



## A critical historiographical analysis of Japan's educational policies from the end of the World War II to 2011

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# **A critical historiographical analysis of Japan's educational policies from the end of the World War II to 2011**

*Kenji Maehara\**

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*Abstract:* This article aims to describe educational policy making in Japan, mainly after WW II, by dividing it into three eras: the first era from postwar WWII to the early 1980s; the second era mid to late 1980s; the third era late 1990s to the present (2012). The first era is characterized by the contradiction between the political and economic requirements for diversification of the school system and the Japanese original meritocratic single track system. The most critical element for understanding the postwar time Japanese education system is to understand the main traits of how the meritocratic single track system functions. In the second era, the provisional Council on Educational Reform proposed some neo-liberal reform ideas for the Japanese school system which have had long-term influences to this day. The third era of neo-liberal reform is also the age of political disarray, despite a call for "politicians-led" policy making instead of the dominance of bureaucrats. Some important changes of the Japanese successful school system have been introduced gradually in this era. This paper also proposes some models that have been used to analyze the recent years educational policy making systems in Japan. It is asserted that the expanding of political spaces opens up some possibilities for educational scholars to take more significant roles in educational policy making than before.

*Keywords:* Education policy, Japanese meritocracy, neo-liberal policy, 'yutori' reform

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## Introduction

This article aims to describe post Second World War Japanese educational policy making, based on historiographical materials. It will also discuss the transformations in educational policy making, showing the contrast between the traditional “bureaucratic” policy making system and the recent emphasis on “politicians-led” structure. For this paper the economic political history of postwar Japan will be divided into three ‘eras’: the first, from postwar reform to the early 1980s, an era of *triumph of state bureaucracy*; the second; mid to late 1980s, an era of *transition and the initial appearance of neo-liberal policy in education*; and the third, from the late 1990’s to the present (2012), an era of *neo-liberal concepts coming to the forefront and educational policy confusion*. Each era will be either characterized by important political, economic and educational events, or supported by solid related materials.

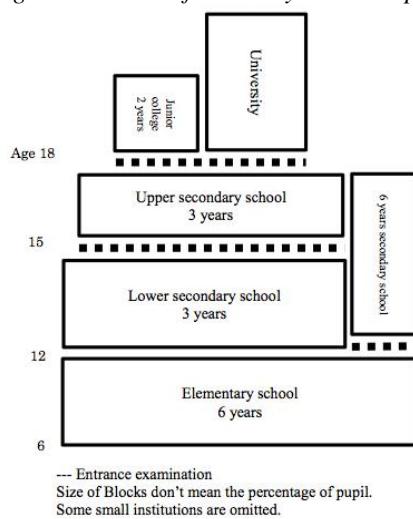
As long as the school system for those aged 6 to 15 has existed, it can be said that Japan has been making a reasonable degree of success, both in quantity and quality. Nine years of free compulsory education for 6 to 15 years-old is guaranteed nation-wide<sup>1</sup>. According to the PISA study, the educational standard of Japanese 15 years-old pupils is evaluated from international comparative as highly satisfactory. For example in the PISA 2009, Japan is ranked within the top 10 in all three fields (reading, mathematics and science) and the results show also the score variations between Japanese pupils are minor. So, it can be said that the Japanese compulsory school system has produced a high average result with limited variation between pupils. Regarding late secondary education, the Japanese educational policy can be assessed as highly successful. After ending compulsory education, approximately 98% of Japanese pupils are admitted into 3 years of upper secondary school (USS) education and the dropout rate is minimal – about 95% of USS pupils graduate. In spring of 2011, 53.9% of USS graduates went directly onto university, including 2 years junior colleges’ courses. Junior college is/was not compulsory, and is part

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<sup>1</sup> The compulsory school system in the modern Japan started in 1872, 5 years later from the Meiji Restoration. At the beginning, the schooling was compulsory for 4 years and the schooling rate was pretty low for a while. In 1907 it was extended to 6 years. The schooling rate reached 98 percent by 1909 (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

of the higher education system, mainly for women, founded after the Second World War. A further 5% or more are estimated to go onto university one or two years after. The school system of Japan can be seen in

*Figure 1. Sketch of school system in Japan*



Compared with the compulsory school system, it is often argued that universities in Japan do not have the same high average quality when compared internationally, but at least for its quantity they should be evaluated as sufficient (Chuo Kyoiku Shingikai, 1996). As the educational conditions are satisfactorily in accordance with international standards, it may seem that the main purpose of this paper is to explain how Japan has built a solid productive school system from the catastrophic situation following the Second World War. Although, this is only half of the purpose of this paper. As will be shown below, the Japanese school system has been facing repeated “reformation” – especially introduced by the neo-liberal policy makers who have affected the education system greatly. So, why were drastic educational reforms required if the system was already working? Further, why have the reforms been in chaos over the last two decades? This paper will try answer these crucial questions.

## **Education for revival and development of the economy**

### *The short-lived euphoric age*

After the Second World War Japan became, under the control of the USA occupation force, a democratic state with a new constitution, which was welcomed by most Japanese citizens (Dower, 1999). Following the direction and support of the General Headquarters (GHQ) of USA, Japan established a new constitution in 1946. This new constitution was highly democratized, compared with the old one, which had defined the Emperor as absolute sovereign and gave no guarantee of fundamental human rights. The Constitution of Japan introduced democratic sovereignty, a guarantee of wide-ranging fundamental rights and renunciation of war. As to education, it was defined as follows: Article 26. "All people shall have the right to receive an equal education correspondent to their ability, as provided by law. All people shall be obligated to have all boys and girls under their protection receive ordinary education as provided for by law. Such compulsory education shall be free". In 1947<sup>2</sup>, the Basic Act of Education was legislated in order to complement and embody article 26 of the Constitution of Japan.

These were deliberated and legislated in the mood of anti-militarism, pacifism and especially "*idealistic democracy*", which was a trait of the report of the United States Education Mission to Japan on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1946 (Kemper, Makino, & Yamada, 2003).

Based on this act, the Japanese school system was totally reconstructed. The school system of prewar Japan consisted of nationalistic education for "the general public" and elite education for the privileged few, as was the system in Germany at that time. This system was thoroughly reformed into a single track system, as in the USA at that time. The most important issue of educational policy then was to secure 9 years of free compulsory education for all, and to actualize the equal opportunity for education through financial aids for the economically disadvantaged. Despite the crippling postwar financial situation, the 9 years compulsory education system had spread rapidly, supported by donations and contributions from the residents, achieving full proliferation of citizens to education (Yamazumi, 1987, pp. 163-164).

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<sup>2</sup> The Basic Act of Education was revised in 2006. English version of both old and new Acts can be read at: [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/kihon/data/07080117.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/kihon/data/07080117.htm)

A new guideline for curriculum was also published by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in 1947. This guideline aimed to introduce a new concept, *child centered education*. This guideline was probably based on the model of *the course of study of Virginia State* (USA) (Kokumin kyoiku kenkyujo, 1973, p. 209). The concept of child centered education spread rapidly since it gave a clear contrast to wartime education when the main aim of education was to train loyalty to the Emperor.

But, in the 1950s child centered education was losing its supporters, because the attainment level of pupils had drastically dropped compared to those of the prewar era, and because the political situation had also rapidly changed which I now explain.

#### *Changing of direction*

Around 1950, facing the radicalization of labor movements in Japan (led by two Marxist parties, the Social Democratic Party of Japan and the Japanese Communist Party) and due to political tension in the Far East, GHQ reformed their occupation policy<sup>3</sup>. Their new policy was implemented which featured an anti-communism aspect called a 'Reverse Course' by a Japanese newspaper. The Korean War began in 1950 and one year later the USA's occupation of Japan formally ended. From this point, some important educational policies' factors clearly began to change under the new Japanese Government.

First, moral education ("Shushin")<sup>4</sup>, forbidden by GHQ in 1945, was a critical agenda for the political conservatives, who gradually were coming back into power. It was at this point the Japanese government tried to reintroduce, if a somewhat remodeled, the so called 'patriot education' as a part of moral education. This breakaway from idealistic democratic education was strongly pushed for (like with the previous demands for a

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<sup>3</sup> As to the policy change around 1950 in Japan occurred by the political tension in the Far East area, in English, see, Dower (1999).

<sup>4</sup> "Shushin" was the top subject in prewar Japanese schools. It consisted mainly of Confucian ethics and general basic social courtesies. The former elements functioned for militant and extreme nationalistic indoctrination because the Confucian way of thinking to consider the nation to be the extension of a family justified the feudal social order and, in the prewar Japan, it functioned as the best ideology of the Japanese fascism, having the Emperor in the center of the family-nation state. As to the significance of the Confucianism for political thoughts, see, Maruyama (1974).

change to democracy) by the USA, too. In 1953, an influential Dietman<sup>5</sup>, Hayato Ikeda (later to be Prime Minister, 1960-1964), was dispatched to the USA as a special envoy of Government and had a meeting with Walter S. Robertson, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Japanese rearmament and the reinforcement of patriot education to enable it were reported to have been discussed at this meeting. They agreed that it was a priority to foster an atmosphere likely to reinforce the Responsibility for the defense of Japan through education and publicity (*Kokumin kyoiku kenkyujo*, 1973, p. 243). This meant that the Japanese government intended to weaken people's disgust against the armament through a remodeled patriot education.

Secondly, the Government started reconsidering the school system introduced under the GHQ occupation. The Government Ordinances Advisory Council, founded by a Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida in 1951, proposed a re-reform of the Japanese school system, because the structure of the school system had been criticized repeatedly.

The reform of school system in the postwar era contributed greatly to correct the defects of past school system and establish a democratic one. This reform, however, included a certain amount of enterprise, following foreign systems of other nations under other conditions, or pursuing the ideal of them, which did not fit to the situation of Japan. We must deliberate fully these points and improve our school system much more rationally, as to how it can fit Japan's situation and can really heighten effect (Kanda, Terasaki, & Hirabara, 1991, p. 360).

The 1951 revised course of study still had progressive child centered education traits along with experimentalism (Shibata, 2000, pp. 83 ff.). However, under this curriculum, "the gap of attainment level of pupils from different districts had been expanding so much due to an excess of experimentalism, that enrichment of fundamental attainment was required" (Monbusho, 1980)<sup>6</sup>. The 1958 revised course of study re-introduced the so-called systematic learning of subject, instead of the child centered

<sup>5</sup> Legislative power is invested in the Diet which consists of the House of Representatives and The House of Councillors Dietmen are elected into the Diet.

<sup>6</sup> *Yoshimatsu Shibata* insisted that the progressive child centered education of post war Japan necessarily came to an end after the short boom, since it as a 'method' lacked sincere considerations about 'contents' or 'social needs' for children's learning (Shibata, 2000, pp. 90 ff.).

education. And after this time, the course of study put together and distributed by the Ministry of Education (MoE) about every 10 years became a formal standard of school curriculum, which outlined among other things the contents of textbooks (Shibata, 2000, pp. 92 ff.).

#### *Development of economy and education for economy*

It is notable that the Japanese school system had been developing steadily after 1950, accompanied with the rapid economic recovery boosted by increased manufacturing associated with the Korean War. There was about a 50% upper secondary school (USS)<sup>7</sup> entry rate in 1955, increasing to over 90% by 1974. It reached over 95% in 1984. In 1955<sup>8</sup> only 1 out of 10 entered into university (incl. junior college), but in 1971 over 1 out of 4 entered into university, in 1974 over 1 out of 3 entered into university, and this rate, in the main, was sustained throughout the 1980s.

The lesson hours, which were/are proposed in the course of study by the MoE, had also steadily increased from the 1950s to the 1970s, especially for lower secondary school. The total lesson hours of lower secondary school for 3 years were 3045 in 1951 and 3535 at the end of the 1970s<sup>9</sup>.

These rapid developments were enabled by growth of public finance. Japan's annual average GDP growth rate from 1955 to 1973 was about 15% – the percentage of Japanese public finance spent on education throughout these years was around 5% of GDP. The economic growth in postwar Japan was enabled by school education, which had begun to provide a substantial amount of highly developed workers to the labour market. In this sense economy and education had been developing interdependently. As the Japanese economy expanded, demand for education also increased. Especially, the industrial sectors began to require more and more highly trained labour in the 1960s.

The MoE introduced the national achievement test for lower secondary school from 1961 (to 1964), aimed at “early diagnosis of talented human resources” (Yamazumi, 1987, p. 219). It was said that this national test policy was planned based on the human capital theory, imported from the

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<sup>7</sup> Upper secondary school is not compulsory education – the three years from 10<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade – leading to university entrance or job. See above for figure 1 of the Japanese school system.

<sup>8</sup> There was no exact data as to university attendance rate before 1954, due to the reform of the school system.

<sup>9</sup> See: table 1.

USA (Kokumin kyouiku kenkyujo, 1973, p. 325). The Economic Deliberation Council (1963) reported: “the necessity of human resource development policy” as follows:

Having highly talented manpower means having human resources which can take leading roles in many positions and areas within the economy, and achieve economic development. School education has prevailed on one hand – consequently on the other hand there is a lack of system, which gives distinctive education and produces skilful, or utilizes the talent of, people. Presently in this age of dynamic innovation, the importance of highly skilled and talented people is increasing – for example scientists who create innovative technology; managers as innovators who introduce new technologies and find new markets with them; and leaders of both capital and labour unions who handle vastly complicated labour relations effectively. All society, including school education, should respect talent and the need for skillful people. Accompanied with the implementation of meritocracy in education and society, people themselves should orient firmly towards a new idea of education and work, which will mean that everyone receives education corresponding to their ability and aptitude, and that workers are evaluated and utilized correspondent to their abilities (Kokumin kyoiku kenkyujo, 1973, p. 339).

The Central Council for Education (CCE), a central policy making body under the MoE, also reported in 1966 about “Improvement of USS” as follows:

Both in the course for setting up general education and occupational education, the current state should be reconsidered as to its contents and method of instruction in order to: respond to the abilities, attitudes and orientation of pupils; and to fit the requirements for the professional diversification of jobs and the needs for manpower from new industrial fields. For this purpose, the curriculum should be diversified (Kokumin kyouiku kenkyujo, 1973, p. 340).

The Japan Federation of Employer’s Associations (“*Nikkeiren*”) also rejected the school system of postwar Japan and demanded diversification in 1969:

Considering that there is a defect through not responding to requirements for educational diversification, a fundamental reform of the 6.3.3.4 school

system should be implemented, especially for the secondary and higher education sectors (Kanda, Terasaki, & Hirabara, 1991, p. 369).

In 1971, CCE proposed the most sensational report in the postwar period, which suggested clear diversification of secondary and higher education.

After the postwar reform of the school system, the nine year compulsory education was established, equal opportunity of education had been advanced and the national educational level was greatly elevated. There is no doubt that these changes, coupled with a long history of an organized educational system, greatly contributed to the social and economic developments of Japan. School education today, however, faces a problem of how to respond to the requirement for a change of quality, caused by an increase of quantity. Confusion and distortion are left, which derive from the rapid reform of the school system under the special condition of the losing the War (Monbusho, 1971, p. 17).

Section 1, Capital 2(2): The fundamental concepts for reform of elementary and secondary education.

[...] For the purpose of solving the problem which is caused by the division of secondary education into lower and upper schools, a consistent secondary school should be introduced. It offers diversified courses for pupils with widely diversified talents, interests and abilities. Instruction and guidance make such education uninhibited and effective (Monbusho, 1971, p. 21).

These requirements or proposals show that the school system with almost no diversification, which was introduced under the strong influence of USA, had already achieved satisfactory success at the point of the schooling rate by 1960s. None-the-less they pointed out that, especially from the viewpoint of further economic development, the said system's ability to produce the human resource required for further economic developments was questionable.

#### *“Meritocratic” single track system*

Given that the ‘meritocracy’ is defined as a fundamental rule of social mobilization which enables all children to promote their social status according to the result of the entrance examination for upper schools, meritocracy had existed already in Japan from the prewar era, though just very few pupils had participated in this meritocratic race then. In this

context, the call for the diversification of the school system was interpreted as a reconstruction of the prewar system. However, there was a difference between the prewar and the postwar era, because now the incomparably large amount of pupils was involved in the meritocratic race throughout the school system. It is noteworthy here that the Japanese school system has often been described as "meritocratic" and criticized for this, even though there is no clear diversification by "merit" in the postwar era.

The Japan Teachers Union (JTU) and educational scholars who supported JTU disapproved of this intensely, and using their considerable power, called for systems to enable meritocracy:

Prevalence of meritocracy in education is now becoming a basic principal of national policy, and its aim and character is tantamount to anti-democratic and anti-educational. [...] The report of the Economic Council on January 1963 'Challenges and solutions of human resource development for the economic growth' links prevalence of meritocracy in education as a basic principal of national policy for the nurturing of a 'high talent man power', estimated at 3-5% of pupils, and from this viewpoint, it defines the production of a dedicated work force as the main function of school education. For this purpose the report argues and urges for 'the strengthening of merit observation and career counseling of pupils', and 'that the age from lower secondary to USS is the most critical stage for this merit observation and career process to be observed' (Kondo, 1984).

In 1971 an inquiry commission by the OECD released a report on educational policy in Japan. In this report it was emphasized that the importance of "social selection" was too large in the Japanese school system. They describe 'the social birth' for those aged 18. This meant for Japanese USS students (coming up for 18) which university they could enter into had the ultimate importance for their entire life. But, from a different angle, a society which gives a chance for social mobility and realizing potential through its school system is, to put it mildly, better than a society in which everyone must spend their life as predetermined by birth. In this sense a meritocratic school system can be built on an essentially progressive and democratic principle. In this OECD report, however, the school system in Japan is evaluated as much distorted, symbolized by 'examination hell', so that there is no longer sound meritocracy, but 'educationocracy' or 'degreeocracy', which was, according to the description of the OECD's report, a variation of aristocracy in feudal

societies (OECD, 1971).

Emphasizing the stressful situation in the Japanese school system, this OECD's report did not give enough attention to the educational process itself in the Japanese school. Another important trait in the Japanese school system which was not to be ignored was a sort of egalitarianism. For example, there were almost no students being kept back in elementary and lower secondary schools in Japan, despite it being possible for those not attaining required levels to be kept back legally. That meant that every pupil went up to the next class in April, even if s/he studied nothing for a year, had achieved their personal targets, which fell below the required standard when applying a deficit model, or failed to comprehend the syllabus. Thus, as class years increased, the attainment levels and outcomes among pupils in a classroom became more diverse. Meanwhile, USS in Japan were stratified by their attainment level. By entrance examination some might be accepted, but others might be rejected and have no other choice but go to other (possibly poorer) USS where s/he can pass the entrance exam. As a result, USS are stratified and each keeps attainment homogeneity. The important point here is that an individual student's career (ladder) prospects depend on their attainment outcomes which determines which USS the student gets accepted to, and attends. However, those USS ranked worse in terms of attainment stratification, may enter their students for entrance examinations to universities.

W. K. Cummings, more carefully than the OECD's report, stated that until the 1970s the Japanese school system had been associated with two main characteristics. First a well-organized universally accessible compulsory schools system. Second, a meritocratic highly stratified USS/university system (Cummings, 1980). In Japanese compulsory schools, the lower attainment a student makes the greater care (attention) they get. Teachers preferred to evaluate students' effort, process, and achievement rather than attainment. When moving into USS or university, students get an 'appropriate' position based on their 'merit'. This system generated a high average with small variance of cognitive level in Japanese schools in total, even though it produced some problems for USS. Such a combination of two principles, the effort-oriented and the merit-oriented, also worked as a universal norm in the work place in Japan.

Thus, it can be said that the required diversification of the school system was not carried out in Japan, because of protests by those on the left of center politically (with socialist leanings) and the will of people who fully

welcomed the common school system of the postwar age, but also, and mainly because of the substitution for formal diversification by the *Japanese original meritocratic single track system*, as shown in the Cummings' work.

The Japanese original meritocratic single track system was characterized by two traits. Firstly, the dignity of an individual pupil's personality is always regarded, irrespective of their achievements or test scores because formal diversification means, in this context, a kind of discrimination. Secondly, attainments or test scores of pupils are praiseworthy as results of their daily efforts. These lead them to a suitable position at every particular point in life, at the age of 15 and 18, when they take the entrance examination for USS or universities. At the age of 15, the highest attaining pupils go to the best USS and the lowest attaining pupils to the worst USS, as a result of a single one day entrance examination and an evaluation report of their total performance based on three years of junior high school. However, all pupils are equal because they are all belong to USS as the same category, even if there are large differences in their educational attainment levels and school culture.

At the age of 18, there are two options for pupils; to go into higher education or to get a job. The same things are repeated, i.e. the best go to the best university, in part due to the severe entrance examinations. There are two points to be noted here: firstly, albeit widely understood but never said, universities have, just like USS, large attainment gaps in their academic levels, standings, cultural and social status. Secondly, here too as with USS, despite such big attainment gaps, students are formally equal because they all belong to 'university' as the same category.

Pupils who decide to get a job are often ranked under university students, but there is no limitation formally for when and where they can take a university entrance examination. In reality they have not so many chances, because they have mostly spent three years in a relatively poor USS. However, with regard to the official qualification, every USS pupil is equal.

Akio Inui pointed out that this meritocratic single track system occurred in human resource management of Japanese big industries (Inui, 1990). According to his argument, since there was no systematic vocational training like in Germany or the UK, Japanese industries had to be in charge of initial and in-service training of workers. Such training was also suitable for rapid innovation in this era. It was also a critical issue for industries to

gain the loyalty of workers in order for them to retain their workforce and to restrain the potential developments of labour movements. To ensure appropriate training and loyalty, which corresponded to the needs of industries, an egalitarian human resource management with non-discriminative meritocratic screening was preferable. In this viewpoint, the diversification of USS was not only unnecessary, but also rather harmful.

Yo Takeuchi argued also the Japanese original meritocracy which was common to the school system and human resource management in industries, used a concept of “the reshuffling type of the selection norm” (Takeuchi, 1995, p. 242). According to his argument, supported by his experimental research of Japanese big industries, promotions in Japanese industries were carried out based on ‘merits’ of an individual worker at that particular time. Nonetheless, there were always a certain amount of unexpected promotions because there was always a possibility of reshuffling through periodical personnel evaluation in Japanese industries.

The reshuffling process was maintained through the human resource management with no clear tracking of workers. Conversely, such human resource management of Japanese industries, without visible tracking was reinforced by the possibility of continued reshuffling, because the clear tracking must maintain space for reshuffling over the tracks (Takeuchi, 1995).

These empirical arguments suggested that the reports for diversification of the school system did not reflect what real human requirements were needed. In other words, it can be said that a future perspective was envisaged, which oriented on restructuring the working environment and the Japanese social stratification, and was not concerned with policy making applicable to the then real situation. The main trait of the Japanese educational policy in this era could be identified not by the superficially, boldly proclaimed diversification measures, which had made no defined change, but by the meritocratic single-track system, which had been covering both schools and industries in a subtle and complicated way. The school system had, with the Japanese original meritocratic single track system, achieved great success both in quantity and quality, and accompanied miraculous economic growth. In other words, most of the first generation after WWII, who had grown up in the 1970s, achieved better social success with better school credentials, compared with their parents who had little chance to go to USS or university in general.

**Initial appearance of neo-liberal policy in education: transition in the 1980s**

Around 1980, in Western nations, neo-liberal powers, in the background of economic downturns, became stronger (Harvey, 2005, pp. 22 ff). In 1982 Japan also had a new Prime Minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone, who carried out with force the privatization of some big monopolistic state-run enterprises: the Japan Railway; Telegraph and Telephone Public Corporation; the Tobacco and Salt Public Corporation. Based on these, Nakasone might be regarded as a typical neo-liberal politician, but it is not easy to conclude so. In 1980s, the Japanese economy was at its peak, recovering most rapidly in the world from a short recession caused by the 1973 Oil Crisis. For example, in the early 1980s, 'Japan as Number One' (originally by E. Vogel, sociologist in USA) was a vogue term in Japan. When Nakasone became the Prime Minister, he was regarded as a restorative nationalistic politician with wartime naval officer experience. Nakasone's political slogan was 'the final settlement of postwar politic', that meant reform of the postwar reforms introduced by the occupation power, which were not always, from his viewpoint, fitting for Japan. As to educational policy, he founded a special council in 1984 directly belonging to the Prime Minister's office. This '*Provisional Council on Education Reform*' (PCER) aimed to lead neo-liberal educational reforms, eliminating the influences of the Central Council for Education in the MoE. From the Nakasone's viewpoint, the MoE as the central institution of the education state was indeed an obstacle for a fundamental reform of school systems, because it seemed to him that the MoE could not abandon the belief in the egalitarianism derived from the Constitution so that it failed to carry out the visible reformation of the postwar school system (Harada, 1988, pp. 47 ff).

One of the most influential members of PCER, Ken-ichi Koyama, pointed out the three problems within the Japanese education system: uniformity, closeness and non-internationality. Consequently, he promoted the idea that the Japanese education system, facing the end of catch-up growth, must orient itself in a new direction of liberalization, diversification and internationalization (Koyama, 1987, p.21 ff). By this argument, the Japanese education system must be reformed, not because it failed, but because it had fully succeeded in its initial goals and now needed a new direction with new goals to develop further (Koyama, 1987, p. 33). Takao Saito explained why PCER was needed in the 1980s:

The birth of PCER was much concerned with the will of economic circles. [...] 1980s was the era of great change of the Japanese industrial structure. Moving the core of Japanese industries from the secondary industries of manufacturing to the third industries of services, an ideal human image demanded by economic circles had been changing (Saito, 2004, pp. 28-29).

These future oriented proposals for liberalization of education, however, could not get support, even in PCER itself, because the MoE succeeded in sending some members into PCER, who represented the will of the MoE. Outside of PCER, these proposals were criticized by JTU and educational scholars who supported JTU. Public opinions were also not favorable for the proposals of PCER, which were seemed to undermine the equality of educational chance. As a result, no substantial liberalization of education was introduced in the time following PCER. A member of PCER, who was a supporter of liberalization, is quoted as saying at the end of PCER deliberations ‘Parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus’ (“The mountains will be in labour, and a ridiculous mouse will be brought forth”, Horace, 18 BC) (Harada, 1988, p. 20).

Still in this era, it was too early for the Japanese school system to take a step forward to reformation. However, PCER still had some importance for providing a transition period by introducing some ideas of neo-liberal educational reform into Japan. The reforms had been coming into practice gradually right up to the present and will probably continue into the future.

### **Politicians-led Politics and neo-liberalism: since the late 1980s**

#### *Japanese politicians-led politics*

By the 1990s socialism had almost entirely lost its power base globally, as was the case in Japan too. This empowered the market system. The *Social Democratic Party of Japan* (SDPJ), which had been for a long time the second largest party in Japan, disappeared from the Diet (the Japanese political assembly). The *Liberal Democratic Party* (LDP), which for a long time had been the political party in power also split into several groups. Politicians repeatedly aligned and realigned in different groups, eventually lumping together the conservatives, and the liberals with (the onetime) socialists. The political layout of Japan began to become confused – a situation that has continued to the present day. The economy, experienced

the so called ‘bubble busting’ of the boom, bust in the early 1990s and the financial situation experienced rapid decline. Further deregulations were introduced to reinforce the market, but were not effective. Since then, Japan has fallen into an unprecedented severe recession. Politically; during the 10 years of post-bubble, Japan has had 8 Prime Ministers and a decade of confused disarray.

With the new millennium the first authentic neo-liberal Prime Minister, Jun-ichiro Koizumi, came into power, and has stayed in power for 6 years, which is an exceptional length of time for a Japanese Prime Minister, and he remains in place as a result of his public popularity (Uchiyama, 2007). Koizumi neo-liberalized the central administration with the catchword ‘politicians-led’. ‘Politicians-led’ is, in its broadest sense, that a goal, concept, planning, adjustment of conflicts, and carrying out and accountability, in short, all matters regarding policy, are led and managed by politicians, not by bureaucrats. It is recognized that such a new approach for Japan has been in operation as a political tradition of western countries. However, the phrase “politicians-led” in Japan also included a call for reformation of Japanese political culture.

This populist Prime Minister Koizumi succeeded in the liquidation of the Japan Post, which was unobtrusively the world’s biggest financial institution. That meant, in short, central bureaucrats could no longer make free use of the Japan Post’s funds to control the economic market. Thus, a new age of market oriented policy was about to begin in Japan. In progress of the neo-liberal reconstruction of Japan some problems appeared, it especially became clear that neo-liberal policies produced gaps between social groups according to their situation. Koizumi’s successors had to take over, with some embarrassment, the responsibility of filling these gaps. Japanese politics had fallen, once again, into confused disarray. During the 3 years after Koizumi, LDP appointed 3 different Prime Ministers. In 2009 LDP lost its majority in the Diet, the first time since 1955, as *the Democratic Party of Japan* (DPJ) came into the power. This Party mainly consisted of groups which had come from LDP in the 1990s and with other groups which originally belonged to the right wing of SDPJ. Hence it was (is) difficult for the DPJ to have a united political and economic position within its own<sup>10</sup>.

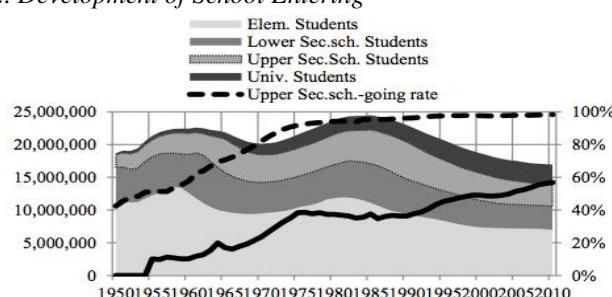
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<sup>10</sup> So-called ‘Manifesto’ of DPJ for the Diet election 2010 in English is:  
<http://www.dpj.or.jp/english/manifesto/manifesto2010.pdf>

### 'Yutori' reform as neo-liberal educational reform

Against this backdrop, from the 1990s, a third era from the viewpoint of this paper, the USS entry rate had been staying over 97% and reached almost its peak. Accompanied by a decreasing youth population, the university entry rate had continued to increase throughout this era (see Figure 2).

*Figure 2. Development of School Entering*



Source: Monbusho, *Gakko kihon chosa* [The Ministry of Education, Annual survey of school], <http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat>List.do?bid=000001015843&cycode=0>

During the 1990s the MoE carried out a reduction of compulsory education called 'slimming'. The five-day school week system, which before had been set to a six day week system, was gradually introduced into public maintained schools. This was completed in 2002 and at the same time the curriculum was cut back both in quantity and quality too. The reason for the reduction, as given by the Central Council for Education (CCE), was as follows:

We think it is important to have 'yutori' for children, schools, and whole society, including home and regional society [...] to bring out 'zest for life'. Children are leading a busy life now. It is difficult to foster the 'zest for life' in such conditions. It will become possible for children to think independently, to look at themselves, and get various real life and social experiences abundantly from their home and regional society for the first time when we give children 'yutori'. It is necessary to secure a lot of time for children to spend at home and in their regional society, that is, the time children can spend independently (i.e. outside of school) and voluntarily. With this time management, it becomes possible for children to have

'yutori' in their mind for the first time (Chuo Kyoiku Shingikai, 1996).

In the above 'yutori', semantically *room* or *latitude*, can be translated as 'education free from pressure' or 'relaxed education', i.e. giving room for every life aspect, for example, room for playing, room for thinking, and even room to do nothing. A school was strictly criticized for implementing an intensive cramming education system. According to this CCE report 1996, Japanese schools must secure 'yutori' for all Japanese children in order to prepare for a 'high knowledge society' in the near future. The course of study for schools was revised in 1998, and school management was introduced at the same time as the so called 'autonomy of school'. The MoE explained that the revised course of study was a minimum standard for every school, and every school had its own autonomy to arrange its own educational activities with an ad hoc approach to autonomous thinking.

The lesson hours in Japanese schools had decreased from 5821 in the 1970s to 5785 in the 1990s in the elementary school, and from 3535 to 3150 in the lower secondary school (see Table 1).

*Table 1. Standard lesson hours by the course of study*

Year	Elementary School (6 years)	Lower Sec. School (3 years)
1951	5780	3045
1961	5821	3360
1971	5821	3535
1980	5785	3150
1992	5785	3150
2002	5367	2940
2011	5645	3045

Source: [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo3/siryo/07110606/002.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo3/siryo/07110606/002.pdf)

Most teachers welcomed 'yutori' and school autonomy policies, since the reformative/progressive scholars and JTU had also desired likewise policies for a long time, criticizing central control. Arguably, it is controversial whether this 'yutori' reform was a kind of neo-liberal educational reform or not, in the sense of competition oriented reform. Seeing how many lesson hours were decreased by the course of study in 1998, it sounds plausible that 'yutori' reform aimed to facilitate a release mechanism from the stressful meritocratic competition system that had prevailed before. If so, it might not be described as neo-liberal.

As mentioned before the basic characteristics of Japanese schools had been a countrywide high average with small variance, and a communal atmosphere. Certainly there had been problems like dropout, school phobia, violence in schools and so on, as had occurred in other industrialized countries, but the seriousness was incomparably low in Japan. For example the annual dropout rate of USS had been recorded at about 2% and the evidence reveals that Japanese schools could be deemed a success (Fujita, 2006, p. 14). So, what was ‘*yutori*’ reform of Japanese Education?

Concerning the planning of ‘*yutori*’ reform, a journalist reported an interesting discourse from a former chairman of the *Council of School Curriculum*, which proposed the reduction of lesson hours.

Japanese pupils' well above average record is a result of the competitive policy, aiming at catching up with industrialized western countries. Comparing internationally, the average score of the USA and European countries is lower, but great leaders are produced in these countries. Japan must simulate such style of these advanced countries. To carry out this purpose is the true aim of ‘*yutori*’ reform. Now we are in the age, in which it is difficult to speak of elite education, so that now we are just beating around the bush. And that's all I have to say (Saito, 2000, p. 41).

In this discourse, it was expressed that the potential aim of ‘*yutori*’ reform was to create a class society like in some European countries, but by a different way from making a visible elite track in the school system. Saito's idea was very strategic. If people would hear a call for ‘*yutori*’, which sounded very plausible, they would (mis)understand that hard work in school was no longer suitable to a new era and stop competing with each other. However, some more prudent families would not believe in such “sugared words” and encouraged their children to keep working hard in school, or willingly choose expensive private schools which did not receive ‘*yutori*’ policy. One generation later, a new class society in Japan formed very naturally as a result. Thus ‘*yutori*’ reform was, even though all official explanations by MoE were ear-pleasing, evaluated as a type of neo-liberal educational reform, in the sense that it manufactured a social and economic gap.

A highly regarded educational scholar and onetime vice director of the National Institute for Educational Policy Research, Shogo Ichikawa, wrote:

The reason why this new concept of education was accepted relatively

smoothly by the education state was because of the existence of common ideas, for instance deregulation and decentralization and so on, between the individualism and the child centrisim which have been existing strongly in the education state on one hand and neo-liberalism or neo-conservatism on the other hand. Therefore, it was very difficult to see through that there was the neo-liberalism and the neo-conservatism in the background of this new concept of education, and that respect of individuality and developing of creativity meant the aggravating of meritocracy (Ichikawa, 2006, p. 67).

‘*Yutori*’ reform with deregulation and decentralization was supposed to focus on exhaustive ‘skewed’ and powerful meritocracy, secretly, but definitely.

Also Hiroshi Sanuki, a well-known progressive educational scholar, argues that ‘*yutori*’ reform inspired some parents to be anxious about the achievement of their child and drove them to seek privatized educational resources to compete for achievement (Sanuki, 2009, p. 29). The parents’ influence at the local level could not be controlled by the MoE and influenced prefectural and local level sub-government level policy making in a bottom up approach.

Thus, regardless of the plausible explanations of the MoE and with the support from the left, this piece of neo-liberal educational reform policy was an opening for expanding the attainment gap between children. In urban areas, especially Tokyo, affluent families’ preference to use private schools had been increasing. The revision of the course of study until the middle of the 1990s had been just an education state theme, i.e. not a common interest matter. Now it became popular to argue about the course of study not only within the education state, but also in more universal areas, including TV shows, weekly magazines, tabloid papers and so on. It could be seen here that the political field regarding education was expanding and strengthening. Hidenori Fujita (2010) called such changes ‘the postmodern transformation of discourse and media space’.

#### *Neo-liberal shifts in 2000s*

In this third era, it was a remarkable trait in education policy making that some governmental agencies took a massive percentage of the important part of the agenda setting for education. Education policy adopted a short-sighted top-down style, which is also a characteristic of neo-liberal politics. The most important agency in this context was the

*Deregulation Council*, which has existed since 1996, changing name many times, but always under the Prime Minister's Cabinet Office. The Deregulation Council proposed that a public school choice in compulsory education, and school inspection with evaluation were necessary. Around the year 2000 some local governments introduced public school choice through their discretionary powers (Monbukagakusho<sup>11</sup>, 2008). Public school choice in elementary and lower secondary school has been rapidly spreading in central Tokyo up to 2011, and 19 of 23 wards of central Tokyo has implemented public school choice in some way. Evidence for the spreading of attainment gaps among public schools due to public school choice (not yet popular outside big cities) was brought to light with the national attainment survey for 12 and 15 years old pupils since 2007. Applicants for private lower secondary schools have been increasing every year. Public school choice may be a way to regain students back from private schools, but in fact the application rate of 12 year old pupils for private lower secondary school has been increasing in Tokyo from 20.0% in 2000 to 30.9% in 2008. In some wards it reaches over 50% (Fujita, 2006). In fact, total lesson hours of Japanese, English and mathematics in an average private lower secondary school in Tokyo area reach 1.6 -1.9 times that of a public one (Ichikawa, 2006, p. 61). A similar situation has been observed in elementary schools, but on a smaller scale. Once a public school is ranked in a lower position, it is extremely difficult for it to recover, since no well-informed parent is going to be willing to send their child to such a school or, if they can afford it, will not hesitate to choose a private school. The course of study and other regulations can only regulate the basic curriculum of private schools, even though private schooling in Japan is a part of 'public education'. Thus, it seems that the paradoxical strategy of '*yutori*' reform, as told by a former chairman of the *Council of School Curriculum* (see the previous paragraph), is coming into fruition, at least in Tokyo.

A new type of 6 years secondary school (relating to the one track system) was legally introduced in 1999, which are public maintained

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<sup>11</sup>'Monbusho' (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture) changed the name to 'Monbukagakusho' (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) in 2001, taking over a part of the Science and Technology Agency. After that, MEXT became the official English abbreviation of the Japanese Central Ministry in charge of education. In order to avoid confusion, this paper consistently uses MoE for MEXT as the English abbreviation.

secondary schools leading directly to university entrance examination. Now there are only a few 6 years public maintained secondary schools, but the MoE aims to make 500 such schools in the near future, which would make up about 5% of lower secondary schools in Japan. A new type of private school was also proposed and introduced as an exception by the Koizumi administration in 2003 under the context of deregulation and restructuring by the *Deregulation Council*. Here private companies and NPOs were able to found a private school in approved special areas, released from some important legal regulations, including the Course of Study.

The actualization of these new schools is, from this paper's viewpoint, evaluated as a sort of diversification of the Japanese school system; described by Hidenori Fujita (2007) as: a new tendency will prevail that it is natural to feature special lessons for entrance examinations or to start elite education from elementary level, and such a tendency will amplify the spread of elite nine year elementary and lower secondary schools, 6 years secondary schools, and public school choice.

It is a choice of prefectural or local governments, whether they introduce such diversification into their own school policy and make good use of possibilities open to them. In this context, it is concluded that there can be found much broader educational policy making spaces at prefectural/local level in neo-liberal deregulated Japan.

For the moment, however, public school choice, 6 years secondary school and new types of private school have not prevailed as planned, probably due to the lack of a consistent political power, which supports such diversification against the opposition. As to the '*yutori*' reform, responding to public opinion, the MoE could not help but begin a substantial withdrawal and decide to increase the lesson hours from 2011, as seen in Table1 (above).

### **Some discussions: Who controls educational policy making in Japan?**

It is useful for the aim of this paper to look intensively at the question of actors in educational policy development in Japan. In the Japanese context three frameworks for interpretation are discussed: the bureaucracy dominant framework, the political party dominant framework and the pluralistic framework.

Social science in Japan had been very strongly affected by Marxism

since the 1930s. Masao Maruyama, the most influential political scholar in postwar Japan, wrote: "Marxism represented everything of social sciences" (Maruyama, 1961, p. 55). Also Yoshihiro Shimizu, one of the representative educational scholars in postwar Japan, wrote: "(In the 1950's) the thinking style of most educational scholars was ideological, and they were all enslaved by the ideology, in short" (Shimizu, 1987, p. 42). In this case, "the ideology" means Marxism ideology.

Marxist ideology assumes that there are two positions in society, the ruling class and the labour class. The former consists of the moneyed capitalist class and some institutions for authoritative control of the "civil society". The nation state, with its political and administrative organizations, is also a measure of capitalism. In this context, the economic circles of big industries, the political party in power and bureaucracy are all one monolithic power. Capitalists have the most fundamental power, politicians represent their opinion, and MoE carries out all their policies through bureaucracy. The bureaucracy dominant framework focused on the definitive role of bureaucrats in the central Ministries.

The bureaucracy dominant model has a standpoint that sees the bureaucratic system as a naturally evolving power group that has existed longer with unbroken continuity than all official organizations in Japan, which wields an overwhelming influence over Japanese society, regardless whether or not democracy is in action. Thus, far from obeying political parties and the Diet, it is independent when it comes to policy making. In this sense, the bureaucratic system in Japan is a serious obstacle to democracy (Sasaki, 1999, p. 218).

This bureaucracy dominant framework indicates not only a special trait of the Japanese political system, especially when compared with British and American systems, but also clearly explains the driving force behind the rapid economic development of postwar Japan. In a study of the Japanese economic history, the reason for the economic success of postwar Japanese is often explained through the theory of 'the 1940 system' (Noguchi, 1998). Following this theory, in 1940 Japanese bureaucracy took total control of economic activity in order to give every effort to keep the war effort going. After this system performed this purpose, it then served postwar rehabilitation, in negotiation and approval with/of GHQ, which then led to rapid economic growth as it concentrated its support on some

main fields of industry, eventually resulting in Japan's ability to overcome the Oil Crisis in the 70's. It is documented that this system was the main locus of control well until the mid-1980s. Against this bureaucracy dominant framework, the political party dominant framework began to appear in the political science circles since the 1980s. This framework is explained by Tsuyoshi Sasaki as follows:

A dominance of the party government had been established by the new constitution in the postwar era, politicians seemed to have developed their policy making competence in the meantime and a plural political process had been established which was no longer controlled by the bureaucracy (Sasaki, 1999, p. 218).

This framework of political party dominance had, according to Sasaki, “became popular temporarily” in the 1980s, but “disappeared completely in the 1990s” (Sasaki, 1999, pp. 219-220). There is no doubt, that the political party in power had a sure and certain influence on policy making, but the bureaucracy of each Ministry was controlling policy making too. This was, at least, the popular understanding within the political science community in Japan.

Now even in the time of ‘politicians-led’, the dominance of the central Ministries’ bureaucracy had basically not changed (Nakano, 2010). So called political appointment of top bureaucrats has been to a small degree extended, but was still limited. Regarding issues of changes of personnel, a Minister can put forward their opinion, but it is definitely rare for her/him to take such action, and it is very clear that the Minister will not get any support from the Ministry, if she/he breaks the implicit protocol of the Ministry. Such a position helps to explain the CCE Reports published throughout the 1960s (see above) that were never realized as policy as text or policy as discourse (Ball, 2006).

Recent studies of policy making in Japan are mainly focusing on various types of interaction within or around a particular Ministry. For example, a research group led by Hideaki Shiroyama on the policy making process in the central Ministry reported diversity in the way policy making was carried out in the Ministry by the Ministry (Shiroyama & Suzuki, 1999). According to their research, there are four characteristic patterns of policy making by central Ministries: project style, assessment style, bottom up style, and liaison style (Shiroyama & Suzuki, 1999, pp. 5-10). The policy

making of the MoE was characterized as mainly bottom up style, which was constructed on the needs of the school and the board of education at prefectural and municipal level (Maekawa, 2002).

A British political scientist L. J. Schoppa described the essence of educational policy making in postwar Japan as a 'bottom-up style of policy making process through sub-government' (Schoppa, 1991), which seems to tie in closely with the 'education state' depicted by Hodgson and Spours (2006).

The bottom up style of policy making process found in the MoE consisted of four elements. First, the relative independent (but limited) role of Dietmen in different Ministries. Second, extensive room for discretion in educational policy making on prefectural and local level. Third, behavior of parents in the education market that could not be controlled, and influenced prefectural, local level sub-government policy making. Finally, the considerable power held by the role of the teachers' union etc. (Honda, 2003).

Moreover a Japanese educational sociologist, Teruyuki Hirota, pointed out a change in the framework of educational policy counterbalance in Japan (Hirota, 2009). He argued that before PCER in 1980s the competition between the monolithic ruling class and the reformatory/progressive groups including JTU was a basic framework to understand most of the educational agenda with much discussion but little change to policy and little interest in research into the struggle for dominance in policy making within the central power structure. After PCER, the monolithic ruling class was divided loosely into two camps: market oriented neo-liberals and traditional conservatives. The reformatory/progressive groups on the other hand were declining partly as a result of the worldwide decline of communism around 1990.

In the 1990s, accompanied by the decline of communist states, the influence of Marxism over academics was rapidly decreasing globally, as it was in Japan. There have recently been an increasing number of monographs, which focus on educational policy making processes including these conflicts, negotiations, compromises and so on. Arguably a reasonable degree of educational policy making studies in Japan are still based on the assumption of a monolithic power structure. The monolithic power structure now consists of 'political liberal' and 'social democrats', with the 'social democrats' holding a much smaller presence compared to before. Thus in current times, all of the three camps have points in both

conflict and in common with each other, and educational policy making processes are no longer determined through a monolithic power of one. Rather, Japanese educational policy making processes could be interpreted as complex interactions among various actors acting within a pluralistic framework. Such a pluralistic framework is defined as the political spaces using Hodgson and Spours framework (2006). Therefore, using Hodgson and Spours framework the 'education state' is framed by the interaction between three camps, the bureaucratic framework, the political party framework, and the pluralistic framework, which have expanded at various levels. Furthermore, it could be also said here, focusing on the interactions among various actors based on their each important value, that the three camps model of educational policy in Japan illustrates the current constellation of the 'education state' on the analytic framework of Hodgson and Spours (2006).

## Conclusion

It is a fundamental problem whether or not Japanese schools were at such a serious and critical point that such exhaustive and rapid reforms were needed post WW II, with the introduction of meritocracy in the transition period, and with the introduction of Yutori that effectively embedded meritocracy and the rapid development of private education, thus dismantling the old system and building a new one. It is not clear if Japanese educational policy will keep going in a neo-liberal direction. Neo-liberal reforms have now withdrawn Yutori, and increased lesson hours for all from 2011 (Ichikawa, 2006).

In respect of the transformation of political space, it is clear that some new changes have begun to emerge. The call for a politicians-led system has a potential to continue to contend with the bureaucratic monolithic control of the MoE. The decentralization has shifted a part of the educational policy making space to prefectures, and local sub-governments. The policy making space at the central level is reducing its size in both cases, and responding to parents at the local level, even though the MoE is the strongest actor in the educational policy making at least for the moment.

In such a situation, the question emerges, what possibilities do educational scholars in Japan have? So far Japan has built up four possibilities taken from Japanese discussion and practice. The first is a

propaganda strategy where an individual school intentionally uses media space to peddle propaganda about its 'desirable school', while cooperating with educational scholars. Second, the infiltration strategy, where an approach is made to a person in power directly, or a person becomes an advisor of politicians, just as neo-liberal economists became advisors for the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party. Third, the rearguard strategy, to retreat to academia and make efforts to reconstruct educational science which can calmly analyze educational policy. Finally, the micro-politics strategy, to find a space not in a policy making process itself, but on the site (i.e. at a school), a district, a school board, at a city, town, village and so on. At these prefectural and local sites, through a process of micro-politics, solid reformations are implemented school by school, town by town that do not seek to change the countrywide education system (Hirota, 2009; Akita Tsuneyoshi, & Satō, 2005).

It is impossible to define which of these options is best, however, it is recommended that there are still some promising possibilities for educational scholars, even in the third era of pluralistic frameworks within which struggles exist between bureaucracy, monolithic power bases, politicians-led policy, prefectural, local sub-government policy, the pressure of parents, the Japanese Teachers' Union, and neo-liberalism.

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