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No need to renew: The end of Japan's teacher license renewal system and the future

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Abstract

In 2007, the Japanese Ministry of Education revised the Education Law to pave the way for the introduction of a teaching license renewal system in 2009. The reform required all teachers to complete at least 30 hours of training in specially tailored university courses as a prerequisite for renewal of their teaching licenses every 10 years. In late 2021, however, the government abruptly announced it was ending the scheme in 2022 in a policy about face reminiscent of the abolition of *yutori kyōiku* ("education without pressure") in 2007. This qualitative study aims to examine the background, outline and issues of Japan's license renewal system in order to understand the reasons for its demise and illustrate the similarities with the *yutori kyōiku* experiment. Drawing on interview data and reflections from the author's experiences with the system over 12 years, it looks at some of Japan's unique training opportunities and, employing examples from other countries, examines what kind of 'training' is needed moving forward. It concludes by calling for a widening of the interpretation of 'training,' and indeed, the license itself, so as to increase diversity in what is a considerably restrictive employment sector.

Keywords: Education policy, Japan, Teacher assessment, Teacher training, Teaching licensing.

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Contents

Contribution of this paper to the literature
Education systems around the world are grappling with questions of how to train and prepare the next generation of teachers with the requisite skills and Japan is no exception. However, as the country seems to be back-tracking in terms of teacher licensing and training, this paper aims to fill a void in this over-looked area by researching the policy moves made and what they reveal about the future for Japanese education and say about the past.

1. Introduction

Today, education systems around the world are facing an identity crisis of sorts. As societies mature, economies evolve and technology becomes increasingly more sophisticated, education systems are increasingly being tasked with greater responsibilities than a few decades ago (Schleicher, 2019). Moving on from 'regular' mass lessons, classrooms are becoming 'intelligent', lessons are being 'flipped' and students are increasingly expected to become active learners, critical thinkers, and global citizens in possession of high-quality vocational attributes. Concurrently, educators too are being challenged to keep up to ensure they are delivering the kind of education required for today's evolving world in the most effective and efficient method. However, because they are so novel in most cases these newly called for skills, attitudes and attributes are the kind that many present teachers themselves do not necessarily possess. This means that some form of 'training' or upskilling is naturally required. Whether that training takes place in school and on the job, virtually, privately or as some form of employment requirement, generally depends on each country's education system and policy.

Until recently, Japanese regulations required all teachers to undergo a process of teaching license renewal which was ostensibly implemented in order to ensure that the nation's teachers systematically acquired up-to-date knowledge and skills to maintain the professional skills necessary for today's educators (Nakayama, Takagi, & Imamura, 2010). However, the requirement to undergo such license renewal (and associated 'training') has recently been officially abolished. How did this situation eventuate and what does it mean for in-service training and, indeed, Japanese education's future? This paper looks briefly at the background, outline and issues of the system and aims to explain why it was stopped and what its demise means. Drawing on data, feedback, and reflections from the author's experiences with the system over 12 years as well as a comparison with the nation's *yutori kyōiku* fiasco, it looks at what could have been and, referencing examples from other countries, examines what kind of approach to 'training' Japan could focus on moving forward.

2. Background

All developed nations set qualifications deemed necessary for individuals to become teachers and Japan is no exception. Dating back to 1897 with the promulgation of the Normal Education Order (*shihan kyōikurei*) in the early stages of the formation of the nation's national educational system, the percentage of 'unqualified' teachers was 58%. However, by 1905 this number had dropped to 16% (Institute for International Cooperation, 2004) as Japan embarked on a path of modernization and standardization ultimately leading to one of the most robust and effective educational systems in the world. At around the same time, the teacher licensing system "was also taken forward, and teacher's licenses were granted to graduates from a teacher training establishment and to others with a different academic record who were successful in the teaching certificate examination" (Institute for International Cooperation, 2004). After World War Two, education was revamped further making it possible for pre-service teacher training courses to be offered in faculties other than education in all national and private universities. For approximately the next 60 years, other than the fact that the issuance of teaching licenses was moved to the jurisdiction of prefectures (1913) and the introduction of a requirement for licensees to undertake compulsory volunteer training at an aged care facility (1997), little else changed.

However, in response to a (supposed) drop in national academic standards and increasing concerns surrounding teacher quality – including their ability to effectively control students – calls began to grow for a system of greater accountability (Yamada, 2021). The nation's teaching license renewal (TLR) system for educational personnel (*kyōin menkyo kōshin seido*, in Japanese), therefore, dates back to discussions from the Research Commission on the Education System in 1983 initiated by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. However, at the time concerns about costs and the burden on teachers meant the debate eventually dissipated (Yamada, 2021). The first Abe administration in the 2000s rekindled the debate and eventually the system became law in what equated to "a speed-before-quality situation" (Mainichi Shimbun, 2007, cited in Nakayama et al. (2010)).

According to documents from the Ministry of Education (MEXT) the main purpose for the proposed system was (as briefly mentioned above) "to ensure teachers systematically acquire up-to-date knowledge and skills to maintain the professional competencies necessary for today's educators, teach with confidence and pride, and gain respect and trust from the public" (Nakayama et al., 2010). While the former ideas relating to professional knowledge and skills make sense, the latter notions pertaining to the abstract concepts of pride, confidence, respect, and trust, suggest that the system itself was always meant to do more than it could. Although some critics argued from the outset that the introduction of the system was a way to eliminate incompetent teachers and maintain quality at a certain level (Higashiyama & Hara, 2010), the Ministry of Education (MEXT, 2012) refuted that, clearly stating in a published footnote "the purpose is not to get rid of inappropriate teachers" (author's translation). However, MEXT documents also note in their explanation of the background surrounding the system that a number of 'scandals' (*fushōji*) by a small number of teachers recently has led to the profession being publicly scrutinized (MEXT, n.d). Wada and Burnett (2011) also reported that some felt the real intention was to centralize MEXT control over teacher employment and to better position the Ministry in its long running battle with the Japanese Teacher's Union (*Nikkyōso*).

Prior to the system's implementation, teaching licenses in Japan were issued permanently for those who had passed their initial training. The Educational Personnel Certification Law was revised in June 2007 and the license renewal system came into effect from April 2009. The changes meant that license validity would be capped at ten years with the successful completion of seminars becoming a requisite for renewal. Specifically, teachers were

required to enroll in at least 30 hours of instruction over a two-year period prior to the expiration of their license. The required 30 hours of study comprised 12 hours of compulsory classes and 18 of electives to be completed at certain participating universities.

3. What Happened?

From the beginning the system faced hurdles not least of which was a lack of understanding of exactly why such a system was necessary – which was most likely a result of poor planning and communication – and consequently, an overall lack of support. For example, Kita and Miura (2010) conducted research through a survey of 472 teachers in which 82% responded that they believed the system was unnecessary. From the outset, the system faced considerable criticism and opposition (see, for example, Sakuma (2007); Imazu (2009); Kita and Miura (2010) and Hirota (2011)). In particular, the extra burden on teachers in terms of time (they needed to take the classes during their summer holidays or weekends) and money (teachers were responsible for the costs of the classes, roughly 30,000 yen) were cited. Anecdotal evidence obtained over a decade in the many classes conducted by the author, fully supports these points. Although many teachers reported satisfaction in regards to the opportunity to 'return' to university and 'feel like a student again', as well as upskill, the fact that they had to use their precious holiday time (and money) to do so were overwhelmingly and repeatedly reported complaints.

Other systemic problems soon emerged as well such as the initial reluctance of universities to get involved, and the number of teachers who merely forgot to enroll for courses. Further, there was also a sizeable number of teachers who refused to take the courses. MEXT reported that in November 2010, that a total of 5100 teachers had failed to undertake their required training. It threatened those who continued to resist that they would lose their accreditation and no longer be able to teach in Japanese schools after April 1, 2011 (Wada & Burnett, 2011).

Several critics went further and penned proposals for how to alter or improve the newly introduced system. Kita and Miura (2010) concluded that a better system would be one that provided greater teacher support (like that seen in Finland), could be undertaken within teacher's own schools, allowed for a degree of professional discretion, improved the status and conditions for teachers and increased the total number of teachers within each school (quoted in Wada and Burnett (2011)). Similarly, Nakayama et al. (2010) argue, based on questionnaire feedback from teachers, that teachers should participate in committees responsible for designing teacher certification renewal courses, that these courses should combine theory and practice and incorporate demonstration lessons and class observations. Further, these should not be one-off, but part of a nurtured work environment "where teachers continue their professional training on a daily basis" (p. 35). Yamada (2021) also conducted surveys of teachers and reported that they thought the training already offered by their educational boards was sufficient and they saw no need for a new course to replace the teacher license renewal course.

Despite this healthy debate from within and outside Japan's educational fraternity, MEXT made little changes throughout the short life of the TLR system but left the possibility alive that something else could replace it in the future. At the time of writing, no concrete proposals have been announced but media outlets have mentioned a replacement system could start in 2023 (Mainichi, 2022) which may include a considerably greater amount of freedom.

4. Yutori kyōiku and *Déjà vu*

The *yutori kyōiku*, or "pressure-free education" experiment, emerged in response to growing public and official concern that Japanese school children were under inordinate academic pressures which were having a detrimental impact on their overall wellbeing and increasing lack of interest in learning (Kariya & Rappleye, 2010). The premise was that by reducing the hours of study and content taught, not only would students have less stress, they could also be afforded more freedom therefore encouraging independent thinking (something else deemed deficient as a result of a prevalence of cram-style teaching). Further, it was envisaged that freeing up space in the school day would lead to more free time for extracurricular activities and allowed for the creation of 'integrated studies' class time. Although not precisely defined, it is generally assumed that *yutori kyōiku* refers to the years 2002-2011 when during which time the Course of Study content was changed.

In many ways, the demise of the teacher license program is reminiscent of the abolition of *yutori kyōiku* which abruptly disappeared with little fanfare as most commentators, experts and the public assumed that a return to tried traditional ways was required to ameliorate Japan's perceived educational malaise. In fact, the two different issues actually reveal a number of striking similarities. The teacher renewal program was also swiftly repealed as it too – apparently – has failed to effect significant change (and has been met with considerable negativity). And while both cases are different – one applying to students, the other teachers – there is a clear link in terms of a lack of examination and reflection. Also, both failed because they missed one crucial point; today's world requires new skills for both teachers *and* students, yet neither are being fully prepared.

Nakai (2012) outlines three factors which proved particularly detrimental to *yutori kyōiku*, all of which have a ring of familiarity to them. First there was a failure to adequately identity exactly which academic skills Japanese students were supposedly lacking in order to 'make it' in the world. Second, requisite academic skills needed to be translated into actual ability, but this point was seemingly overlooked by those concerned. What is more, the new skills required changes in ways of thinking and, indeed, in ways of life, in other words, a full commitment. Thirdly, the number of teachers or other adults who could offer effective guidance in the required fields were in short supply from the beginning. Put simply, the blame was being placed on students when in fact much of it actually rested with adults. As Nakai (2012) summed up: "the academic ability and ways of life that children display are nothing more than reflections of adults' inadequacies".

Similarities between these criticisms and the demise of the TLR are pertinent. Like *yutori kyōiku* the TLR had several failings. First, teachers were not properly consulted or informed about the purpose or indeed need for the system. Second, the so-called 'skills' that were expected to be raised through courses at universities were difficult to foster in a passive learning environment. Related to this was the somewhat mistaken belief that university professors had a thorough understanding of the needs of schoolteachers in their classrooms and were in a good position to provide immediate and appropriate lessons and advice. Another problem related to universities was assessment.

There was an unwritten expectation that professors would grade their TLR classes generously (i.e., teachers rarely failed), reducing the desire of teachers to fully engage in the learning. As one critic put it, the classes provided a good opportunity for schoolteachers to catch up on sleep (Ikegami, 2014). This point also highlights the contentious issue of accountability in higher educational grading as well as the fact that most university teachers have had little or no experience teaching 'mature' students (the overwhelming majority of students in Japan's universities are aged between 18-24 years of age with older or mature students being almost non-existent).

5. Lessons for the Future

From the seeming 'failure' of these two educational experiments several points can be gleaned. Both policies emerged in response to external pressure and perceived 'problems' within the education system. Both cases represented a kind of 'trojan horse' style of using a policy change for an ulterior motive (as a means of getting rid of 'inadequate teachers' in the case of the renewal system and revamping the curriculum in the case of the *yutori* project). Similarly, both were eliminated also partly because of negative external reactions without proper assessment or reflection. In sum, the *yutori kyōiku* policy failed to function properly because of the gap between the ideals of the national government and the reality of classroom life (Shirota, 2012) whereas the TLR system's demise was as a result of the gap between the vision of the national government and the reality of the life in the *shokuin shitsu* (Teacher's Room).

Regardless of what – if anything – replaces the TLR system, it must be remembered that Japan's schools already have excellent informal training systems and opportunities in place, namely: the teacher's room (*shokuin shitsu*), 'Lesson Study' (*jigyo kenkyū*), and 'Special Activities' (*tokubetsu katsudō*). By systematically utilizing and improving on these, perhaps through the incorporation of input from best practice examples abroad, Japan's education system could be further enhanced without the need for an external retraining and evaluation system. These three informal teacher training opportunities are briefly explained below.

5.1. Shokuin Shitsu (Teacher's Room) Training

Research by Ahn, Shimojima, Mori, and Asanuma (2018) found that informal training through collaborative learning which occurred in the *shokuin shitsu* was considered of greater value than officially sanctioned professional development training. In fact, teachers at differing stages in their careers "unequivocally endorsed the critical role of *shokuin shitsu* (teachers' room) as a necessary space for their professional growth" (Ahn et al., 2018). Because all schoolteachers in Japan are based in a common teacher's room, it provides an excellent physical environment for them, throughout all stages of their careers, to learn, grow, challenge, and improve their skillsets making it an extremely effective "continuous shared learning space" (Ahn et al., 2018).

5.2. Jigyo Kenkyū (Lesson Study)

It is probably a result of the close physical proximity in which teachers share space in their teacher's room that has enabled the development of *jigyo kenkyū* (literally: 'lesson research'). "Lesson Study", as the term is often introduced in English literature (see, for example, (Rappleye & Komatsu, 2017; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992)) refers to the process of ongoing collaborative learning by teachers to improve their lessons. It involves the observation of one another's lessons, follow-up discussion meetings to talk about them and the "ideology which guides teachers to focus on student learning, rather than how well or poorly colleagues taught" (Tsuneyoshi, 2018). While this may not seem radically different to similar activities undertaken in other countries, the uniqueness lies in the fact that "the system brings everyone in the school together to discuss a common lesson" (ibid). Originating in the Meiji period (Makinae, 2019), the effectiveness of this method has caught the eye of many international scholars who have written about the holistic and positive benefits (e.g. Stevenson and Stigler (1992) and Stigler and Hiebert (1999)). Such a system allows for teachers from diverse specialities to observe and critically examine differing teaching styles, therefore providing them with new and unique options to trial in their own classes.

5.3. Tokubetsu Katsudō (Special Activities)

Tokkatsu, as it is generally abbreviated, is an umbrella term encompassing an array of regular noncognitive activities that take place at schools throughout the school day, including such things as school lunches, student-led cleaning, classroom activities, school-wide events, excursions and club activities (Tsuneyoshi, 2018, 2020). Often referred to as whole child or holistic education, initially it appears that *tokkatsu* is primarily aimed at students. But upon closer examination, the wide-ranging breadth of activities and school-wide focus intimately links them to teachers creating a collaborative environment, similar to the teacher's room, only this time emphasizing non-academic aspects of school life. Nagashima and Sakuma (2018), touch on this collaborative group support aspect of career development and its importance to Japanese education and several of the aspects incorporated in this philosophy have been the focus of international attention in academia (Tsuneyoshi, 2017).

6. Other Opportunities

While the above outlined endogenous training opportunities are excellent examples, they are in most cases informal and complementary, not replacements for officially mandated faculty development. Neither are they uniformly offered nationwide meaning there are considerable discrepancies between schools and regions. There are of course other unique and effective systems being utilized in different countries around the world from which Japan could source ideas for innovation when looking for options to replace or modify its now defunct TLR system.

In a recent survey of teacher education systems in America, Australia, Finland and Singapore, Darling-Hammond (2017), writes that "[I]n every case, these systems include multiple, coherent and complementary components associated with recruiting, developing, and retaining talented individuals to support the overall goal of ensuring that each school is populated by effective teachers" (p. 294). Also in each case, there has been a strong push towards the implementation of standards for what teachers should learn and be able to do. The United States is the leader in this regard, having established the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in 1987. Most other developed

nations have followed suit in creating either nationwide, or state-separate standards used for, among other things, licensing, and training. Japan has yet to formalize such standards, and this would be a good place to start so as to ensure accountability through the creation of "teacher performance assessments, based on professional standards, that connect student learning to classroom teaching" (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Other trends noted internationally ensure competitive renumeration in order to attract talented new teachers and financial subsidies for training to ensure ongoing job satisfaction and development. Furthermore, increasing opportunities for teachers to learn from one another from within as well as across schools and universities has been highlighted (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Again, in this regard, Japan still has work to do, especially in terms of financial provision, and the ending of the university-school links forged through the TLR system is clearly a wasted opportunity.

7. Looking Back and Forward

Just over a decade ago Japan instigated a teaching license renewal program officially aimed at ensuring teachers were able to systematically acquire the latest knowledge and skills required. However, due in part to insufficient communication, coordination, planning and forethought, the system failed to reach its goals and has recently been scrapped. The parallels with a previous educational policy change, *yutori kyōiku* are stark. Japan should learn from these 'missteps' in terms of planning and work towards creating a system which benefits all. In that regard, it is useful to reassess the education field, for clearly it has – and will continue to be – a place of considerable and rapid transformation and change. Japan is slowly becoming a more diversified society and learning to be able to deal with the greater needs of students (both domestic and foreign) as well as the new skills and knowledge forms being required of them, means a wider understanding of methods and content for teacher training is essential. As Darling-Hammond (2017) writes, "The teaching challenges posed by higher expectations for learning and greater diversity of learners around the globe will likely be better met if nations can learn from each other about what matters and what works in different contexts" (p. 307).

Firstly, the steadily growing number of non-Japanese (or not 'fully' Japanese) students in Japan's classrooms has been an increasingly reported on phenomena. Recent studies put the figure at over 124,000 (The Economist, 2019), but this number does not reveal the whole picture. Japan's educational policy means that children of non-Japanese nationals are not legally required to attend school (they can if they wish) meaning there are likely a significant number of children not enrolled in schools in Japan. In fact, a survey in 2018 of 100 local government bodies in Japan showed that while there were 77,500 children registered as children of foreign nationals, no data was available for 16,000 of these as to whether they were attending school or not (Mainichi, 2019). While the reasons for this situation include cultural factors, language issues and financial problems, clearly this lack of data and information is far from ideal for either Japan or the foreign families concerned. As numbers of international students and those with roots overseas continue to increase, Japan could find that links across sectors (public and private as well as so-called 'miscellaneous' schools such as international or free schools) may be a useful path forward. In other words, increasing options and allowing greater freedom for students to choose would likely lead to greater participation and inclusion. Such sector-wide flexibility would most likely mean the strict necessity for teaching licenses in their present form would also need to be reevaluated.

Secondly, the job of teaching and the role of the teacher is evolving dramatically. Although certainly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the teaching environment has increasingly become a digitalized one, and this is challenging teachers to adjust and keep up. As MEXT looks to replace the TRL system with some other form, it would do well to include teachers' voices as well as best practice ideas from other countries to ensure a system is established that is both flexible and meaningful. It may well be that the above-mentioned unique informal training systems that exist already in Japan can be modified or expanded on to allow for greater inclusion of ideas across demographic, administrative and regional fields. Similarly, nationwide standards and regulations for training should be formulated to ensure teachers at all levels and in all types of schools are able to access regular training opportunities, applicable to each teacher's needs without having to forfeit their own free time.

Reflecting on being involved with teaching TLR courses at a university in Western Japan for 12 years, the overwhelming majority of comments received were that the opportunity was generally academically rewarding, even stimulating, but not always entirely practical or applicable to the present classroom situation. As has been noted elsewhere, most teachers had positive comments to make about their learning experiences during their courses (Akiba, 2013). Exit questionnaires from participants in all courses taught at the same university almost always mentioned a desire for greater 'classroom-related' skill acquisition. As teachers seek to keep up with the fast pace of change, the need for systematic and ongoing opportunities to learn and upskill is unquestionably urgent and important. Removing the entire TLR system seems to signal a lack of need for such opportunities at a time when they are arguably more necessary than ever before.

8. Conclusion

While acknowledging the considerable problems and issues inherent in the TLR system, this paper argues that it was a useful first step in bringing attention to the need for, and importance of, regular systematic teacher training in Japan today and fostering debate about the creation of a more effective and codified system for the future. Internationally, the trend has been towards creating standards for measurement and opportunities for wider teacher/school/university interaction to enhance and maximize teacher ability and job satisfaction. From the outset it was dubious to expect a once-every-10-year system of (somewhat ad hoc) lectures to lead to revolutionary changes. It may be that the negative reaction to MEXT's plan has invigorated teachers to focus more deeply on what kind of learning and skillsets they need and how to obtain them themselves. Japan's teachers work arduously to improve their teaching and the systems in place providing learning opportunities are both unique and encompassing. However, there is a need for a much more rigorous system which can involve universities and greater numbers and varieties of schools and teachers as a way of working towards creating an even better, more inclusive, working and learning environment for all parties. As Japan struggles to attract and keep the highest quality teachers (Asahi, 2022),

the time is also ripe for rigorous debate into future teacher training program content and qualities required in the profession from now. This can surely help to contribute to the improvement of society for all.

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