

The Southeast Asian Ministers of
Education Organization (SEAMEO)
International Conference, Tokyo
Campus, University of Tsukuba,
Japan. February 11, 2018



National Curriculum Reform in Japan from 1998 to 2018: A Critical Discourse Analysis and the Possibility of Sustainable Development

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Introduction

- **The purpose of this study is to examine the validity of Japan's curriculum reform from 1998 to 2018, focusing on the concept of Yutori education, and to think about the possibility of the sustainable development of curriculum policy in the future.**
- **In this report, I first explain the criticism of Yutori education in Japan.**
- **Next, I point out that the criticisms about the Yutori education and the Yutori generation were incorrect. Then, I examine how the criticism about the Yutori education affected the revisions of the national curriculum guidelines in 2008 and 2017.**

- **Critical discourse analysis, which focuses on language and discourse created with a specific intention, is used in this study. It is problematic that such language and discourse form a specific image that influences people's thinking, labels some people, and has a negative influence on policy formation.**
- **cf.) A definition of Critical discourse analysis (CDA) varies depending on a researcher. For instance, “Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to textual study that aims to explicate abuses of power promoted by those texts, by analyzing linguistic/semiotic details in light of the larger social and political contexts in which those texts circulate(Huckin et al 2012)”.**

A Brief History of National Curriculum Guidelines

- 1947 School Discretion
- 1958 Standard – Legal Power, Basic Education, Science and Math
- 1968 Modernization of Curriculum
- 1977 Essential and Balanced Curriculum
- 1989 New Way of Learning for Changing Society and Living Environment Studies
- 1998 Self-Learning, zest for living and General Studies
- 2008 Balance between Knowledge and Problem-Solving
- 2017 Subjective learning, Interactive and Deep learning

Criticizing
as a

Yutori

“That’s
discourse”

1. Meaning of Yutori

- **Yutori is a word commonly used, as in the expression “a comfortable (Yutori) lifestyle,” and it generally has a positive meaning. It can be said to be a word reflecting an ability to afford something. For example, when I am busy, I could say “There is no time or space (Yutori).”**
- **Yutori is a keyword referring to youth theory and education theory in Japan, and it is commonly used in terms such as Yutori education (relaxed or stress-free education) and Yutori generation. These words have been coined through a combination of Yutori + education and Yutori + generation, but in Japan, they are established as well-known phrases; they often have a negative meaning.**
- **It is not uncommon to hear such statements as, “the Yutori education failed,” “the Yutori generation has low academic ability,” and “the Yutori generation is selfish.” But are these true?**

2. Definition and criticism of Yutori education

- **Before answering this question, it is important to clarify the definition of Yutori education. Although there are various opinions on the scope of Yutori education, it can be said that it is referring to the education based on the national curriculum guidelines for revision in 1998.**
- **The full implementation of the guidelines was in 2002. The guidelines emphasize learning through problem solving and experiential learning. In addition, in accordance with the 5-day weekly school system implemented in 2000, class hours were reduced and the curricular content was carefully selected.**

- **Some critics who responded negatively to this feature began criticizing the national curriculum revised in 1998 by calling it Yutori education, starting around 2000. The MEXT, in order to address the criticism of the Yutori education, increased the contents of education and class hours at the guidelines revised in 2008. The revised national curriculum guidelines for 2008 were positioned as "reactionary" toward the revised guidelines from 1998.**
- **What age group does the Yutori generation refer to? According to newspaper articles, this generation is delineated based on whether a student took university entrance examinations using the revised educational guidelines of 1998. Current first and second year undergraduates took an entrance examination for university based on the revised educational guidelines for 2008 for all subjects.**

3. Is criticism of the Yutori education correct?

- **First, let me consider academic achievement. At TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) of the IEA (The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), Japanese academic achievement levels have been high, including during the time when the students from the Yutori generation participated.**
- **At the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) by OECD, Japan students made up the top class in the 2012 survey. Students who took the PISA in 2012 were from the generation learning using the 1998 revised national curriculum guidelines, the so-called Yutori education.**
- **In other words, there was no drop in academic ability due to the Yutori education.**

4. Is criticism of the Yutori generation correct?

- **The Yutori generation has been widely criticized.**
- **Although it is difficult to explain the characteristics of the young generation, Furuich (2011) has made the following points based on the “public opinion survey on social consciousness” of the Cabinet Office. “Do you always want to be useful for society as a member of society? This question has been consistently asked in the survey.**
- **According to the 2012 survey, 59.4% of young people in their twenties are hoping to serve society. In the 1983 survey, only 32% answered that they wanted to serve society in their twenties. That means that in less than 30 years, the number of young people who really want to serve society has doubled.**

- **Contemporary young people are not just ‘society oriented,’ but also want to contribute to society” (Furuich 2011: 73-75).**
- **From here, we can see the young generation’s interest in public contribution.**
- **This may be the result of a variety of background factors, but if we focus on school education, it can be considered to be the result of the 1998 national curriculum guidelines that strove to overcome competitive education and emphasized human nature, living together, problem solving, and experiential learning.**
- **In other words, criticism of the Yutori education and the Yutori generation is not appropriate; instead, it can be said that it is a factual misunderstanding.**

5. How did the criticism affect the revised national curriculum guidelines for 2008?

- **The negative impact of Yutori criticism in the development of curriculum policy still exists. Since the MEXT is concerned about the reoccurrence of the criticism toward the Yutori education, its only option is to increase class hours and educational content. In short, because of the discourse surrounding the Yutori education, MEXT cannot freely develop curriculum policy.**
- **After the revision of the curriculum guidelines in 2008, the quantity of homework assignments and learning drills increased. Since the curriculum that was taught in the upper grades was moved to the lower grades, unreasonable learning expectations that are incompatible with developmental stages were raised.**

- **At the same time, various problems concerning children's growth have arisen.**
- **For example, according to the MEXT "Final report on support to school refusing students" (study and research collaborators meeting on school refusal, July 2016), the number of schools refusing pupils increased for the first time in six years in 2013 (in FY 2014, 0.39% of elementary school children and 2.76% of junior high school students do not attend school).**
- **The current course of study guidelines have made educational content too difficult, and students are busy every day. Should the national curriculum guidelines be considered as one of the background factors of the high proportion of school refusal?**

6. How did the criticism affect the revised national curriculum guidelines for 2017?

- **The 2017 revision did not reduce study content. It maintained the number of class hours, and even increased class hours in elementary schools.**
- **The 2008 revision had created certain problems, including an increased number of class hours, a focus on drill work, increased homework, the use of units unsuitable for the students' developmental stages, and a "crowded curriculum."**
- **The guidelines that were revised in 2017 did not solve any of these problems. Thus, the coursework might not all fit into the allotted time. As a matter of fact, some boards of education have even proposed a "shorter summer holiday."**
- **The main reason behind these policies that focus on "total volume" and "increased content and class hours" is that MEXT has gone on the defensive; they fear the revival of the criticism of the Yutori education that the 1998 revision might have caused academic decline. However, in fact, that criticism was mistaken. The 1998 revision did not advocate for children being relaxed, but rather should have been considered as promoting learning through problem solving and living together.**

Conclusion

- **From an international perspective, the Japanese curriculum policy has problems. In order to realize a competency-based curriculum for a knowledge-based and global society, OECD suggests that increasing the number of class hours is inappropriate; instead, deep learning is important (Taguma 2015).**
- **Is the current curriculum of Japan keeping students busy, competing to exclude them from 21st century learning? Internationally, is there any possibility that the Japanese education will become obsolete?**
- **In order to maintain the possibility of sustainable development in the curriculum, discourse such as the criticism of Yutori education should be abolished. Constructive discussion over education is the first step in policy formation that will lead to sustainability.**

References

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