

Moral Education as Special Subject in Public Schools – Implications for Human Rights Education

Osaka Prefectural Teachers Union

THE OSAKA PREFECTURAL TEACHERS UNION (Union) is a member of the national organization of teachers, the Japan Teachers Union (Nikkyoso). The Union has been promoting Dowa and human rights education, one of the major issues in its education work, as well as doing awareness-raising on human rights.

Beginning of the Union

In 1945, an organization of teachers in Osaka was formed called the Osaka Teachers Union. More than 90 percent of the teachers in Osaka prefecture joined this union to fight for improvements in labor conditions, wage and welfare. It won recognition of various rights in its struggles.

In 1965, the government published the report of the Dowa Policy Council, an advisory panel of experts established to recommend basic policies to tackle the issues of discrimination against *Buraku* people. In its preamble, the report declared that the “Dowa issue¹ is an issue of freedom and equality of human beings, the universal principles of humanity, as well as an issue of basic human rights protected by the Constitution of Japan.” It also stated that it was the nation’s responsibility to solve the issue.

The members of the Osaka Teachers Union were divided into those who rejected the report outright, and those who received it positively and called for measures to implement the recommendations. The government enacted the Law on Special Measures for Dowa Projects in 1969. Based on this law, the Osaka Teachers Union started to support Dowa education² by organizing study meetings, believing that education valued the human rights of all children. In particular, it worked with the Osaka Prefectural Dowa Education Research Association³ (currently, the Osaka Prefectural Human Rights Education Research Association) in its activities. In 1970, the teaching material for human rights education, *Ningen* (Human),⁴ was published

in Osaka, and was distributed to all primary and lower secondary school students. With the distribution of this material, Dowa and human rights education was actively undertaken in Osaka Prefecture.

The Osaka Teachers Union was reorganized in 1989 and became the Osaka Prefectural Teachers Union; the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengo) was also established at this time. Today, the Union focuses its activities on peace, human rights, environment and multicultural education.

Role of Education in the Past

Before World War II (WWII), education made it possible for Japan to invade many countries in Asia and other areas, to glorify the killing of people as well as dying for the State, to objectify human beings, and to create a hierarchical military institution based on the absolute obedience of subordinates. Teachers who taught the Imperial Rescript on Education and *Shushin* (Morality)⁵ to children from young age in homes, communities and other places of education, wielded immense authority.

Nikkyoso, which was established in 1947, did a soul-searching on the role of education in abetting the war and played a part in creating a new democratic education based on the Constitution of Japan and the Basic Act on Education (Act No. 25 of 1947) under the slogan “Do Not Send Our Students Again to Battlefields.”⁶

The following is an account of the status of moral education since the 1990s as well as problems and concerns about its introduction as a school subject.

History of Moral Education

Why was moral education introduced as a special subject in the first place?

In the late 1990s, juvenile crimes attracted public attention, including the incident in which two children were murdered and three injured by a juvenile in Kobe in 1997, leading to a call for the need for “education of the heart.”

In 2000, the National Commission on Educational Reform, an advisory panel during the term of Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, recommended introducing moral education as a subject. While this recommendation was not implemented, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and

Technology (hereinafter, Ministry of Education) published in 2002 a booklet entitled *Kokoro no Noto (Notebooks for the Heart)* for lower primary, mid-primary, higher primary school children, and for lower secondary school students. Whereas notices from the Ministry of Education is normally sent to local schools through the boards of education, copies of *Notebooks for the Heart* were sent directly to the schools and distributed to the primary and lower secondary school students.

In 2002, the year when copies of *Notebooks for the Heart* were distributed, the Iraq War began. In 2004, when the Self Defence Force was sent to Iraq as part of the rebuilding efforts, a Japanese journalist who went to Iraq was kidnapped and held hostage. The comment of then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi that “it was his responsibility, since he went to Iraq ignoring the recommendations to evacuate” became subject of numerous discussions.

The first Prime Minister Shinzo Abe government amended the Basic Act on Education in 2006. Before the 2006 amendment, the law was like a Constitution on education, setting forth basic principles and placing broad frameworks such as academic freedom, and creation and development of culture as goals of education. After the amendment, the terms, “public spirit” and “tradition” were included in the preamble, and the cultivation of “a rich sensibility and sense of morality,” “love of the country and regions” were explicitly placed alongside “equality between men and women” and “preservation of the environment” as objectives to be achieved through education. A new provision on education in the family placing “primary responsibility” on parents and guardians was inserted. Before the amendment, the goals of the education bureaucracy were to create and improve the conditions for education. Under the amendment, national and local governments have to comprehensively formulate and implement educational measures. Heads of local governments were given a say in educational contents through the newly-created general education conferences.

The first Abe government established the Education Rebuilding Council in 2006 in the Prime Minister’s Office. The Council argued that moral education should be included in the curriculum as a subject. Meanwhile, the Central Council for Education found that though moral education was necessary, it was not appropriate as a subject in the curriculum because of issues with evaluation, textbook screening, and qualification of teachers,

among others. Moral education was not included as a subject in the Courses of Study that was updated every 10 years.

However, the Courses of Study for primary and lower secondary school was revised in 2008 that required time for moral education and the school as a whole to conduct this education. Instruction plans were developed, indicating the relevance of other subjects with the contents of moral education given in the Courses of Study. The content items of the moral education are similar to the “virtues” in the pre-war moral education, such as “honesty and good faith” and “kindness and compassion,” and lists the morals that should be attained “in relation to oneself,” “in relation to relationships with others,” “in relation to nature and the transcendent,” and “in relation to relationships with groups and society.” The revised Course of Study also required the teachers to promote moral education. And teacher were officially assigned to teach moral education from 2010 onward. The teachers assigned to promote moral education were those already working in schools rather than new teachers.

When a lower secondary school student killed himself after being bullied by his classmates in Ohtsu, Shiga prefecture in 2011, the discussions on introducing moral education as a subject were revitalized. In 2013, under the second Abe government, the Council for the Implementation of Education Rebuilding was set up in the Prime Minister’s Office. The Council published its recommendations on bullying, making a renewed call for the introduction of moral education as a subject. In response, an expert panel on moral education in the Ministry of Education published a report stating that it was appropriate to place moral education within the curriculum. In 2014, the Central Council for Education recommended that moral education be included as a special subject. *Notebooks for the Heart*, copies of which were distributed since 2002, were substantially revised in 2014, and reissued as *Watashitachi no Doutoku* (Our Morals).

Under these circumstances, the section on moral education in the Courses of Study was partly amended in March 2015 to designate it as a special subject. Primary schools were to start teaching the special subject of moral education using textbooks and evaluations from 2018, lower secondary schools from 2019.

The Courses of Study was revised in 2016 for other subjects, and classes would be taught according to the new Courses of Study in 2020 for primary schools and 2021 for lower secondary schools, after a period of dissemina-

tion and transition. Only the special subject of moral education was implemented in advance.

This is how the special subject of moral education became a new subject in 2018. The Ministry of Education indicated that moral sense would be formed through changing moral education classes into one of “thinking and discussion,” and by fostering the ability to address learning as well as a sense of humanity through each of the subjects.

Before the official introduction of the special subject on moral education, the schools were “encouraged” to promote moral education.

Concerns about Moral Education as a Subject

The *Notebooks for the Heart* were not textbooks, as they have not gone through the textbook screening process. They are also not supplementary textbooks because they have not been approved by the Boards of Education. The Director-General of the Primary and Secondary Education Bureau of the Ministry of Education at the time stated during a session of the Audit Committee of the House of Councilor that the Ministry of Education was not forcing the schools to use the *Notebooks for the Heart*. If so, when, where and who were expected by the Ministry of Education to use them?

The amended Basic Act on Education explicitly refers to “sense of morality” and “love of the country and regions,” as well as to terms that imply moral education as a school subject. It also includes provisions on education in the family, possibly introducing the idea of self-responsibility in education. Also, with the amendment of the goals of education, general educational conferences are held with the participation of heads of local governments, giving them a say in education, even though the Basic Act stipulates that “education must not be subject to improper controls.”

The publication and distribution of the *Notebooks for the Heart*, which resemble textbooks, since 2002 and then *Our Morals* since 2014, may be seen as preparation for the introduction of moral education as a subject. In practice, the use “as much as possible” of *Our Morals* was encouraged instead of the locally prepared teaching materials being used before then.

Ever since they were officially designated in the schools, the teachers for the promotion of moral education took the lead in organizing training activities. The goal of moral education was identified as the fostering of a sense of morality through the educational activities of the school as a whole,

and moral education class hours would focus on the study of morality. Based on this idea, the annual school plan was required to state the relevance of all educational activities (including subjects, classes for integrated learning and special activities) to the content items of moral education.

During training, emphasis was placed on lesson planning for moral education classes that gave more weight to the content items given in the Courses of Study. Until then, multiple items could be taken up in a class hour, but as the class was the focal hour for moral education, it was now required that only a single item would be taken up in an hour, or if the lesson involved a story, the whole story would be read and discussed within the hour. As teaching materials, the use of *Our Morals* published by the Ministry of Education was encouraged. The contents of locally published teaching materials were considered not clearly relevant to those of the content items in the Courses of Study. Moral education classes that the Ministry of Education “encouraged” to be held were promoted.

Textbook Screening

Moral education as a special subject in primary schools was planned to be officially introduced in 2020, with the revision of the Courses of Study. However, in practice, its introduction was made in advance in 2018. As a result, the textbooks for moral education as a special subject were screened and adopted in each of the administrative jurisdictions of the Boards of Education.

A number of problems were pointed out during the textbook screenings. After the Ministry of Education expressed negative views, certain items deemed inappropriate in relation to content items were changed such as the reference to a “baker” that was changed to a “Japanese sweet shop,” and an illustration of children playing with playground equipment that was changed to one of children watching Japanese musical instruments with interest. While the Ministry of Education did not ask for specific changes, the textbook publishers complied by making changes. Some textbooks were overly political by showing photographs of the Prime Minister’s Office, for example, or raised concern such as those demanding respect for the national flag and anthem. Each textbook has a guide material, and some guide materials try to lead the children’s views to a particular sense of values. Although the Ministry stresses thinking and discussion in moral education,

it has been pointed out that by using the textbooks, there is a risk of forcing uniform sense of values.

Evaluation

The expert council on evaluation in moral education published its report on the instruction methods and evaluation in moral education as a special subject, indicating the following basic ideas regarding evaluation of the subject:

1. From the children's perspectives, evaluation should allow them to have a sense of their progress, and lead to awareness raising;
2. From the teachers' perspectives, evaluation should be materials to improve and substantiate goals, planning and instruction methodologies;
3. Evaluation should not be given in numeric values, but in descriptive account;
4. Evaluation should not be based on individual content items, but on broad sets of items;
5. Evaluation should not be done in comparison, but be based on each individual on the progress according to the respective levels of development;
6. Emphasis should be given on the development of the children's multi-faceted and diversified views, and on the deepening of their understanding of moral values by relating the values to themselves;
7. The children's specific efforts in the learning activities during moral education should be assessed broadly.

(From the report of the expert council on evaluation in moral education, Ministry of Education)

Report cards (evaluation of learning) given to the children and the parents in each school term are made and handed out upon the discretion of the schools, and are not legally required. However, evaluation must be included in the guidance records. From the perspective of the children, making evaluation through "report cards" would mean that adults are "evaluating" their (children's) "sense of morality." Evaluation should be such that the children should not see it that way. It is important that report cards give an account not on each of the content items in the subject, but on matters such

as “mainly about oneself,” on how the children considered “moral values” as something that mattered to them, and how their understanding progressed. It is possible to give an account on how they learned about the Constitution, international treaties and their rights, or how they responded to education on peace and disaster prevention, without being bound by the content items.

How Moral Education Should Develop

In moral education, students are “taught” that “you should not discriminate,” that “you should be considerate of the feelings of others,” and that “kindness and compassion are important.”

In Dowa and human rights education, on the other hand, emphasis is on “why discrimination exists,” “what discrimination is,” and “what should be done to eliminate discrimination.” These are not “taught” unilaterally by the teachers but “considered together” as a class. In the process, students learn to express their feelings, listen to the feelings of their friends, discuss with people with different views, and sympathize and connect with not one but many people. By doing so, their own views may increase in depth, or change. Then they can discuss and translate their views into action.

In Osaka, the teaching of moral education cannot be understood without taking into account the experience with *Ningen*. *Ningen* is historically significant for being part of the development of the “academic skills for liberation,”⁷ its “democratic edition of educational contents,” and “free distribution.” Learning through *Ningen* is an effort to reform humanity that addressed the issues of “*buraku*,” “Okinawa,” “Korea” and the “War, in which Japan was the aggressor.” There were seven versions, for each grade from one to six in the primary schools and for lower secondary school. It was revised in 2003 into four versions, but still maintained as its basis, the “creation of relationships in which people can recognize who they really are,” “irreplaceable life, peace,” “diversity as wealth,” and “importance of people to people connections” as in the earlier versions.

However, the Osaka Restoration Association, a political party, came into power in Osaka Prefecture through elections, and in 2008, *Ningen* ceased to be distributed, although parts of the material were put together as “human rights education teaching materials” and distributed to all schools.

By addressing the human rights issues taken up in the *Ningen*, readers will be brought face to face with themselves and their families, the lives of

their friends and peers and the local communities. Human rights education in Osaka has nurtured a concrete sense of human rights by learning about not some “moral” tales happening far away but about the injustice and conflicts right in front of the people. *Ningen* (human rights education materials) has been used and is being used in moral education in the curriculums of many schools.

Efforts of the Union

The Ministry of Education and the boards of education have been intensifying their “strong guidance” on “how things should be” with the distribution of the *Notebooks for the Heart*, the amendment of the Basic Act on Education and the distribution of *Our Morals*, even before moral education became a special subject.

With the introduction of moral education as a special subject, the Union has been informing members through study meetings and the Union Newsletter that the imposition of a particular sense of norms or values and the instructions that interfere with the freedom of thought are not permissible.

Three published news articles on the comparative examination of textbooks in view of the adoption of primary school textbooks for 2017 emphasized the following points:

1. The adoption of a “better” textbook - for education based on human rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child;
2. The non-imposition of a particular sense of norms or values - for moral education based on the Constitution and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This article compared and analyzed textbooks for third and sixth graders, categorizing issues by (a) the Constitution and the law (rules and regulations for third graders), (b) peace, human rights, (c) tradition, family, and (d) persons appearing in texts. The textbooks were evaluated and identified as those that were appropriate, those with problems, and those that could be appropriate, depending on how they were used;

3. Education that takes the child into consideration.

This article argues that moral education classes should not be an imposition of uniform sense of norms or values, but a class in which participants

“think and discuss,” and this can be done by including human rights education in the subject. It also proposed how *Ningen* (human rights education materials) could be used, and presented the basic ideas on how evaluation should be.

The Union organized the following study meetings:

1. How to respond to moral education as a special subject (speaker: Kenichi Ikeda)

Held in 2015, the participants learned about the criticisms against moral education “called for” by the government taking into account the context in which it arose. They also studied morality as seen from the provisions of the Constitution as well as the image as a nation.

2. Thoughts on moral education classes (speaker: Kenichi Ikeda)

Held in 2018, Mr. Kenichi Ikeda pointed out the following in relation to human rights education:

We must consider how we can plan a moral education class that does not interfere with the freedom of thought. In doing so, the accumulation of experience in “human rights education” may be of use. At first glance, the human rights perspective seems to take up similar content to those of moral education, but it is fundamentally different.

Human rights education is “to know one’s human rights, and to act to realize those rights as rights holders.” It is an education that leads to a “regaining of humanity and transformation of society.” (Mariko Akuzawa, “Jinken Kyouiku Saikou,” *Chinmoku suru Jinken*, M. Ishizaki, H. Endoh, editors, Horitsu Bunka-sha 2012, pages 33-35.)

But moral education as a special subject may give the impression that human rights issues can be solved by learning moral values such as consideration and kindness.

After Mr. Ikeda’s presentation, participants created lesson plans for existing textbooks as well as materials from *Ningen* (human rights education materials), and discussed the perspectives in the materials and lesson planning.

The Union published and distributed relevant materials and introduced new publications, such as materials published by Japan Teachers Union, Courses of Study, Ministry of Education materials on evaluation, related

newspaper articles, views of academic experts, and lists of textbooks adopted by schools in Osaka Prefecture.

Education inside the Classrooms

In the academic year 2018, classes in primary schools were held using the textbooks. Due to the heavy workload of the teaching staff, schools are unable to form their own curriculums or conduct further research on teaching materials. In particular, with the introduction of foreign language activities (English), the priority of teaching materials research may further decline. In some schools, the school administration may tell false information that locally published teaching materials or materials such as *Ningen* are “not allowed,” and the uncertainty on conducting classes based on human rights.

The “guide material” at the back of each textbook also places far too much emphasis on particular content items and as a result, uniform sense of values is imposed and children are reluctant to raise diverse views. It might be effective to pause in reading a text, rather finish reading it till the end, to allow the exchange of different opinions.

The frequency of evaluation by “report cards” that the schools (teachers) give to each student differ from school to school, ranging from once a year to two to three times a year. Schools seem to be figuring out by trial and error what explanation should be written on the evaluation. The teachers are probably perplexed and would look for guidance on evaluation on moral education from books and in the internet and use them.

Morality itself should not be evaluated, but teachers should keep giving an account of what and how the child tried to learn, focusing on the child’s statements and comments.

Future Directions

There are almost no materials on “rights” or “freedoms” in the textbooks that passed the Ministry of Education’s screening. Their perspectives on “human rights” are also weak. Many of the materials try to solve social issues by increasing the “morality” of each person, and shifting the responsibility to the individual. Also, many involve events and persons that emphasize how wonderful Japan is.

Very few textbooks refer to the Constitution, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the three human rights laws⁸ that protect people in Japan by describing how the society can take action to solve the social issues. Regarding other countries, many materials refer to how Japan helped people in other countries when they suffered from disasters or other problems, and how this led them (other countries) to extend help to Japan. None of the materials refer to how Japan invaded other countries in Asia during WWII, and how this was making relations with the neighboring countries complex today. They seem to maintain the stance of “not touching on” any matters of inconvenience to Japan.

The current Minister of Education caused an uproar when, in response to a question from a reporter, he said that there were parts of the Imperial Rescript that could be arranged to suit the modern times and used in moral education. What is the significance of bringing back the Imperial Rescript, which was declared no longer valid by the Diet, and of presenting respect for the parents and diligence in study and work as important moral values? This shows that the introduction of moral education as a special subject is an attempt to “resurrect” the moral culture education and the Imperial Rescript that was conducted before and during WWII.

Each school has the power to form its own curriculums. For the moral education class, which has been introduced as a special subject, engaging in education should not be an imposition of uniform norms and values, but one that is based on the children, and the local community, and with human rights at its core.

Endnotes

1 Dowa issue is a grave human rights issue unique to Japan, in which a section of the people of Japan is compelled to an economically, socially and culturally disadvantageous status over the years, and experience various discrimination in their daily lives, due to discrimination based on a hierarchical class system created in the process of social development in the history of Japanese society. (Ministry of Justice, www.moj.go.jp/JINKEN/jinkeno4_00127.html)

2 Educational measures in solving the Dowa issue that persisted in many areas of the society in general play an important role in character building. For this reason, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports, and Technology has made efforts to promote Dowa education, by improving the respect for the basic human rights of the people of Japan through school and social education, and by narrowing the educational gap and improving educational and cultural levels in the Dowa areas.

Policies on Dowa education of the Ministry began in 1959 with the designation of pilot schools for research, and publication and distribution of materials.

Since 1969, additional teaching staff were assigned in prefectures with Dowa areas in response to special educational needs to increase the academic skills of children and for academic and career guidance. Since then, more than 3,000 teaching staff were assigned by 1991, by improving annually through an improvement plan for the number of teachers. (From the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology, www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/hakusho/html/others/detail/1318317.htm).

3 A research organization mainly of teachers, created in 1953, which aimed to promote Dowa education. It organizes summer seminars and other seminars for teachers in Osaka Prefecture, as well as seminars and study meetings on specific human rights issues.

4 Ningen is a supplementary textbook for Dowa education that was distributed in elementary schools and lower secondary schools in Osaka Prefecture. It was edited by Ningen Editorial Committee in the Liberation Education Institute. The Osaka Prefectural Board of Education purchased it in bulk and distributed to schools for free.

5 The Imperial Rescript on Education was issued on 30 October 1890 in the name of the Meiji Emperor. The basis of education under the Rescript was in the teachings of the imperial ancestors, and it placed loyalty and filial piety at the center of the education of the nation. In 1948, the Diet decided to void and abolish it.

Shushin means to behave correctly and bring order to one's life. It is also the title of the subject on moral education in pre-WWII school systems. It envisaged the practice of national morality and the development of virtues. It was given the highest status among primary school subjects with the amendment of the Education Order, and after the Imperial Rescript was issued (1890), it was given particular importance as the basis of the national morality and national education, not only of primary schools, but all schools. Later, it played a central role in promoting nationalist education policies, and was abolished after WWII.

6 See Nikkyoso website for more information on its post-war activities, www.jtu-net.or.jp/english/birth/.

7 *Kaihou no gakuryoku*, or academic skills for liberation, advocated by Kozo Nakamura. According to him, the skills consist of (1) self-awareness of liberation, (2) collectivism, and (3) scientific and artistic perception. The three components should not be considered separately. The (1) self-awareness of liberation and (2) collectivism should be the basis on which (3) scientific and artistic perception would develop.

Later, it was rephrased, such as into "ability to identify, to not be defeated by and to fight discrimination." Since then, education practices were created to develop the "ability to identify, to not be defeated by and to fight discrimination."

8 Three laws to solve discrimination were enacted in Japan in 2016. They are (1) the Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities, (2) the Act on the Promotion of Efforts to Eliminate Unfair Discriminatory Speech and Behavior against Persons Originating from Outside Japan and (3) Act on the Promotion of the Elimination of Buraku Discrimination. All these laws seek to realize a society in which all people can live feeling safe, to build a society in which human rights are mutually respected, and an achievement of a society where there is no discrimination.