


Building a knowledge society during Japan's coronavirus pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This article will attempt to explain Japan's policy adoption regarding education during the coronavirus pandemic from the perspective of technology adoption and with the intention of adhere to the ideals of a knowledge society, while at the same time, exploring the probable causes and consequences of these decisions and the possible repercussions in the Japanese youth.

Keywords: knowledge society, pandemic, Japan, technology adoption, coronavirus

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INTRODUCTION

It is April 25th, 2020, in Japan. The state of emergency introduced by the then Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe has expanded to the entire nation. The measures lasted until May 31st in 39 of Japan's 47 prefectures, including five classified as requiring "special caution." In Japan, the school year starts in April and at the time there was no official protocol given by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) on how schools should impart their lessons, yet the ministry made clear that schools should give students some type of work to avoid them doing nothing at home.

The schools' solutions ranged from sending homework which students had to finish at home by themselves, to go fully online. This was the scenario that the head of the English Department, Les Smith, was faced with in a small high school in the Gifu Prefecture about five hours away from Tokyo. His school decided to go fully online and during the months of April and May, an online system following the regular curriculum was put in place with positive feedback from the students and parents.

Surprisingly, by the end of these two months the MEXT did not consider this time of online lessons as part of the 194 to 230 days required of attendance to fulfill the school year. Their explanation was that attendance days only counted if the students were physically present in the classroom. As a result, students had to attend school on Saturdays for the rest of the year to make up for "lost time".

This paper will attempt to look into the reason for the decision made by the MEXT by looking into the history of Japanese education, the cultural background, the role of technology in today's classrooms and the consequences of these factors in the search for a knowledge society.

Historical Background

Around the 1860s in Japan, education policies tried to focus on meritocracy. An examination system was put in place to curb the favoritism of the higher class that was at the forefront of the Tokugawa period. At the end of this period in 1868, the Samurai class quickly realized it was possible to invest more money in making their children somehow have more equal opportunities than others (Amano et al., 1990, p. 500). By the 1890s, the burden was entirely on the students. Teachers pressured them to do well only on the examinations and education was neglected in favor of results (Amano et al., 1990, p. 501).

In today's Japan, for big companies, test results became the only way to reliably tell the quality of their potential employees. The larger the company, the higher its status, salary, security, and benefits and so, the more able to recruit from the higher hierarchy of institutes of tertiary education. A place in such a company is determined directly by the result of the university's examination. The educational background then became a synonym with status. By the year 1900 there was a very clear advantage to attending prestigious universities. This cycle became known as "the examination hell" (Amano et al., 1990, p. 500). Although the curriculum has been updated, this system is still present in one way or another in Japanese classrooms.

Cultural Background

There are many ways in which Japan is different from cultures in the West. This part will focus on four particular cultural aspects that influence the classrooms directly or indirectly: top-down, confrontation-averse, losing face, and seniority.

Top-down is a hierarchical structure, where there is a clear leader who makes decisions that are rarely questioned (Meyer, 2014, p. 77). In order to have a knowledge society, students must be able to interact and not become passive recipients (Bindé, 2005, p. 46). The top-down

system is in direct opposition to the process described above since feedback is non-existent. This dampers creativity and critical thinking.

Confrontation-averse refers to avoiding direct confrontation in favor of conceding to a point, even if one strongly disagrees (Meyer, 2014, p. 104). This is seen at every level of the education system, from students not wanting to question their teachers if they make a mistake, to teachers who would not suggest needed changes in the curriculum to their supervisors, all the way to the higher strata of government. Open and honest discussions and forums where debate is necessary, simply do not occur (Vallance, 2008).

Losing face is the idea that you present yourself to others through a persona which reflects who you publicly claim to be, so you will experience a sort of public shame if anyone questions you (Meyer, 2014, p. 98). Adding to the previously mentioned cultural aspects, losing face introduces a new layer in the classroom dynamic, where it would be shameful for a teacher to acknowledge a mistake. This perpetuates misinformation and dogmatic ideas without the chance to be analyzed. Knowledge becomes stagnant.

Seniority is the state of being older or placed in a higher position of status. This is a concept that appears in many cultures, the difference is that in Japan, rank is directly related to age and has little to do with merit.

This is present mostly in governmental and educational organizations and it is reflected when their members are unable to adopt and adapt new technologies or methodologies and simply can not understand their full potential. New technologies directly affect the speed of information and especially, the way it is processed. Therefore, the classic theories of knowledge are no longer useful as pedagogical tools (Bindé, 2005, p. 50). In most cases, older members in the educational system cannot keep up. These cultural norms act as a deterrent for transformation. We can draw a parallel as to how these cultural aspects influenced the MEXT's decision regarding Les's high school.

TECHNOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOMS

The answer to the pandemic was different all over the world, in Japan an MEXT survey found that only 10% of public schools provided some form of online instruction to students and a mere 5%, live streamed classes over the Internet (Morris-Suzuki, 2020).

The MEXT did not propose a universal protocol on how schools should deal with the pandemic, in the few schools that adopted technology most teachers applied their old, antiquated methodology by simply replacing pen and paper to an iPad or smartphone (Nakamura, 2020). This can hardly be seen as "adoption" of the full potential of technology.

Students, on the other hand, seem to be quite receptive to technology. A study revealed that 93% of Japanese university students believed that mobile phones were a valuable educational tool that enhanced their learning (White & Mills, 2014).

The mobile assisted language learning project (MALL) had the goal of shifting the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the student. This resulted in increased scores in the reading section of the test, but most importantly, students showed an interest to continue their self-directed study using mobile devices (Kondo et al., 2013). Ockert (2014) reported that the use of iPads in junior high schools improved the

student's confidence, reduced their anxiety, and helped their willingness to communicate in English.

Another study showed that information and communication technology (ICT) produced an overwhelming increase in the student's motivation and promoted students to share their feelings and hold discussions. ICT activities had a positive impact on the development of all abilities, especially problem solving, creativity and oral communication (Davila Huerto & Hasegawa, 2015). Les Smith's high school students also reported positive reception to technology.

The benefits ICT in classrooms has only started to be seen and it still has not shown its full potential and adaptability. The Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage, adopted by UNESCO stresses that electronic resources must be conceived as a heritage and as capital for the activities of future generations (Bindé, 2005, p. 52). Seems clear that Japan should prioritize introduction of technology in classrooms and educate the teaching staff to improve technological literacy.

CONSEQUENCES

Brown et al. (2012) discovered that while iPads may resolve some technical limitations, students' and teachers' lack of familiarity with the device still continues to present challenges when attempting to facilitate MALL in Japanese classrooms.

Although the official position of the government is to produce global leaders, the MEXT is slow to adopt changes. The majority of senior officials in position to make policies are not necessarily familiarized with the benefits of technology and some still see it as unnecessary (Nakamura, 2020). These poor decisions receive little to no questioning because of the conflict-averse nature of Japanese society and even in cases when calls for reform appear, any momentum is quickly squandered in part by the fear of members losing their jobs by appearing too confrontational to their superiors. In the very rare case when facts are so overwhelmingly clear against the MEXT's decisions, the taboo of losing face is the last impediment between the status quo and much needed reforms. Tradition is prioritized over change. The phrase *Shikata nai* literally means "there is no way to do something", and colloquially translates to "it cannot be helped". It is used when a situation must be accepted because the circumstances cannot be changed. A clearer picture starts to emerge for the MEXT's decision to reject Les' high school online days.

MEXT's decisions over the years have had a direct impact on students' performance. For example, in the Education First's (EF) world ranking of 100 non-English speaking countries, Japan dropped from 14th place in 2011 to 55th in 2020. EF labels Japan as having "low proficiency" in English. Compared to other countries in Southeast Asia, China ranks 38th, South Korea 32nd, and Singapore 10th (EF English Proficiency Index, 2020). This decrease is directly related to the focus on memorization and the results of standardized tests (Nakamura, 2020). This same problem applies to all other subjects of Japanese education, leaving Japan's citizens unprepared to face an internationalized and informational-intense world (Nakamura, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic added more problems, for example, many students of institutions which did not adopt technology were handed homework to finish at home unsupervised, the overwhelming task made students reluctant to return to school.

This exacerbated an issue that started in 2019, where around 440,000 junior high school students had absenteeism problems (Ittoku, 2020). And even for the students who adopted online teaching, the accelerated introduction of technology resulted in many cases of isolation and depression (Katayama, 2020). It is clear that the old methodologies simply do not work.

BUILDING A KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

The state of Japanese education is in dire need of change. The government's goals are unrealistic and lack structure. Teachers and students alike are neglected. The government focus on making better standardized examinations do not account for the real solutions that the system needs. To put it simply, as long as the old methods are still set in place, the new goals of modernization cannot be achieved. But even in this scenario, there have been some pushes for reform in the shape of programs like UNICEF's GIGA initiative will help speed this process along, equipping students with the electronic tools they need (Suzuki, 2020). The initiative of certain institutions to incorporate classes, which focus on "integration of individualized, cooperative, and project-based learning" (Ittoku, 2020). And even the implementation of coding as a mandatory subject in middle schools (Sano, 2019).

It is important to note that both the methodology and the technologies for teaching should go hand in hand when attempting this leap forward, only then can there be a real significant change that will bring deep and long lasting results.

CONCLUSION

The objective of creating global leaders simply cannot be reached by today's antiquated educational standards. The true potential of ICT in classrooms is its early stage and it already shows promising results among students in Japan. Its adoption promotes key qualities which are essential for the creation and sustainability of a knowledge society.

Technology's limitations are only set by its users. In cases like Les' high school, it was a well-received tool that solved many uninvited problems that the pandemic brought on. These steps for change should be encouraged by the education system and not shunned. Overall, the role of education should not be to dictate the lane a student will travel, but give them the tools to be prepared to pave the path they choose

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