The Case History of Japanese Education

The 21st century is a “knowledge-based society”. So, education is necessary to contribute to society by creating human resources. Generally speaking, most countries consider education as the foundation of a nation. In instance, education is regarded as an important role in society in Japan. However, the current schooling in Japan is faced with difficult situations, such as truancy, an increase in bullying problems and ‘decline in scholastic ability’, but people do not know how to fix these problems. Therefore, just as a doctor looks at a patient’s clinical history to identify health issues as a first step toward healing, this study looks at the history of Japanese education system in an effort to understand how to fix it.

In 1868, a political revolution called Mei Restoration occurred in Japan and ushered in the beginning of the modernization of Japan (Saito, 2004). During this time, Meiji government planned to remove the former shogunate government power, adopting three main slogans, “Civilization and Enlightenment,” “Enrich the Country, Strengthen the Military,” and “Industrialization” (as cited by Saito, 2004). The new government attempted to unify and modernize Japan. Education was regarded as one of the
important processes for modernizing Japan, so the Japanese nation aimed to abolish the traditional class system and provide equal educational opportunity to all people.

The traditional education system was made up of fief schools, which were made for the samurai warrior class and “terakoya,” which concentrated on teaching reading, writing and practical skills to the common people. Direction of these schools therefore had innate bias of classical culture and work knowledge. Consequently, the traditional education system could not be the foundation for a modern nation-state. As a result, a central Ministry of Education was established as a part of the central government for a unified national education system. In 1872, the first Education Ordinance which adopted the U.S. school system and the system of educational administration and school districts in France as models was officially announced. The base idea of this ordinance requires that all children attend class, regardless of sex, parental jobs or social status. However, it became a heavy burden for many small-scale farmers who had absolute majority in the past Japanese society. Even though the government tried to encourage school enrollment, the percentage of enrollment did not increase. In 1879, the government decided to abolish the Education Ordinance and spread the Education Order. The regulations were relaxed at this time, but enrollment rates were still low.

In 1885, a bureaucracy system of government was introduced in Japan. Mori
Arinori, an enlightened bureaucrat, was appointed as the first minister of the Ministry of Education. He made the fundamental framework of an education system which became the educational development in Japan. In 1886, the former Education Order was revised and separated into four different parts: 1) Elementary School Order, 2) the Middle School Order, 3) the Normal School Order, and 4) the Imperial University Order. Education Minister Mori hoped to achieve modernization for Japan so Japanese people could realize the spiritual unity of the people through a strengthening of national morality.

The government did not only innovate the education system but also started to modernize industry by imitating Western countries technologies and establishing state-operated companies. This caused a demand for train workers. So in 1894, the government issued the Vocational Supplementary School Regulation and the Apprentice School Regulation. In 1899, the Vocational School Order and the Girl’s High School Order were promulgated. The structure of Japanese higher education system also changed to two parts: 1) Imperial Universities and 2) Specialized Colleges. During this time, the teaching force was regarded as a sacred profession by parents and the public. However, most teachers did not have a good salary or a social status. In 1896, a number of teachers organized the “Imperial Education Association” for improving work
conditions and setting financial support from the national treasury.

From 1890 onwards, the school enrollment rate improved steadily. Moreover, because of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) and World War I (1914-1918), Japanese capitalism made remarkable developments, so the demand of education also increased. In 1918, the government established the Special Council for Education which looked on problems of the education system and extended the duration of compulsory education from six to eight years. By this time, students who attended Japanese compulsory education had reached 99%. It is reasonable to say that a modern education system was in Japan by around 1920. However, the costs of compulsory education still faced difficulties, especially at the local government level. For solving this problem, the enactment of “Law Concerning the National Treasury’s Share of Municipal Compulsory Education Expenses” was created, which aimed to get special funds. Local areas, however, still had difficulties dealing with the financial burden of education.

The turning point happened in Japan’s education system in Taisho era. The ideas of John Dewey and other educationalists influenced the education system at a global scale, including Japan, known as New Education Movement, which emphasized child-centered and activity education. Even though it did not spread through Japan’s public education system, it was introduced in some Normal Schools and private schools.
In the 1930s, the rise of ultra-nationalism and militarism became strongly perceived in Japan’s education policies. In 1937, the Shino-Japanese War caused the militarism striking, and following World War II, militarist education was strengthened. It is clear that most students were given military training for drafting to produce foodstuffs or military supplies at this time. In the end, Japan’s school system was absolutely unable to operate normally until 1945.

From 1945 until 1951, Japan was controlled by the General Headquarters of the Allied Forces (GHQ) after the country’s defeat in the War. At this time, demilitarization, democratization and the rebuilding of the country were pushed forward. Education reforms became an important element for democratized Japan. To prevent the militarism education from being revived, some subjects like Moral, Japanese history and Geography were officially stopped. The textbooks of these subjects were also canceled. Some educators who were connected to militarism were forced to leave the teaching positions. Moreover, GHQ organized a form of “United States Education Mission to Japan” which is an education specialists’ investigation group in 1946. After the investigation, based on the results of the research, the Education Reform Council had cooperated with the U.S. Education Mission to reform education. The core of this education reform was the Fundamental Law of Education. This law was
the fundamental rule of postwar education in Japan. The basic framework of the new education system could be the cornerstone of today’s education. For example, 6·3·3·4 school system, 9 years compulsory education or co-education. The teacher training system was also changed. Teachers were asked to set teacher licenses in specific subjects.

In 1947, the Japan Teachers Union (JTU) was formed. As the democratization of education making steady progress, the textbook of nationally approved textbooks system was revised. The Authorized Textbooks were admitted after war. Influenced by the U.S. Education Mission, a New Education Movement such as Child-centered teaching methods, community school planning and the Core Curriculum Movement (as cited by Saito, 2004) became popular during the 1920’s. The signing of the San Francisco Treaty of Peace became the end of occupation by GHQ. Minister of Education Amano Teiyu re-evaluated the postwar education reforms in Japan. He issued that “national anthem” (*kimigayo*) should be sung and the national flag should be flown on special events and occasions. He also insisted the restoration of “Morals” as a school subject which caused big arguments.

The Board of Education Law was abolished in 1956 and in its place, the board of education members changed to be appointed by the head of the administrative
organization. Then, a series of laws were enacted one after another. In instance, the School Lunch Law, the School Health Law, rose to improve the school and the learning environment. The school lunch especially became an important school culture in Japan.

The Industrial Education Promotion Law and Science Education Promotion Law, which promoted and encouraged industry and science education for the development of industry, science and technology in Japan were established. Stimulated by the postwar good economic condition, the educational demands are increased. In 1962, the Ministry of Education issued a White Paper entitled “Education and Japanese Growth – the Development of Education and the Development of the Economy”. So “education development plans” was a keyword during this period. However, the education reforms moved more slowly than the demands of higher levels of people’s education. Revision works were taken at this time.

The expansion of education had rapid progress in Japan in the postwar period. A number of school enrollment and schools showed a remarkable increase by 1990. The rapid quantitative expansion was for the demands of the economic world; consequently, Japanese education was able to produce a large number of people who have the qualities wanted by the industrial world and Japanese society.

To make a generalization, in 1870, the modern-style school was to start
functioning, but it was not the image of the sort of Japanese, so the Imperial Rescript on Education was published and school was established in 1890. Because of the several wars, Japanese capitalism made remarkable developments, so the demand of education also increased. In Taisho era, the ideas of New Education Movement influenced Japanese system and schools were reorganized. However, Japan faced serious economic crisis, which led Japanese to turn to a militarism education. The militarism education lasted but a short while because Japan was defeated in the War. Until 1950, Japanese education was under the GHQ’s control. After that, Japan argued to go back to Japanese-style education which emphasizes ability. Running toward the high economic growth produced negative effects that schools fell into ruin. So the government and Board of Education decided to change to a ‘relaxed education’ (yutori), but this resulted is the Japanese becoming dispirited. After the Cold War, globalization began to spread around the world. The two-party system of Japanese government collapsed. The disputes of ideology settled down.

At the present time, standardized education and common sense are education problems which confront us. A change in the word of “common sense” is to “not accept different ideas or diversities”. The present Japanese education system was affected by history which we need to solve today.
[Reference List]
