Hirota (2011) also pointed out that the 'ambiguity and arbitrariness' of the selective examination *based on student's ability* may result in the inequality of educational opportunity.

In summary, the issue of evading social justice in Japan must be resolved immediately, even though Japanese government also is eager to reform the issues of the gap between public and private high schools, such as the school fees, just like Taiwan.

### *Ideas of realizing social justice (educational equality) and strategies of enhancing students' capacity for individual self-development*

This section will analyze how the Japanese government efforts towards achieving equal opportunity in education and students' capacity for individual self-development in recent years.

#### *Reforms of the school system*

In recent years, especially in 2014, the Japanese government (Education Reproduction Execution Conference, chaired by the Prime Minister Abe) has tried to reform the school system. Two prominent points are highlighted in those policies. The first one is positively reviewing the existing 6-3-3-4 school system and attempting to implement some pilot systems, such as 5-4-3-4 system, 5-3-4-4 system, and 4-4-4-4 system. The second one is emphasizing the connections among the stages of the school system. That is the, Japanese started to consider that the single school system of 6-3-3-4 is outdated and unable to meet the needs of all students. Moreover, they believe that diversity in the school system is necessary to provide more educational choices and achieve each student's equality of opportunity in education and capacity for individual self-development. Thus, 'the existing nature of bifurcate type' within the Japanese school system (Liu, 2013) and several reforms for the diversity of the school system, in fact, has led the Japanese-one-track system to be continually developed, which is completely different from the school system of the U.S.

#### *Reforms of the school type*

As mentioned above, in order to realize the diversity of upper secondary education, Japanese government not only attempted to change the school system, but

also continued to add new school types since 1999, such as the Cyu-Kou-Ikan School (i.e. Secondary School), which includes 3 years of lower secondary school and 3 years of upper secondary school. And after July 2014, the Japanese government started to promote the Syo-Cyu-Ikan School (i.e. Compulsory School), which includes 6 years of elementary school and 3 years of lower secondary school.

#### *Promotion of the career education*

In Japan, with the concept of life-long learning has been introduced and the importance of career education has continuously been emphasized by the government and educational institutes since 1990. Then, after July 2014, the Japanese government started to promote careers education further in the all stages of educational system, especially in upper secondary education. It also pointed out that upper secondary education, as a preparation to becoming a member of the society, should provide more challenging approach for all students who have the motivation to study (Cabinet Office of Government of Japan, 2014). At the same time, in higher education, the Japanese government has also begun to focus on the importance and necessity of the establishment of a vocational higher education system.

#### *Promotion of narrowing the gap of school fees between public and private high schools*

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)'s White Paper 2013, one of its four basic directions is 'developing 'a safety net' for education', so the educational support for disadvantaged groups (such as youth, women, the elderly, the handicapped, etc.) and financial assistance for the economically disadvantaged (such as early childhood education grants, the exemption of high school fees, foreign senior high student grants, higher education scholarships loan and tuition remission, etc.) are positively valued and emphasized (MEXT, 2013).

Especially, in the upper secondary education, as mentioned above, in order to further guarantee students' educational opportunities from the influences of family socio-economic factors, since 2010, the Japanese government has implemented some policies regarding the exemption of public high school fees, and stressed the need for further promoting the school subsidy policy for those on low-incomes in 2014. Moreover, some local governments, such as Osaka Prefecture, has attempted to implement the exemption of private high school fees since 2010. Although the issue of evading social justice still exists, this movement of reforms, in fact, may help to achieve social justice in upper secondary education.

## **Conclusion**

Because this study has just begun (since August 2015), there is no clear conclusion. So in this part, based on the discussions above, we propose the puzzles and future researches as follows:

*Necessity of in-depth analysis of concepts of social justice and capacity for self-development in Japan*

As maintained above, there is no such policy like TYBEP in Japan, and the preliminary analysis of this study showed that although equal opportunity in education is often highly stressed and discussed, social justice is rarely used in their educational policies and researches. Even the Chinese characters (Kanji) of social justice in both countries are the same. Therefore, the further research on the Japanese special social and cultural background as well as concepts of social justice and capacity for self-development in Japan are quite necessary. Especially, we need clear evidence and more relative researches to analyse the difference between social justice and educational equality, and the relationship between social justice (educational equality) and capacity for self-development in educational system. Besides, since the school systems of two countries are so similar, we believe that Japan's challenges and reform trends are a useful reference for Taiwan.

### *Necessity of comparative research in Taiwan and Japan*

This research had proved that there were a lot of similarities in the educational system of Taiwan and Japan. Moreover, Taiwan and Japan are both valid comparison objects to each other in the very beginning. Taiwan and Japan not only have high systems entered the universal stage almost at the same time. Besides, they both faced several issues such as Diploma Disease. Therefore, further comparative research on social justice and capacity for self-development between Japan and Taiwan are quite necessary. This study also believes that the result of these future researches will be a good reference for Taiwan, Japan and even other countries.

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