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by Ari Kusuma Wardana

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Japan's school curriculum for the 2020s politics, policy and pedagogy

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Siti Suprihatiningsih, Rizki Kurniawan Rangkuti, Kintoko & Nur Hidayat


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BOOK REVIEW

Japan's school curriculum for the 2020s politics, policy and pedagogy, by Akito Okada and Sam Bamkin, Singapore, Springer, 2022, 222 pp., \$120.69 (Hardcover), ISBN 978-981-19-2075-2

Research on the implementation of curriculum reform has been widely addressed to find out best practices from different angles, such as policies (Chan 2012; Pietarinen, Pyhältö, and Soini 2017) and flexibility of practices (Johnson, Boon, and Thompson 2020; Sinnema, Nieveen, and Priestley 2020) to elevate the quality of education with less information on socio-cultural issues as one of the essential elements of curriculum implementation. From the context of the Asia Pacific region, the book entitled *Japan's School Curriculum for the 2020s Politics, Policy and Pedagogy* aims to explore how Japan's education curriculum reform has succeeded in elevating the quality of education as it is influenced by the commitments of the authority and community's cultural values. Divided into 12 chapters, this volume discusses an extraordinary Japanese school curriculum reform under the dynamic socio-political change.

The first three chapters discuss the impact of Japanese education reform and policies on the school curriculum and education actors. The first reform is the shift of centralised education, emphasising homogeneity and equality to a diverse system. It brings consequences that local municipalities have expanded authority to adopt a flexible school-choice system for the elementary level. The implementation of the curriculum in Japan is flexible and different from other countries, such as Hong Kong, which uses the term 'soft policy' with different results. This is due to the differences in cultural values of the communities, where Japan places a greater emphasis on ethics, discipline, and responsibility, which is vastly different from Hong Kong's focus on academics rather than character values. It can be stated that incorporating cultural approaches in curriculum implementation has a more positive impact than just focusing solely on academics.

Chapter 4 discusses the implementation of active learning as a form of reforming the Japanese curriculum. What is interesting about the concept of active learning is that Japanese education is not just designed how to make students learn actively in the classroom, such as through higher-order thinking, innovation, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Still, it is also designed to achieve high standards of ethical and social competence. This concept is different from the concept of active learning from other countries, which only emphasises the academic aspect of education as its main goal. Japan views aspects of morality (*dotoku*), such as ethics and social skills, as the main foundation of education. The integration of Japanese cultural values with academics has been proven to enhance not only academic quality but also the cultural quality of the country through its curriculum reform, as evidenced by its improved PISA ranking, as discussed in the following chapter, surpassing other countries. Chapter 7 discusses further the policy changes made by the Ministry of Education in its efforts to optimise learning resources and implementation to the assessment of moral education for basic education. The changes in the assessment policy aimed at improving the quality of learning, not for the purpose of grading or examination. The dualism between active learning and moral education at the beginning of educational reform did not run harmoniously and balance, where its implementation was dominated by improving pedagogical quality rather than moral education. This happens because the innovation of learning apparatus for moral education is still not well formulated at the level of professional development. Consequently, the aspect of academic achievement is more dominant than moral education.

The interesting part in Chapter 6, outside of optimising education based on active learning and moral education is its relation to learning English in the Japanese curriculum (McMurray 2018). At

first, learning English in Japan before 2017 was merely focused on reading skills. Meanwhile, other English skills, such as listening, speaking, and writing, are not well-prioritized. As a result, it is not surprising that at that time, when we visited Japan and asked the train passengers using English, none of them could respond to our English questions. It was different in 2017 when the Japanese Ministry of Education changed the policy and emphasised comprehensive English subjects such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills for English lessons starting from primary education. It represents one of the efforts in Japanese education to enhance socio-cultural competence skills, which is highly beneficial for education in Japan.

In relation to the assessment of active learning and moral education, chapter 5 discusses comprehensive efforts in assessing learning outcomes in relation to university examinations, students' future learning, and career prospects via assessment. The purpose of the assessment reform is to replace the previous assessment process, which only focused on factual knowledge. The current assessment reform is directed at two main aspects: the attitude to learn independently and collaboratively with diverse people. Therefore, the implementation of morality-based assessment has been implemented in the form of real-life action that is beneficial for students' future careers and life. The assessment of morality has become one of the positive values that are the main topic of discussion in the curriculum reform regarding the aspect of morality and local cultural values, which has not been widely discussed by other researchers.

Furthermore, chapters 8 and 9 discuss science education and equality in its efforts to form a knowledge-based society and its impact on the PISA test. The science education learning model is based on OECD and Japanese education policy, which includes the competencies for Rika science, namely: 1) basic techniques of observation and experimentation, 2) problem-solving, 3) emotional aspects, and 4) concepts about energy, matter, and energy. Life and earth have been taught as fundamental subjects since the elementary level for all schools. From these two concepts, it is not surprising that the results of the PISA test in Japan have increased significantly beyond that of other developed countries in less than ten years.

Chapter 10 discusses the Japanese government's efforts to maintain traditional arts as part of the school curriculum, such as tea ceremony (*Chanoyu*) and flower arrangement arts (*Ikebana*), either as extracurriculars or as compulsory subjects in certain schools such as Japanese, and Chinese, math, calligraphy, painting, and sewing. The tea ceremony is carried out to honour guests and teach manners in life, discipline, and moral values. This is the advantage of Japanese culture in its efforts to optimise the implementation of moral education, which is taught in schools and through the family to foster a sense of nationalism of Japanese-ness. Through a tea ceremony organised by the school, innovative ideas for learning will also be generated. Then, solutions to problems such as bullying and inequality can be accommodated and resolved in an atmosphere of harmony. In addition, schools can deliver their programme more successfully.

Chapter 11 discusses the issue of equality and inequality of active learning as key competencies for the twenty-first century in Japanese education from a sociological perspective. The primary issue is the emergence of fear of disparity in educational achievement along the class line and efforts to mitigate the threat of disparity because students from upper-class families dominate education achievement. The family has a very important role in its efforts to help achieve optimal education achievement, including 1) the family is obliged to strive for healthy living habits such as regular sleeping, walking, and limiting screen time/video games/cellphone usage; 2) Encouraging reading books and discussion with family during reading time, 3) communicating with children regarding their school grades, social events, news, and future careers. This strategy is also used as a way to mitigate the disparity in educational achievement, which is still dominated by rich families.

Finally, Chapter 12 is the closing chapter which discusses how the success of the education reform efforts in Japan cannot only be evaluated based on the academic and moral quality aspects but also on the economic growth aspect, as previously discussed. One of the efforts made by the Japanese government to contribute to the country's economic development is to reduce the number of universities that focus on social and humanities programmes and increase the number of vocational

education programmes to better align with the country's industry and economy. This book is highly beneficial for those seeking information about curriculum reform, not only in the Asia Pacific region but also internationally, providing insights into the successful reform efforts in academia, morality, and economics in Japan.

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Siti Suprihatiningsih

Universitas Negeri Surabaya

 siti.21032@mhs.unesa.ac.id  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0131-0604>

Rizki Kurniawan Rangkuti

Universitas Negeri Surabaya

 rizki.21038@mhs.unesa.ac.id  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7811-904X>

Kintoko

Universitas PGRI Yogyakarta

 kintoko@upy.ac.id  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9472-7611>

Nur Hidayat

Universitas Negeri Surabaya

 saujirusea@gmail.com  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1023-4877>

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