

Japan: “Internationalization” of Education

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With the increase in the number of people coming to Japan from abroad, the “internationalization” of education has become an important issue in Japan’s national policy. Two major trends are the so-called “education for international understanding,” which is associated with the UNESCO, and “human rights education,” which is influenced by the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education, which started in 1995. I trace the development of these trends, and determine whether they have actually helped transform some educational practices that were originally designed to “assimilate” children into Japanese society.

UNESCO-inspired Government Initiatives

The modern school system, which was founded in the late 19th century, was meant to promote the transition of society from one based on status to one based on class. Underlying Japan’s catching up with Western capitalist countries were its admiration for the West, its use of Emperor worship to unify the country, and its contempt for other Asian countries targeted for invasion and colonization (Yoon 1996). The educational system was based on the myth of Japan’s social homogeneity (Weiner 1997), which implies that authentic Japanese are only those whose ancestors were Japanese.

The term “internationalization” of education first appeared in 1947 in the course of studies for a proposed model curriculum that would promote a peaceful and democratic society. In the 1950s, Japan joined UNESCO, which encouraged Japan to promote “education for international understanding.” Until the 1970s, education stressed seeking understanding and cooperation with other nations, contributing to world peace, and respect for human rights, as stated in UNESCO’s recommendation for International Education in 1974

(Yoneda 1993: 335). Since 1975, with Japanese companies joining the international market, the education of children who accompanied their parents abroad has become an important issue (Sato 1999: 159). These “international,” or in many cases “Americanized” or “Westernized,” children were expected to contribute to the country’s internationalization as long as they also behaved “as Japanese.” They were not expected to be “internationally minded” persons per se. Despite “internationalization” of education, the essence of the modern education system has not changed since it began in the late 19th century.

In the 1980s, education went through a transition because of the influx of foreigners, mainly laborers, of various cultural backgrounds. In 1998, foreigners made up 1.2% of the total population, almost double that of 25 years ago. (In Osaka, they make up 2.36%; in Kyoto, 2.09%; and in Tokyo, 2.22%.) Although the proportion is smaller than in other countries, the demographic transition had a dramatic impact as many Japanese still believe their country to be “homogeneous” despite the presence of ethnic or cultural minority groups.

Since the 1980s, the government has been pushing for “education for international understanding,” with focus on “internal interna-

tionalization,” as education for ethnic Koreans in some public schools, which started in the mid-1970s, has become more widespread. Although Korean schools had existed before then, it was only in the 1970s that they started to teach students to stand up for their rights.

The government’s policy to introduce international education for the benefit of foreign residents was therefore a response to (i) the increase in number of foreigners and (ii) the development of Korean ethnic education at the grass-roots level. Although few Japanese teachers support international education, some prefectural and municipal teachers’ associations promote it, especially in Kansai, central Japan, where 46.6% of ethnic Koreans reside.

UN-inspired Grass-roots Human Rights Education

A second trend in educational internationalization began after the declaration of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education in 1994. It has given rise to now-popular human-rights-oriented education for minority groups, such as Dowa education for the *Burakumin*, ethnic education for Koreans and other foreigners, education for the disabled, intercultural education, and so on. These educational programs are called “education for international understanding,” “multicultural education,” or “human rights education,” depending on the context. The national government and some prefectural and municipal governments plan to promote such programs. “Human rights” have become buzzwords. Human rights education has become as popular as education for international understanding. Both deal with ethnic minority groups and are sometimes summarized as “education for learning to live with others.” Especially in dealing with ethnic minority groups, the term *tabunka*, meaning “multicultural,” is often used.

Comparison of Human Rights Education and Education for International Understanding

Both are products of UN influence. Both are accepted in various circles but interpreted differently. Education for international understanding emphasizes understanding various cultures outside Japan and learning foreign languages, especially English (which will be introduced in elementary schools in 2002). It is promoted by the government through researchers and teachers engaged in the education of returnees and in language education. A 1994 survey showed that 120 high-school courses nationwide could be called “international.” If English courses were included, the number would rise to 149. These courses have promoted internationalization of education since the 1980s (Yoneda 1995). Human-rights-oriented education, however, puts more emphasis on education for ethnic minority and outcast groups.

The double trend in educational internationalization is especially visible in public high schools in Osaka. As compulsory education ends at junior high school, students take an entrance exam for senior high school. All high schools, both public and private, are ranked based on the students’ test scores in each district. The schools considered as “good” but not the “best” have courses on international culture (*kokusai kyoyo*) and international understanding, which were introduced in 1990 to attract students. Mainly based on UNESCO’s guidelines, these courses aim to promote (i) love for peace; (ii) awareness of human rights; (iii) appreciation of Japan and a sense of citizenship; (iv) understanding of other countries, peoples, and cultures; (v) awareness of international relations, world issues, and the importance of world unity; and (vi) attitudes and behavior that will foster international cooperation.

While some courses deal with Korean residents, foreign workers, and the Ainu in northern Japan, they do not relate these issues to the students’ daily life.

In 1996, a subject on industrial society was introduced in Osaka public high schools. It "is related [to] 'human rights education' and its goal is to nurture the ability of the students to decide their future and to assist them [in achieving] self-realization" (Osakafuritsu Kotogakko Dowa Kyoiku Kenkyukai 1999: i-iii). However, only nine of the relatively lowest-ranking schools offer it.

In other words, the academically good schools promote UNESCO's education for international understanding, while the academically poor promote the UN's human rights education. The latter also criticize the other schools for neglecting human rights, which were, in fact, an important factor in the original UNESCO guidelines.

Education in a Minority Community

Research was done at an elementary school located in an Osaka Burakumin community of 2,000 people. The school also has a population of about 200 Burakumin, 70 ethnic Koreans, 50 ethnic Koreans with Japanese citizenship (of Korean descent or with one parent of Korean descent), and 22 Korean nationals. Since the 1980s, the school has accommodated 18 Vietnamese (mostly Japanese-born) and 13 Chinese. The student body consists of 15% foreign and 48% Burakumin students.

Under pressure from the Buraku liberation movement in the mid-1960s and the ethnic movement of Korean residents in the mid-1970s, the school, with the assistance of the local community, developed an educational program for each group. The program for the Burakumin gave importance to the concept of "equality"; for the Koreans, to regaining ethnic pride. With the increase in Vietnamese and Chinese enrollment since the 1990s, the school started developing a program called "education for learning to live together" based on the concept of "human rights." In my research area, an elementary school in Osaka, the following are being undertaken: (i) human rights

education in the Buraku community; (ii) education for learning to live together in the Korean community with the buzzwords "international exchange"; (iii) teaching Japanese language and culture to the Vietnamese and Chinese so that they can adjust to Japanese society, while encouraging them to maintain their ethnic identity; and (iv) promoting "education for learning to live together" for other Japanese.

All this is part of the second trend in education, which is human-rights-oriented and which originally began at the grass-roots level. However, the entry of people of other cultural backgrounds (Vietnamese, Chinese, etc.) is transforming this trend. At the administrative level (i.e., the municipal office and the education board), the increase in number of foreigners is described as a good opportunity for "cultural exchange" and "international exchange." Some municipal education boards have guidelines for the education of foreign children, including ethnic Koreans. The guidelines refer to human rights education (in Osaka prefecture, Osaka city, etc.) and internationalization (in Ikoma city, Nara prefecture, and Kyoto city, Kyoto prefecture), which indicates that the issue of ethnic minority groups is being dealt with at the cultural level, with less or no emphasis on human rights.

The same is true for education for Korean residents, which assists them in regaining their ethnicity through the learning of culture, but without dealing with their status as a minority group. For example, the Osaka city government, city education board, and the city civic centers jointly organize an annual "festival for international exchange" featuring performances by Koreans, Vietnamese, and Chinese residents. In the 1998 and 1999 festivals, adults and children wore their colorful ethnic dresses, and danced, sang, and played their ethnic musical instruments such as Korean drums. The organizers, presenters, and most of the audience belonged to the same ethnic groups. The few Japanese present were mainly school teachers attending to the performing children.

The festivals were held at an isolated place in the city, seemingly cut off from the rest of the world. Those who were “observed” have always been the “observed.” They were not given a chance to play the other role of “observers” of Japanese performers at the festival. Such odd scenes, without Japanese presenters and without exchanges with Japanese, are rarely questioned. They may be described as the result of another version of “assimilation,” this time within the framework of “international exchange” or “internationalization.”

Conclusion

As schooling has functioned as a socializing device since the late 19th century, the current “internationalization” trend appears to be challenging the schools’ long tradition of nurturing the Japanese nation. Closer scrutiny of the internationalization curriculums, however, reveals that it is not so. It is clear that education for international understanding is more popularly accepted than human rights education, which may be reduced to dealing with the cultural aspects of foreigners. I argue that these two education programs are likely to strengthen the purpose of the original Japanese modern educational system, which is to “assimilate” foreign residents into Japanese society in the guise of “internationalization.” As long as no attempts are made to make the ethnic minority groups the “observers” and not always the “observed,” and to make the dominant group (the Japanese) learn to “respect” or protect the rights of the ethnic minority

groups, “internationalization” will be nothing more than a series of cultural displays.

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