

## Time for sustainability in japan

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# TIME FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN JAPAN

*Yuko Okado (2004)*

## INTRODUCTION

'Education for sustainability' is a process of learning which aims to challenge the dominant thinking of education and society to improve the quality of living by promoting more sustainably-oriented thinking for future citizens. Beginning in 2002, Japanese schools began to introduce the new national curriculum, a revolution in Japanese educational thinking designed to counteract the effects of two decades of social upheaval. The principles and the style of the new national curriculum provide opportunities for Development Education, Environmental Education and Education for Sustainability to contribute their good practices towards the innovation of curriculum change.

Education for Sustainability (EfS) is needed in today's world more than ever before. We are living in a post-modern, complex world, in which the uncertainty of life is increasing, and the boundaries of regions or nations have become blurred by the process of globalisation. The issues of today, such as environmental destruction, international conflicts, and the widening North–South gap, demand a united global response, as they transcend national boundaries, and cannot be solved by any single nation. We also have to start learning how to live our lives within the carrying capacity of our supporting ecosystem, in order to

create a viable future, as responsible citizens of a global society. Future perspectives along these lines and, in particular, concerns for the Earth, equity and participation, represent the key constituents of the concept of 'sustainable development' (WCED, 1987).

There is no single authoritative definition of EfS, rather its value comes from an ongoing active process of questioning and experimenting with the idea and meaning of sustainability in different contexts of practice. In *Education for Sustainability*, Huckle and Sterling (1996) state that EfS is a continuous process rather than a defined state, and one which depends on vision.

## **THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF JAPANESE EDUCATION**

Education in Japan has to address a new set of challenges faced by contemporary Japanese society. In particular there are the issues of a rapidly ageing population, economic stagnation and a high rate of unemployment. Under this strain, other social norms, such as life-long employment and relative equality in the distribution of wealth, are collapsing.

Today, Japanese formal education is attempting a bold transformation. Educational policy in the post-war period has, until recently, been characterised by a standardised, inflexible approach. With the introduction of the new National Curriculum in 2002 (introduced from April 2002 in elementary and junior high schools, and in senior high schools from 2003) however, the emphasis is on greater flexibility and autonomy in school organisation, curriculum development and classroom teaching. In particular, the new subject of 'Integrated Study' has been designed with the aim of encouraging more creative study on locally chosen themes (*Tokyo Shimbun*, 2002). This has opened the door to a greater co-operation of schools with social organisations, and hence for a possible acceptance of EfS. Given the power of Japanese education over society, the impact of these educational reforms could be pivotal in Japan's future. EfS may hold the potential to help steer Japan towards a greater social equality.

## **POSSIBLE DANGERS OF THE NEW REFORMS: THE INFLUENCE OF MARKET FORCES**

In various ways, the new reforms may, in effect, bring a greater influence of market forces into education. For example, one result of the deregulation of central state control of primary and junior high schools is the beginning of diversification within the hitherto standardised educational system. In Tokyo the abolition of the fixed school catchment area for elementary and junior high schools has introduced the practice of competition between schools for pupils. As Tokyo is traditionally the testing ground

for nation-wide changes, it is reasonable to anticipate that the rest of the country's schools will follow suit, and hence all schools will have to compete in appealing to parents. As parents are likely to favour good exam results over experimental learning methods, there is a danger of a conservative bias creeping in. Within state schools then, there may be a pressure to use the time allotted for Integrated Study to focus simply on getting the best possible exam results.

If parents do not respond positively to the new National Curriculum, there is also the potential of an exodus of students from state education to private schools. This in turn presents the possible danger of the development of a two-tier education system, and so a threat to the principle of equal opportunity for all students.

If we consider an outside model, in Thatcher's Britain of the 1980s, 'greater choice' was used as a slogan to justify the application of market forces to the educational system and its objectives. While there is no clear evidence that Japan is following the same path, the UK model should at least serve to alert EfS practitioners to the potential threat to their work from the reforms, much as it also offers opportunities. As for this potential threat, the theme we have to consider is the relationship of education to inequality in society. If the new reforms do indeed open the door to market influence, such as performance-related tables as exist in the UK, the competitive adversarial aspect embodied in such education may tend to influence society in this direction. So the new reforms may actually contribute to greater social inequality.

## **POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES OF THE NEW REFORMS: A CHANCE FOR SUSTAINABLE LEARNING**

Current educational reform in Japan is, on the other hand, supportive of practitioners of EfS. It gives more opportunities for people outside the formal education process to participate in education and to share in the responsibility of creating the process of learning for our society.

As a practitioner of EfS myself, I feel that we should recognise that the opportunity we have been given represents a challenge to demonstrate, hands on, the potential effectiveness and dynamism of EfS within Japanese formal education (Tanaka, 2003). The strengths of the EfS approach – appreciation of good existing practices, learning through experience, the challenge of making creative practices and being aware of critical reflection – have much to contribute to society through the education process.

As for the goals of EfS, they have a role in trying to preserve and enhance the quality of state school education in terms of the outlook of the future citizens it influences. It can act to counteract the ideology and practice of market forces which may tend to widen the gap between rich and poor,

hoping rather to help knit society around values such as egalitarianism, respect for diversity of values, respect for oneself and for the planet. EfS can help schools to develop their distinctive educational paths to achieve a more truly democratic, inclusive and sustainable society. These aims will remain open-ended however, since EfS is about the continuous process of learning, and is itself part of the process of sustainable development.

The growing recognition and endorsement of sustainable development is likely to continue. However, the way in which DE, EE and other adjectival educations can actually be integrated into a single framework is something which must be contested through continuous analysis, argument and practice. The formulation of alliances is useful only insofar as it brings real change and enhances efforts to bridge differences between different forms of education through the mutual recognition of existing good practices (Kawamura, 1999). The key will be the extent to which strong, focused but at the same time holistic approach and action can be produced from such good practices.

Work to this end is being undertaken in Japan, for example, where a coalition of educationalists from DE, EE, Peace Education and Pollution

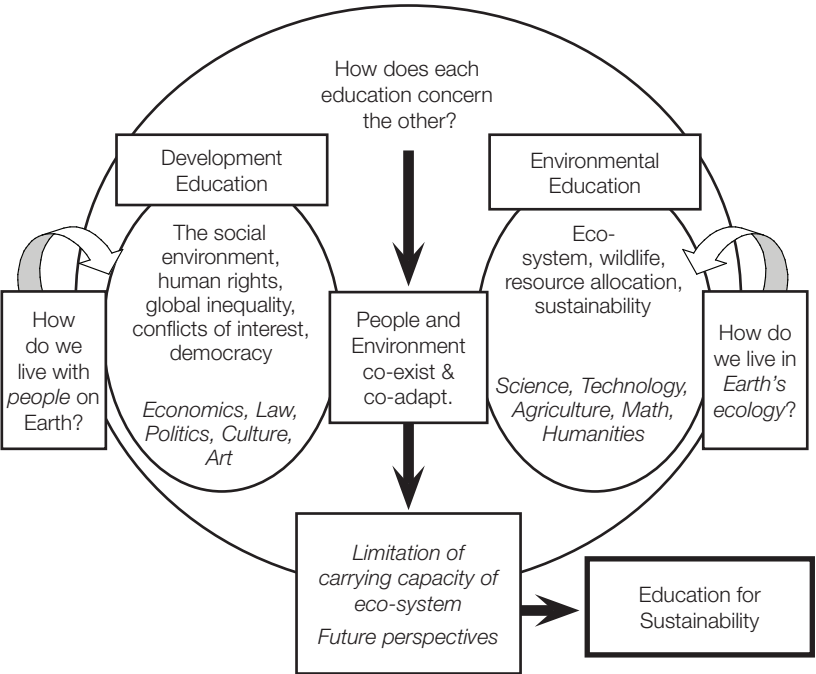


Figure 1: DE and EE for EfS

study are working towards producing a common strategy to bring to the Earth Summit in Johannesburg. This kind of common effort should provide promising grounds for communication, and it will be of real benefit if DE and EE and other fields of education can continue to find ways to work together for our common future.

### EfS AS A UNIFIER OF ADJECTIVAL EDUCATIONS

EfS as a unifier with particular respect to DE and EE has been discussed above. As for ‘Adjectival Education’ as a whole, Sterling (1996) lists 26 fields of studies, claiming that sustainability should be reflected in any general curriculum. He claims that the importance of its approach is that of ‘vertical progress in curriculum and horizontal integration of subject areas’. In other words, as Greig, Pike and Selby (1987) assert, ‘Education for Sustainability provides an integrating framework for social and Environmental Education together with other forms of adjectival education.’ Furthermore, ‘Education for Sustainability is a concept that can house all the necessary elements to be effective’ (Martin, 1996, p.51).

### EfS in the overall context of Adjectival Education in Japan

How do International Understanding Education (IUE), Development Education (DE), and Environmental Education (EE), interrelate within the framework of EfS?

The timeline below (Figure 2) should not be taken to represent all the educational movements in Japan: those listed are determined on

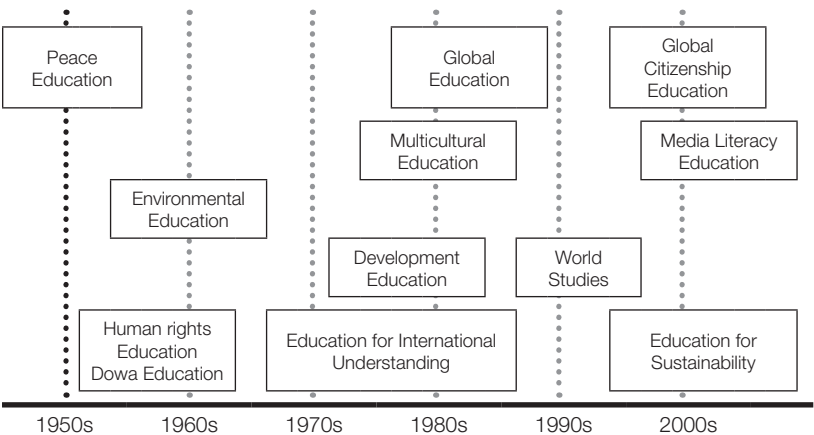


Figure 2: Adjectival Educations in Japan (DECJ (2002))

the basis of their relevance to Education for Sustainability. Many of them are influenced and oriented by movements from abroad, such as Development Education, Global Education, Education for Sustainability, Media Literacy Education, and World Studies.

## **CHARACTER OF THE NEW REFORMS, AND THE SUITABILITY OF EFS**

The key content change in the curriculum is the introduction of a new subject called 'Integrated Study' (*Sougou gakushuu*). In the primary school curriculum, Integrated Study is given 100 hours a year, with 70 hours for a secondary school, which shows a remarkable emphasis on the subject, especially in the light of the overall reduction of the curriculum.

There is no precise definition of the contents of Integrated Study in the new curriculum guidance. However, there is a description of the principles behind it, which mentions the setting up and developing of classroom themes and activities flexibly in terms of cross-curricular themes such as international understanding, information technology, environmental issues, welfare care, or themes based on the pupils' interests. These themes can be chosen as appropriate to the unique character of each locality and individual school.

The introduction of Integrated Study is designed to encourage each school to show ingenuity in providing interdisciplinary and comprehensive courses. It allows space for each school to interpret the guidelines in their own way, to design their own curriculum and to develop an individual educational approach appropriate for their setting (Kanagawa Board of Education, 1999).

## **AGENDA AND PRINCIPLES OF THE NEW REFORMS**

The main agenda of the new curriculum reform is that of diversifying education in response to rapid economic and wider social change (Horio, 2002).

The main issues of reform in the new curriculum are two-fold: first, a scaling down of the overall weight of the curriculum in order to suit a five-day school week; second, an emphasis on the development of 'individuality' among students. The new course of study encourages schools to introduce ability-based teaching and learning. It also contains the stated aim of giving autonomy to each school in order to facilitate original, local school management.

Figure 3 (opposite) summarises the type of change envisaged by the new reform, in terms of 'values in schooling', 'system', 'pedagogy', and 'type of learning'. It shows how the direction of the new reform marks a distinct break with the past. While a standardised approach, inflexibility

	Past	New
<b>Values in schooling</b>	Homogeneity	Diversity
	Equality of outcome	Equality of opportunity
<b>System</b>	Controlled	Autonomous
	Standardised	Diversified
	Rigid	Flexible
	Nationally standardised	Localised
	Non-competitive	Competitive
	Regulated	Deregulated
<b>Pedagogy</b>	Technical	Creative
	Narrow perspectives	Broad perspectives
	Standardised teaching	Ability-based teaching
	Subject divided	Cross-curricular
	Efficient	Diverse
<b>Type of Learning</b>	Passive	Active
	Knowledge-based	Experience-oriented
	Memorising information	Problem-solving

Figure 3: The shifts in Japanese educational reform

and a rigid nature made up the basic characteristics of educational policy during the post-war period, the introduction of the National Curriculum 2002 clearly attempts a bold transformation. It suggests an overhaul of many aspects of education, from school management to classroom teaching. But the official paper does no more than lay down the guidelines. The exact nature the reform takes from now on is up to the schools themselves.

## WHAT CAN EFS OFFER THE NEW REFORMS?

Education for Sustainability can be seen as an educational strategy with the power to respond positively to many of the principal changes suggested in the new national curriculum. For example:

### 1. 'Response to environmental issues'

Both the new curriculum and EfS place a high priority on teaching about the environment. The curriculum provides the goal, and EfS suggests the strategy, encouraging a fostering in children of concern for environmental issues.

## **2. Problem-solving skills**

The curriculum highlights the need for development of problem-solving skills. EfS also focuses on the need for these skills, encouraging children to develop their ability to respond individually, creatively and pragmatically to problems. EfS emphasises action.

## **3. Interdisciplinary framework**

The curriculum calls for the above-mentioned skills to be developed through interdisciplinary and comprehensive learning activities. EfS offers an organising framework for these activities. EfS is holistic in its approach to learning, and is conscious of the interrelation of different factors behind the issues. EfS is process-oriented, its emphasis is on critical reflection, an experimental learning cycle. As its ultimate purpose is to make a difference in the world and the future, it positively encourages an active response in the process of learning.

As suggested by the above points, EfS can be usefully incorporated into each school's original distinctive curriculum in various ways. EfS is constructive and holistic in its approach. In its whole-school approach, it offers guidance as a uniting philosophy within which schools can develop their originality of organisation and curriculum development in harmony with the concerns of the locality.

## **CONCLUSION**

In a world facing an increasing poverty gap as well as environmental exhaustion, there is the need to find a more sustainable approach to global development. One possible solution is offered by the vision of sustainability, a concept which has been gaining greater recognition amongst educationalists and environmentalists since the Rio (1992) and Johannesburg (2002) Summits.

Education for Sustainability, or EfS, is arguably the best way of teaching sustainability issues. A look at the development of adjectival educations in Japan in the post-war period shows a great multiplicity of different disciplines, which have come and gone, overlapped and contradicted each other. This confusing picture may explain why an in-depth understanding of such educations has been low amongst teachers. One great virtue of EfS, however, is that its holistic approach enables it to provide a unifying framework to the many different forms of adjectival education, providing the advantages of a possible co-ordination of effort and resources for educationalists.

In addition, EfS seems ideally suited to the new educational values that the Ministry of Education proposes in the new reforms, such as 'response to environmental issues', 'developing problem-solving skills' and providing an inter-disciplinary framework. The new reforms also encourage schools to be outward looking, and to co-operate with other

social actors such as NGOs. EfS can also act as a unifying structure for the single concepts promoted by each individual NGO, whether they happen to promote environmental, development, or some other form of adjectival education.

EfS itself is not yet widely recognised within state education, but the direction of the reforms allows for teaching which can incorporate many of its concepts. The form of teaching of the new Integrated Study subject has been left to the schools to determine, but the recommendations suggested by the curriculum do provide scope for promoting EfS. One promising example is International Understanding Education (IUE), which includes socially critical perspectives on development issues. This kind of teaching can cultivate the ground for a greater acceptance of EfS within schools.

In theory, then, EfS can influence the new curriculum in a positive direction but education is, of course, more than simply theory. A number of practical factors will determine whether the process of curriculum change ends as being ‘innovation’, in keeping with EfS ideals of continual regeneration through good practice, or simply as renewal. Ultimately this will depend on the extent to which teachers can be drawn into positive, active engagement with the process.

## AFTERWORD

It has been nearly five years since I wrote my dissertation. During this time, Japanese formal education policy made a dramatic U-turn, abandoning reform in favour of a ‘back to basics’ approach. The education reforms of 2002 – which cut back lesson hours and introduced Integrated Study into primary and secondary school education – are now being blamed for the apparent decline of students’ basic study skills, such as numeracy and literacy.

MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) has reacted by re-introducing increased lesson hours and a more knowledge-based curriculum. In the aspect of EfS, it implies less opportunity in formal education, and puts a stop to the progress over the last five years that has been made with teachers, in schools and the community in the development of practice.

On the other hand, global trends in increased awareness of sustainability issues are reflected in Japan, with a particular growth in related activities. This has been notable in the corporate, non-formal education and local government sectors. In these ways EfS has continued to grow.

It will be fascinating to see how these contrary trends resolve themselves over the next five years. I hope of course, that EfS in Japan will continue to have something to contribute to the global movement.

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Yuko Okado studied development economics for her first degree in Japan, while qualifying as a high school teacher. She has contributed to EfS practice and research in the formal and non-formal education sectors in Japan as part of her MSc dissertation, which she gained with Distinction. Her main interests are in citizenship/built environment education and community development. Yuko currently works as an assistant director for the British Education Office in Tokyo.

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