# Japan's national curriculum reforms: Focus on integrated curriculum approach

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## Abstract

**This article describes the process of national curriculum standards reform and the progress of applying the integrated curriculum from theory and research to practice.**

**The curriculum council of Japanese government received an inquiry from Monbusho in August 1996 about "reform of the national curriculum". The council comprehensively discussed how to help children's well-balanced development and how to educate them to be sound members of the nation and the society living independently in the 21st century. In addition, the council agreed that it was necessary to constantly review the national curriculum standards for improvement focus on integrated curriculum. The purposes of national curriculum standards reform are as follows:**

**1- To help a child cultivate rich humanity, sociality, and identity as a Japanese living in the international community,**

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**2- To help children develop ability to learn and think independently,**

**3- To help children acquire basic abilities and skills and grew their own individuality with plenty of scope for educational activities,**

**4- To encourage individual schools to show ingenuity in developing unique educational activities to make the school distinctive.**

**The article shows that the new national curriculum standards emphasis on interdisciplinary and comprehensive learning clearly specified and more flexible.**

**Key Words: national curriculum, integrated approach, educational reform, Japan**

## Introduction

The speedy economical, industrial, and modern technological transformations in the past decades have had unprecedented impacts on Japan's cultural and social foundations. Constant study and research for the creation of necessary changes in Japan's education system has become much more essential due to certain reasons, some of which include: 1- the people's ever-increasing request for synchronization of education programs with the daily developments; 2- the social and cultural needs of the modern information and communications age; 3- The essentiality of having the necessary preparations that are proportionate to the needs of the twenty first century; 4- The public request for life-long education; and 5- Japan's position in the international field and the schools daily-increasing request for having more control over the curriculum planning; (Lee, 2001; Monbusho, 2001, 2000a; Kariya, 2000b)

Japan's plans for educational reform began in 1974. This was to face the mentioned issues and the fundamental subjects. In the recent decades as well, the special council for modifications of the education system has had the role of conducting the most important researches for the modification of the Japanese education system.

The most important subject, which the educational reforms aimed at according to the suggestions by the higher education council, was the revision of the fundamental goals of the education system and the school curriculum. The council suggested that in the twenty first century the main education goal in schools would be to help students in gaining the necessary abilities for living rather than passing the fundamental knowledge and teaching it to them (Monbusho, NCER-GJ, 1998). The council stressed on many principles. Among these principles were: paying attention to the individual differences and needs; nourishing creativity; expanding human relationships; teaching like skills in today's world; expanding the learning opportunities; ecological teachings and adjustment with the world of communications and information (Lincicombe, 1993).

## Research for national curriculum reform

Based on national researches that were conducted from 1993 to 1995, Japan's Ministry of Education realized that the Japanese students, especially those of the general education period, are ahead of their competitors in the fields of reading, writing, mathematics, and sciences. However, they have weaknesses in problem-solving ability, designing, critical thinking, and complex problems analysis based on individual abilities (Monbusho, 2001). The Japanese ministry of education indicated the cause for the problem as too much emphasis on the student's memory, knowledge transfer, and insufficiencies in the educational assessment system. Another research that was conducted in Japan along with the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) – with the help of International Association for Evaluation of Academic Achievement (IEA) – showed that although the Japanese students have earned a high rank in mathematics and sciences, they are in a lower rank in for their amount of interest for these two subjects (IEA, 1996).

Another research that is conducted in year 1999 by The Japanese Youth Research Institute shows that about 40 percent of the

students of the high-school period do not study outside school. As well, those who do study have indicated that they allocate about one hour of their time to this matter. At the meantime, the number of students who do not want to study the inapplicable and unrelated educational content and subjects that have to do with their life is increased on daily basis (Takashina, 2001).

In another research in year 1997 on the necessity for re-vising the need to update the curriculum the Japanese students gave the least number of positive responses among the six countries including China, South Korea. The question of course was "whether you are a good student and study well". The research showed that only less than 10 percent of the grade five students have provided a positive response. (Takashina, 2001)

Japan's Ministry of Education assigned the task of investigating the educational and curriculum planning of the various educational stages to the Central Council For Education based on the results from the national researches conducted during the years 1993 to 1998 and by taking advantage from the educational modifications experience in the previous periods.

The council's efforts and other hard work that took place in the final years of the twentieth century in Japan, aimed in fact to find the answer to this question: "how can the curriculum and the educational curriculum of the Japanese schools be revised and renovated in the twenty first century". In other words, what worth learning and spending time on in this world of information and communication, and how can one reach the desired answer to this question.

## The national curriculum reform

The central education council brought the attention of the education's higher managers to the need for curriculum modifications in order to face the educational problems in Japanese schools. The council established the main study and education curriculum orientations in its June 30th, 1998 report based on the

researches and the reports of various councils, especially that of the Curriculum Council. These main orientations for the curriculum modifications were provided with emphasis on the three important elements of human, society, and the world. On July 29th, 1998, the council finally provided on its report the main axis which the modification of the national curriculum revolves around.

1- Emphasis on intermixed educational curriculums for study majors

2- Emphasis on skills for taking advantage of knowledge and information and a movement from teaching knowledge to children to teaching how to learn.

3- Emphasis on lessening the study content and decreasing the number of class hours, and increasing the optional course opportunities, children's free activities, self-learning, and self-awareness.

4- Taking more advantage of active education methods with more emphasis on critical thinking development, problem-solving skills, memory role reduction, and increase in project-based learning.

5- Paying more attention to the students' individual needs, differences, and abilities in schools.

6- Using the capabilities of the World Wide Web in the teaching-learning process and long-distance trainings based on this network.

7- Providing security for the students on the World Wide Web.

8- Training professional teachers that fit the modern information and communication technology transformations.

9- Paying more attention to students' moral development, life skills, social responsibility, and human relationship skills.

This report with the set axis was placed as the basis for the education curriculum modifications of the ministry of education.

## Integrated curriculum

This work is a revision in the schools curriculum that had its studies done in Japan's ministry of education and was carried out from April 2003. The plan was such that the necessary opportunity for combined learning or combined study hours become possible in the schools education and curriculum. The main goal of this curriculum is to provide effective relationship between the various curriculum elements and subjects in the schools educational activities. The decision for revising the schools education and curriculums and the providing of new opportunities in the context of combined curriculum for students has had one aim in mind: to decrease the height of those tall strong walls between study subjects and elements and to make it more flexible (Monbusho, 1998).

On this basis, the optional courses increase; the teacher's role changes; and the school should teach the students how to think, decide, and organize their thoughts, as well as how to gain the skills for learning, research, and collection and analysis of data. The school should also teach the students how to learn while being in contact with their surroundings, and how to relate all the learning with the society, and the daily life (Monbusho, 1999). Such schools will work with a diverse and different range of study subjects in the combined curriculum relative to the needs, abilities, and cultural and geographical circumstances. This for example includes recognition of various cultures in the world, understanding international relationship as well local and global ecological issues, understanding information society skills and complexities, the native culture, and industrial and information technology transformations. For example during the school year 1999-2000, Linan high school in Mie prefecture selected the subject "Learning how to expand the region we live in". The emphasis was on the students' all sided recognition of the region they lived in. The high school conducted and evaluated various study works and designs for the combined learning hours based on the students' group activities.

## Conclusion

The main and important question for us is to see how we can use the Japanese experience and modify Iran's curriculum. In the author's viewpoint, the findings of this research can be used from two different dimensions. First, the methodology of curriculum modifications; and second, the Japanese people's objective experience in carrying out education and study modification curriculums with emphasis on combining approach

With regards to modifications methodology, Japan's various experiences in changing the study and education curriculum is based on three approaches: Carrying-out the modifications based on research; taking advantage of international experiences in carrying-out the educational reforms; and paying attention to experiences gained from previous national education modifications. The Japanese have been well aware of their national needs in modifying the curriculums and have been after gaining global experience with specific goals for carrying-out the study and education curriculum reforms. They have very well gained the ability to criticize themselves and without the least care criticize their available plans and to identify their weak points based on national and combining researches. To make it short, the Japanese methods and curriculum modifications are effective experiences for Iran in the revision and restructuring method of its curriculum at various stages. In addition, these experiences teach us how to help the managers and curriculum-planners of the country's education system to lead this great and effective organization toward being scientific.

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