

Human Rights Education in Japan: Overview

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Japan responded well to the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) [UN Decade]. It adopted a national plan of action for the UN Decade in 1997, while more than five hundred prefectures and municipalities adopted local action plans.

The local enthusiasm for the UN Decade stemmed from the need for a new law that would continue government support for human rights education. The history of human rights education in Japan dates back to the beginning of anti-discrimination education (known as DOWA education) in the post-war period. Special laws and policies on fiscal measures for anti-discrimination (DOWA) projects since the late 1960s helped support the growth of DOWA education. With the ending of the special fiscal measures law in March 2002, the UN Decade became a new vehicle to continue and further promote human rights education in Japan.

Human Rights Education Law

The enactment of the Law on the Promotion of Human Rights Education and Human Rights Awareness-Raising (LPHREA) in 2000 ironically led to less reference by both national and local governments to the international framework on human rights education

specifically the UN initiatives. Unlike the UN Decade, the adoption by the UN of the World Programme for Human Rights Education (WPHRE) in 2005 did not lead to adoption of national and local plans of action in support of the new UN initiative.

Nevertheless, the enactment of LPHREA was progress. In implementing this law, the Japanese government adopted a National Basic Plan in 2002 and started issuing the annual *White Paper on Human Rights Education and Awareness-Raising* from the same year.

Many local governments again followed the national initiative. A 2012 survey of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) revealed that forty-two prefectures (approximately 89 percent of all the prefectures) and 841 municipalities (approximately 47 percent of all municipalities) had already adopted local plans based on LPHREA.

It is noteworthy that many local governments regularly revised their plans to meet the changing needs of local communities. In revising the plans, many local governments conducted surveys to know the extent of the citizens' human rights awareness, as well as to evaluate the impact of their

human rights education programs.

People's Attitude

Recently, unexpected changes in the citizens' attitude have been observed based on the results of these local government surveys. For instance, in two separate surveys conducted in Himeji city (2011) and Tanba city (2012), both in Hyogo prefecture in the western part of Japan, the majority of respondents did not believe that institutional measures, such as laws or administrative systems, were effective in solving social problems. Instead, they believed that individual effort was more important. In the free answer column, some respondents even expressed anxiety that institutional measures made people too dependent on the government and spoiled individual effort. Respondents seem to trust personal solutions more rather than the democratic mechanisms of society.

Do these survey results reflect neo-liberal policy adaptation in Japanese society? Considering that human rights education facilitates participation in democratic decision-making processes, the results were discouraging if not alarming for human rights educators.

School System

Regarding human rights education in the school system, MEXT, as provided for in the National Basic Plan, undertook research and information gathering activities on effective teaching practices and materials in order to improve human rights teaching in schools.

MEXT organized a Panel of Experts for the Research on Approaches to Human Rights Education in 2003, and in cooperation with the Panel, conducted surveys in 2008 and 2012 to find out how local boards of education and schools implemented human rights education. The 2012 MEXT survey discussed earlier also showed that about 75 percent of the schools had human rights education plan. Based on the discussions of the Panel of Experts, MEXT issued a third report in 2008 entitled *Approaches to Teaching Human Rights Education*, which promoted the integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in teaching human rights in order to capacitate children to take action to protect their own rights as well as those of others.

However, the future of human rights education does not warrant optimism. The change in the ruling party (Liberal Democratic Party) at the end of 2012 led to less serious government support for human rights education. In March 2015, MEXT revised the course of study to introduce moral education as an official subject at primary school level in 2018 and at the lower secondary school level in 2019. For

instance, the revised course of study for 1st and 2nd year primary students would be learning nineteen keywords such as honesty and sincerity, moderation, hope and courage, kindness, gratitude, politeness, friendship and trust, observance of rules, public-mindedness, fairness and justice, respect for culture and tradition, love for one's home and country, and so on. Stronger emphasis on values rather than rights, and on personal attitude formation rather than democratic participation may change the very basis of human rights education in Japan.

Moral education has been taught only as an informal subject in Japanese schools in the post-war period due to the criticism that it instilled the patriotism and militarism that led Japan to war. Consequently, moral education, given its wide latitude as an informal subject, became a good vehicle to integrate DOWA and human rights education. Many local boards of education issued unique supplementary textbooks for DOWA and human rights education that introduced the history of local human rights movements, and stories and voices of minorities. However, upgrading moral education to a formal subject requires the use of authorized textbooks and grading. As a consequence, the space for teaching human rights based on the rich local resources will be strictly limited.

In this context, the relationship between moral education and human rights education needs serious discussion. And there is a need to remind the Japanese

government that it has the "primary responsibility to promote and ensure human rights education and training, developed and implemented in a spirit of participation, inclusion and responsibility (Article 7.1, UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training [2011]).

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