

Maintaining National Standards While Engaging Culturally Relevant Education: A Comparative Analysis of Citizenship Education in the United States and Japan

Jinichiro Saito[†]

This article explores the relationship between the freedom granted to teachers to shape curricula and the function of national standards. In recent years, many countries have begun to introduce standards-based reforms in education, such as standardized curriculums and high-stakes tests. As cultural diversity within schools increases, the tension resulting from catering to this diversity while maintaining standards is also rising. This article offers a comparative analysis of the educational theories and practices in the U.S. and Japan. In the U.S., debate and conflict between supporters of national standards and those of multicultural education have surfaced. In Japan, the government determines broad standards for all schools in order to ensure a fixed standard of education throughout the country. Thus, although the U.S. has a higher degree of cultural diversity than Japan, similar controversial issues will also face the Japanese educational system as school populations change rapidly due to the enrolment of children with diverse foreign heritages. Therefore, this article advocates the need for balance between the scope of regulation by the national government and the development of a citizenship education curriculum that uses teachers' own initiative in the modern age, and has practical implications for educational policymakers.

Keywords: Citizenship education; standards-based reform; teacher decision making; cultural diversity

1. Developing a Citizenship Education Curriculum in the Global Age: Balancing Diversity with National Standards

In the globalized age, citizenship education is faced with a dilemma, particularly from the curriculum perspective. Many countries have begun to introduce systems of quality assurance and accountability, such as standardized achievement tests. In the context of this new trend, neoliberal education reform and results-oriented thought are rising. As a result, both

[†] Tokai University
e-mail: jsaitoh@tokai.ac.jp

teachers and schools are required to suggest the results of their classroom lessons (Moore, Zancanella, & Avila, 2016). According to Sleeter and Stillman (2005), the word “standard” refers to a level of quality or excellence, while the word “standardization” refers to making all education the same. Still, the relationship between “standard” and “standardization” is controversial in real-world education. Since 1990s, the U.S. has had a policy on national standards in place. Following business management models, states in the U.S. have often been directed to set high educational standards and to align standardized curricula to them. Today, teachers in the U.S. are required to teach to these standards and to test students’ mastery of them. In Japan, one type of educational standard, the National Courses of Study, came into effect after 1947; however, prior to 1958, regulation of courses was weak, and teachers had a great deal of freedom for curriculum design. The government revised the National Courses of Study for primary and junior secondary schools in 1958, and for senior secondary schools in 1960. As a result of these revisions, the guidelines were no longer presented as ‘tentative’ but rather as requirements subject to public monitoring by the Minister of Education. These new guidelines meant that a legally binding uniform standard would be applied to schools across the country (Kimura, 2017). After 1958, government regulation of the Courses of Study was reinforced, and this situation, where teachers and schools are required to adhere to curriculum frameworks, continues to this day.

At the same time as the steady contemporary growth of standards-based reform, cultural diversity among schoolchildren has gradually increased. This creates a unique challenge for schools, requiring teachers to cope with the needs of foreign students, and this arrangement will be always uniquely dependent on a particular situation. Teachers are, therefore, under pressure to create lessons relevant to specific children. An example is demonstrated through the demographics of the U.S., which have changed rapidly since the 1970s due to immigration from Latin America and Asia. On the global scale, as population diversity has increased, the tension between cultural differences and the maintenance of regulated, uniform educational standards has also risen.

It is difficult to consistently manage these two issues. The background context elicits a number of questions for consideration, such as: How should countries and states be involved in determining curricula? How should teachers focus on the needs of students in the social context? How should teachers independently judge curriculum content? These issues are important, especially in citizenship education, because the development of citizenship education curricula is related to social norms, personal identity, value, ethnicity, and so on.

Through a comparative analysis of the U.S. and Japan, this article focuses on the dilemma between catering to cultural diversity and the skillful handling of national standards by teachers. It first examines the situation in the U.S. and then reflects on that of Japan, considering whether Japan can learn from the American example.

2. Literature Review

In Japan, as the number of foreign students has increased incrementally, researchers have begun discussing educational practices that focus on the different cultural backgrounds of students (Shimizu & Kodama, 2006; Minamiura, 2013; Saito, Ikegami, & Konda, 2015). However, these researchers exclusively discussed how to care for the needs of foreign students

and did not examine the additional impact of the national standards for courses of study. In fact, most educational practices for foreign students are implemented in the international classes “*Kokusai Kyositu*” (International Classroom), “*Gakusyu Sien Kyositsu*” (Learning Support Classroom), and “*Sougoutekina Gakusyu no Jikan*” (Period for Integrated Studies). In these areas, teachers have significant authority to create the curriculum, with much flexibility in their decision making. In other words, extant research has not discussed how educating foreign students is reconciled with the regulation of national standards in Japan.

Conversely, in the U.S., the national standards policy and the use of high-stakes testing increased after the 1990s. This created a dilemma between accountability related to educational standards and the need to support children from diverse backgrounds. This dilemma has become particularly pertinent in terms of citizenship education because ways of participating in public life change depending on culturally defined lifestyles and characteristics of ethnic identity.

In Japan, although there has been a national achievement test since 2007, the stakes of this test are not as high as those in Western countries. Nevertheless, the national regulation of courses of study has traditionally had a strong influence on schools and teachers in Japan. In general, these curricula have not met the needs of diverse students, such as immigrant children. Generally, Japan has tended to be regarded as a broadly homogenous society, but this one assumption has gradually changed due to the immigration of groups with different cultural backgrounds.

The present comparative analysis provides the foundation for an in-depth discussion concerning these existing issues. The struggle between maintaining cultural sensitivity and maintaining national standards in the U.S. will now be critically examined.

3. National Standards, Curriculum, and Teachers’ Decision-making Power for Diverse Students in the United States

3-1. Standards-based education reform in the United States

From the late 1990s, common learning standards and a stricter test-based accountability grew in influence in the U.S. and remain in force today. In an attempt to raise standards for student learning across the U.S., states developed curriculum standards specifying what students are required to learn. Raising such standards has become synonymous with standardizing curricula (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005, p.27). In California, this was characterized by adopting content standards for textbooks for grades one through eight by the State Board of Education, and the implementation of a state achievement test. The Californian Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999 also established a system of achievement testing based on curriculum standards and on rewarding high-performing schools and penalizing low-performing schools (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). This standardized policy is still in use, despite facing criticism from some researchers and educators (Skerrett & Hargreaves, 2008). In 2010, the nationwide Common Core State Standards (CCSS) represented the latest iteration of academic performance criteria for students. The focus of the CCSS is on mathematics and English language learning. These standards dictate the literacy knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire at each grade level. They also provide indicators of how prepared high school graduates are for college, careers, and life after school. While the CCSS are sim-

ilar to national standards, they are not legally mandated. They are, however, incentivized through financial aid from the federal government and thus have a significant impact on public schools on the national scale (Gay, 2018).

As the federal government's power of educational control grew, some organizations and educators attempted to maintain their own educational policies in a strategic way. For example, the state of Nebraska emphasized a formative assessment system and devised an original assessment system apart from the standardized test reform. Various other intermediary organizations, such as the Coalition of Essential Schools, have also tried to support the pushback against standardized test reform (Ishii, 2015). However, overall, such strategic attempts have been few.

3-2. The tradition of culturally relevant education

Historically, public schools in the U.S. have accepted all students, regardless of ethnicity, race, or social class (Woyshner & Bohan, 2012). In 1973, out of concern for racial and ethnic inequities apparent in learning opportunities and outcomes, American educator J.A. Banks published *Teaching Ethnic Studies: Concepts and Strategies*. This book contains valuable insights concerning how educators met the cultural needs of students. Gay (1988) considered demographic change in the U.S. and indicated that "effective educational program planning for diverse learners is informed by the fact that these students bring to school a great variety of interests, aptitudes, motivations, experiences, and cultural conditioning" (p.328). She pointed out that the real focus of equity was not the provision of the same content for all students but the equivalency of effective potential, quality status, and significance of learning opportunities (p.329). She argued that the best way to achieve comparability of learning opportunities was to differentiate among them based upon the characteristics of the students for whom they were intended (p.329). For Gay, the essence of multicultural education was the diversification of the content, contexts, and techniques used to facilitate learning to better reflect the ethnic, cultural, and social diversity of the U.S. (p.332). Her comments contained controversial issues related to equity and the quality of public education. Social studies journals during the 1960s and 1980s also published articles emphasizing the relevance of students in terms of ethnicity or social class, such as "Relevant Social Studies for Black Pupils" and "Urban Relevance and Social Studies Curriculum" (Banks, 1969; Unruh, 1969).

After 1970, most immigrant students in the U.S. were either Hispanic or Asian. As a result, the national population started to change dramatically. In the 1990s, as discussion on multicultural education began to grow, a new concept of "culturally relevant education" was presented. For example, Ladson-Billings (1994) proposed the concept of "culturally relevant pedagogy" (CRP). She stated that CRP can empower students by maintaining their cultural knowledge and skills in schools and working "to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture". Ladson-Billings (1995) provided a framework of successful teaching for African American students, offering a model composed of three main principles: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Jaffee, 2016). This educational theory emphasized how essential it is for all students, especially second-language learners, to build their academic skills on their everyday life experiences and family-based knowledge.

Following Ladson-Billings' proposal of CRP, much research and practice regarding culturally relevant education and citizenship education has been undertaken in the classroom (Stovall, 2006; Martel, 2013), and CRP theory has been introduced into the studies of vari-

ous subjects (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). However, some researchers have criticized the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, stating that it tends to focus only on marginalized children (Kumar, Zusho, & Bondie, 2018).

3-3. Critics of standardized policy based on the theory of culturally relevant education

The characteristics of the theory of culturally relevant education and citizenship education may come into conflict with the policy of national standards, as they attempt to emphasize catering to diversity. Valerie Strauss (2014) challenged the equity claims of the CCSS, arguing that this policy infringes upon, rather than promotes, opportunities for racial minorities, educational language learners, and disabled students. Ross, Mathison, and Vinson (2014) indicated that in the standards-based reform, “teachers must assert themselves and actively resist top-down school reform policies if they are to recapture control of their work as professionals” (p.38). Their study emphasized the growing resistance movement against standards-based reform.

Gay (2018) criticized the standard policy because of the dangers it posed to diversity. For example, she noted that the Alaska Assembly of Native Educators had created a set of Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools to complement the state’s subject-based content standards. These standards foster strong connections between students’ lives in and out of school; teaching and learning through local cultures; and viewing different forms of knowledge and ways of acquiring knowledge as being equally valid, adaptable, and complementary. In addition to this, in 2010, the Alaska Native Knowledge Network (ANKN) issued a comprehensive list of guidelines for dealing with the documentation, representation, and use of the cultural knowledge of indigenous Alaskans in educational contexts. The general purpose of the guidelines is to encourage and facilitate the inclusion of accurate and authentic indigenous cultural content in teaching practices (Gay, 2018). Sleeter (2012) stated that neoliberal reforms reverse the empowered learning that culturally responsive pedagogy has the potential to support by negating the central importance of teacher learning as well as of context, culture, and racism.

Sleeter and Stillman (2005), educational researchers focusing on multicultural education, discussed the struggle between the standardized movement and multicultural education. They claimed that standards, especially those related to reading and language learning, deflect attention from ideological underpinnings by virtue of being situated within an environment of testing. They indicated that “rather than asking whose knowledge, language, and points of view are most worth teaching children, teachers and administrators are pressed to ask how well children are scoring on standardized measures of achievement” (p.44). In 2005, Sleeter published “Un-standardizing curriculum,” a title that expressed their strong negative views about the strategies of implementing standards-based educational reform (Sleeter, 2005). Sleeter and Carmona (2017) argued, in the second edition of this book, that “paradoxically, while student populations have diversified rapidly across the country, use of standards-based reform as a way of eliminating inequity has resulted in homogenizing the curriculum, even while classrooms in the United States have become more diverse” (p.9). For them, while the word “standard” refers to a level of quality or excellence, the word “standardization” refers to making all education the same (p.3). Therefore, they illustrated the opportunities and spaces teachers have for designing and teaching a multicultural curriculum through vignettes of classroom teaching. One of the authors’ main messages was that teachers can link the CCSS

with “big ideas” around which they can develop a curriculum (p.46). In this way, they proposed designing a curriculum around core concepts and ideas and building units, lessons, or courses of study on these. According to Sleeter, the most effective teacher planning places students’ active engagement with meaningful ideas at its center. This method was based on the “backward design” theory of Wiggins and McTighe (2005). Thus, the process by which teachers judge what constitutes a big idea becomes important for their initiative in designing the curriculum.

In the field of social studies, which is key to citizenship education, the National Council for the Social Studies published its own national standard in 1994 and 2010 (NCSS, 1994, 2010). This standard aims to give teachers some flexibility in determining curricula. In 2013, the NCSS introduced the C3 framework to help teachers use the CCSS effectively on their own initiative. Though the C3 framework was purposefully designed not to outline specific content to be delivered, the 2010 NCSS Standards offer specific themes that can be useful for identifying specific content to be delivered and concepts to be acquired (NCSS, 2013). Herczog (2010), one of the creators of the C3 framework, indicated that the CCSS are designed to create a citizenry with knowledge, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills that would enable them to succeed in the global economy and society, and that “NCSS standards provide a framework for selecting and organizing knowledge and modes of inquiry for the purpose of teaching and learning to meet these goals” (p.217). Herczog introduced a six-step process to use the NCSS standards: 1) Answer this essential question: Why teach social studies? 2) Align learning expectations with instruction and assessment, 3) Unpack your state standards to identify the “big ideas” or enduring “understandings” for each course of study, 4) Adopt the NCSS National Curriculum Standard for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning and Assessment as a resource for designing instruction and assessment, 5) Align your state standards, instruction, and assessment with the question, knowledge, processes, and products suggested by the NCSS standard, 6) Reflect, revisit, revise. Herczog claimed this “supports teachers in their efforts to meet state mandates for social studies education, but also inspires them to make the learning relevant to the current reality of our world and meaningful to the students in their classrooms” (p.222). Thus, the NCSS standard creates support for teachers participating in determining curriculum content.

Jaffee (2016) considered the characteristics and influences of culturally and linguistically relevant education, indicating that immigrant students discuss their immigration status in the social studies classroom. Teachers in this study fostered pedagogy through making cross-cultural connections with historical content and larger sociopolitical issues in their communities. This cross-cultural practice “sought to make connection within and among students’ cultural groups by engaging in communication, building relationships, and creating a community of learners” (p.166). For example, teachers made cross-cultural connections with their new students by linking the U.S. and global history curricula to collective human experiences and students’ prior knowledge. Jaffee observed that teachers encouraged students to question the standardized curriculum, and students frequently challenged the dominant narrative and identified the bias within it (p.168). Simultaneously, teachers showed a propensity for developing their newcomer students’ cognitive academic language proficiency and their literacy skills, as emphasized by the CCSS, including reading, writing, and speaking. These strategies suggest good examples of ways to implement national standards without losing critical perspective.

Skerrett and Hargreaves proposed that teachers have the right to interpret the meaning of

national standards, contents, and aims by themselves (2008). A better strategy here would be to understand how the encroachment of standardization confounds, erodes, and configures diversity in learning conditions and contexts. Simultaneously, we need to understand how to develop culturally responsive instructional strategies amid, and as alternatives to, standardization.

4. National Standards, Curriculum, and Teachers’ Decision-making for Diverse Students in Japan

4-1. Justification of the “Courses of Study” in Japan

In Japan, the “Courses of Study” national standards were introduced after World War II to provide national standards for elementary and secondary education. The Courses of Study have been revised nine times, most recently in 2017/18, and have had a significant influence on schools and teachers. This government policy extends to the specification of national standards for instructional material used in public schools, the review and censorship of textbooks, and the use of testing to ensure that student achievement meets national standards (Ikeno, 2011).

Abiko (2017) stated that the basic characteristics of the Courses of Study and their relation to teachers can be explained in five stages (Table 1), where the regulation of the Courses of Study has changed each revision year. In addition, Abiko indicated that the latest version of the Courses of Study (2017) forces teachers to create lessons with similar content and methods, and therefore evaluated that the principle of general rule has changed, with the regulation of the Courses of Study becoming stricter than ever (pp.16-17).

Table 1: Regulation changes to the Japanese Courses of Study

Stage	Revision year(s)	Characteristics
1	1947, 1951	(1) Tentative course of study, Guidebook; (2) Teacher-centered; (3) Education criteria on a national scale; (4) Teacher flexibility in terms of changing criteria.
2	1958, 1968	(1) Legally binding and teachers must comply with the law; (2) Nation-centered; (3) Highest national official standard of educational content.
3	1977, 1989, 1998	(1) Legally binding but less stringent; (2) Nation-centered; (3) Highest national official standard of educational content (continued).
4	2003, 2008	(1) Legally binding but less stringent (continued); (2) Nation-centered; (3) Minimum national official standard of educational content.
5	2017	(1) Legally binding with tightening regulations; (2) Nation-centered; (3) Minimum national official standard of educational content (continued).

(From Abiko (2017))

Ikeno (2011) also stated that issues remain concerning whether schools and teachers should be afforded a level of choice or be restricted in terms of curriculum content. In effect, Japan’s principal educational policies and administration have gradually strengthened the emphasis on regulation and control since the inception of the Courses of Study (p.19).

Historically, issues concerning the legal justification of national control were perceived as controversial. In June 1976, the Japanese Supreme Court decided that the Courses of Study were the national minimum criteria (Saiko Saibansyo, 1976), despite the differences

among communities and schools. The Courses of Study standards were the only general rules concerning education on the national scale. These standards provided room for teachers to devise creative and flexible education and leeway to create education individualized to each region. In addition, in 1989, the Sapporo High Court declared that any demand beyond the general rules would be legally unjustifiable (Sapporo Koto Saibansyo, 1989). In light of these judicial decisions, teachers had some rights and expertise to make flexible curricula. In addition, since 1998, the Japanese government has pushed for deregulation of the national curriculum (Watanabe, 2018).

In Japan, although controversy has developed in some prefectures, a high-stakes test, such as the one utilized in the U.S., does not exist, nor is financial aid tied to such a test. However, historically, enrolment examinations in the country have significantly influenced the school curriculum.

4-2. Challenges and prospects in educational practice for children of foreign heritage

In Japan, in the 1960s and 1970s, most immigrants were Korean and Chinese, with smaller, scattered numbers from Southeast Asia. However, since the 1980s, the latter populations have dramatically increased (Befu, 2006). Recently, the educational situation in Japan has changed rapidly in response to globalization. Okano (2013) indicated four premises concerning Japan's current educational situation. First, Japan has become more ethnically diverse in the last two decades, with the addition of newcomer immigrants to the ethnic minorities of former colonial subjects. Second, mainstream schools have become more inclusive and tolerant of diversity, partly in response to older-generation minority movements since the 1970s and to the immediate needs of newcomer ethnic groups. Third, while some new immigrant students have succeeded in moving up the school ladder, a substantial number have found the acquisition of academic language demanding and accessing schooling beyond compulsory education via competitive entrance examination difficult, if not impossible. Fourth, several ethnic communities, concerned about the behavior of their children who were not attending school, have established full-time ethnic schools (Okano, 2013). In 2019, the Japanese government decided that the way to meet the country's labor demands was to accept foreign workers, and thus revised its Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act. As a result, the regulation of immigration control in Japan was reduced, and consequently, Japanese society continues to grow in diversity.

Against this background, attempts at social studies research on foreign students have been made to some extent. The number of researchers focusing on foreign students in Japan has slowly increased. Shimizu & Kojima (2006) reported the practice of a special subject named "*sentaku kokusai*" (International Elective), taken mainly by foreign students. For example teachers of this subject pose the question, "Why and how did we come to Japan?" In solving this question, students investigate their historical and geographical backgrounds and question their own identity through the process. Minamiura (2013) also attempted to create lessons to emphasize cultural relevance for students, mainly East Asian pupils, which taught about the Japanese envoys sent to China during the Nara Period. In addition, Saito (2005, 2015) created social studies lessons for elementary schools by addressing language education perspective. She emphasized teacher practice in order for foreign students to easily understand the educational content.

Some researchers believe that lessons emphasizing cultural relevance for students of for-

eign heritage can only be utilized in international classrooms, “*kokusai kyositsu*” (International Classroom) (Miyajima, 2014). If this were true, providing subject-based studies for foreign students would be a difficult task. After considering the U.S. example concerning the relationship between culturally relevant education and national standards in educational policy, it is clear that educational practice for foreign children needs to be discussed and considered from the perspective of justification for the Japanese Courses of Study.

4-3. Extent of teachers’ freedom within the Courses of Study

Recently, the number of studies referring to the Courses of Study has increased (Abiko, 2017). Here, this study will analyze how the strict regulation of the Courses of Study has changed from a legal perspective, which influences the extent of flexibility teachers are given to develop curricula.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) (2011a) provided “Chapter 1 General Provisions” in the Courses of Study for elementary school. In this publication, MEXT indicated that “each school should create specifically tailored educational activities by making use of originality and ingenuity, in order to foster in pupils a zest for life.” In addition to that, MEXT stated, “When it is particularly necessary, each school may include additional contents not specified in Chapter 2 onwards. It is possible to teach contents beyond what is stated in the Treatment of the Contents. However, in this case, care must be taken not to deviate from the objectives and contents of all subjects.” Therefore, each school does not necessarily need to follow the grade-wise order of the instruction items for all subjects, which allows teachers to decide to use educational material in the Courses of Study beyond the specifications of MEXT. This means that the Courses of Study represent only the national minimum as a general rule (MEXT, 2011a).

Furthermore, MEXT declared that “when teaching subjects, each school should improve individually targeted teaching so that pupils can acquire what they have studied, in accordance with the circumstances of the school and pupils, through improving and devising teaching methods and teaching systems.” Finally, for the benefit of pupils such as returnees from abroad, adaptation to school life should be promoted and guidance provided in a way that makes the most of their experience in foreign countries (MEXT, 2011a). These explanations refer to the special treatment of children who have various special needs. Such stance toward standards is similar in the Courses of Study in lower secondary schools (MEXT, 2011b)

4-4. Rethinking citizenship education lessons for immigrant children in Japan

Here, we discuss an example of a concrete lesson devised by a Japanese educator. Although citizenship education is integrated into general school education and social education, it is also incorporated into the social studies curriculum, including history, geography, and civics, playing a significant role in school curricula (Ikeno, 2018). Minamiura (2013) proposed historical lessons for diverse pupils with foreign heritage in the “*Kokusai kyositsu*” (International Class) of elementary school, including an original lesson named “The Story of the Success of the Japanese Envoy to China.” In this lesson, pupils were required to analyze the historical significance of the Japanese envoy from the two different perspectives of the Japanese dynasty and the Chinese Sui dynasty. Although this was a unique lesson, whether it could fit into the Courses of Study standards in Japan or not posed an issue. The Courses of Study for elementary school social studies (MEXT, 2008) defined the contents of this field as

follows:

Examining the incorporation of continental culture into Japan, such as the Taika Reforms, the construction of the Great Buddha, the lifestyle of the aristocracy, and the understanding of the building of an Emperor-centered political system that has characterized Japanese culture. (MEXT, 2008, p.76.)

“Ingestion of continental culture,” refers to, for example, the incorporation of continental culture through the Horyu-ji temple; the dispatch of the envoy, etc., and understanding that continental culture, such as political systems, was taken actively into Japan. (MEXT, 2008, p.76.)

Minamiura’s lesson focused on the meaning of “the incorporation of continental culture into Japan” and “the introduction of national systems, including cultures or goods from the continent.” By focusing on the corroborative story of the “Japanese envoy to China,” children can use their own cultural background, “provided in such a way as to make the most of their experience in foreign countries.” This is one of the most important proposals made by MEXT regarding culturally relevant education. While details of the Chinese Sui dynasty’s reaction to Ono no Imoko’s arrival do not appear in the national social studies textbook for elementary school students, this Japan-China relationship was important to enable pupils to understand the “big idea” of the historical meaning behind the “incorporation of continental culture into Japan” at that time. Such strategies represent Japan’s version of culturally relevant pedagogy; the teacher tried to connect national history with the children’s cultural knowledge and experiences. Thus, it is possible for teachers to focus on cultural relevance in the education of foreign students without deviating from the standardized Courses of Study.

5. Conclusion: Citizenship Education and Teacher Discretion in the Global Age

This article began with a discussion of the challenge of balancing the cultural diversity of students with maintaining accountable standards when designing educational curricula, particularly in the case of citizenship education.

Regardless of the method used, several countries have tried to impose educational quality and accountability on contemporary schools and teachers (Moore et al., 2016), affecting the trend for neoliberalist reform. Citizenship education is essentially related to values, social norms, and culture. Therefore, the question arises as to how involved national authorities should be with the curriculum of citizenship and how much freedom teachers should have. This freedom debate is a controversial issue in education and politics at a time when levels of cultural diversity amongst students are high.

This article compared existing issues in the U.S. with those in Japan, critically examining the Japanese context regarding education for foreign students. In the U.S., various scholars and educators have criticized the standards-based reforms in education, such as curriculum standards and high-stakes standardized tests (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017). A strong criticism comes from researchers and educators who have attempted to raise the issue of cultural relevance for children in the context of multicultural education. Using the theory of

“backward design” and “big ideas” proposed by Wiggins & McTighe (2005), the practice of multicultural education attempts to enable teachers to develop the curriculum content by themselves.

Conversely, many have recognized the trend of increasing diversity in ethnicity and culture in Japan, resulting in discussions about the best way to support students with foreign heritage. Despite this, there has been no unified acknowledgment of the troublesome relationship between the legal justification for the Japanese Courses of Study and the way to meet the various needs of foreign students. Upon analysis of the characteristics of Japan’s Courses of Study, it was found that this type of standard allows teachers to arrange the educational material as they wish, as long as they meet the minimum standards. Per the example of Minamiura’s history lesson, these teacher arrangements are an important function for creating original lessons for immigrant children.

However, the latest Courses of Study (2017) require teachers to monitor their content and methods closely, and this functional change may transform the Courses of Study into a strict set of regulations, rather than simply national minimum standards and general rules. This change in the Courses of Study may be related to standards-based reform in the global age. We must, therefore, consider what the increased Courses of Study regulation means for diverse children in Japan today. At the same time, teachers and researchers need to discuss the function of national standards and handle them skillfully.

Teachers should participate in developing the curriculum while considering the specific context of individual students and schools. There is serious tension between the logic of the government’s focus on the quality of education on a national scale and the logic of teachers who are educating a diverse range of children in schools. This is one of the central issues facing education and politics in a globalized era. Although such tensions have already surfaced in the U.S., it is likely that Japanese educators and researchers will face the same issues in the near future.

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