

Unstable educational administration: Problems implied in the national achievement test system and the teacher certification renewal system



Takashi ITO Professor Emeritus at Yokohama National University

Introduction

The above-cited issue, which this author had proposed, was adopted at the Editorial Committee held on August 20. At that time, public opinion about transfer of political power had already been considered unshakable; ten days later, this assessment proved to be correct when election results of the House of Representatives were announced; and on September 16, the political power was actually transferred. I must confess that I was confused about how to write this article when I faced the shift of the core administrative pillar. Before assuming the reins of new government, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) had unveiled the 2009 DPJ Manifesto on July 27. The Manifesto stipulates DPJ's five "pledges," including the second one, "Children and Education," which promises to pay a "child allowance" for all children until they finish junior high school, and to make high school education effectively free and make the university scholarship system much more inclusive. The Manifesto also describes detailed policies, including "Provide a high-quality education to all." Under this title, [Policy Objectives] are defined as "Enhance the educational environment in schools, improve the quality of teachers and increase their numbers." One of its [Specific Measures] is described as "Fundamentally review the teacher certification system in order to improve teacher quality."

When this article is published, the subject problems may have been already solved or the first step to solve the problems may have already been taken. If this is the case, I should feel grateful. Here, at the moment I write, I would like to clarify the realities of the two educational systems which have already been realized and which are cited in the heading, and then discuss why they do matter, from the viewpoint of "fostering of next-generation human resources,"

which is the starting point of elementary and secondary education.

Various problems of the national achievement test system

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been administering the national achievement tests for scholastic abilities in the Japanese language, arithmetic, mathematics, and English (only for junior high school students) since fiscal year 2007, covering all 6th graders and 9th graders nationwide. The third round took place in April this year, and the results seem to be still fresh in everyone's mind, as they were disclosed just recently, on August 27. The reported general overview for this time around is just the same as the previous rounds: While most students can answer questions concerning basic knowledge (with respective percentages of correct answers being at the 70% level, except for 63.4% in the case of junior high school mathematics), they tend to have difficulty in practical exercises which test their ability to utilize their knowledge (with respective percentages of correct answers being at the 50% level, except for 75.0% in the case of junior high school Japanese language). Even more remarkably, results by prefecture are not much different from the past records as well, with prefectures such as Akita, Fukui, and Toyama ranking high. This indicates that academic performance gaps among regions are entrenched to some degree.

A lot of criticism against the nation's uniform and all-hands achievement test system has been frequently reported through mass media and so on. Such problems can be summarized as follows: (1) Scoring of each subject will accelerate the hierarchy of local governments and/or schools. (2) Accordingly, the principle of competition will be brought into the educa-

tional community.

- (3) The intrinsic education philosophy will be distorted. For example, getting higher scores on these tests might become a priority.
- (4) A huge amount of national expenditure, roughly estimated at 5.7 billion yen, will be spent (in vain) every year.

The Inuyama City Board of Education had been refusing its participation until last fiscal year, due to concerns about the above problems (1)-(3). Besides, a harmful effect caused by problem (2) was clearly revealed in the summer of this year, when the Governor of Osaka Prefecture vented his anger and criticized the Osaka Prefecture Board of Education.

As shown in the above, this national system has been receiving only criticism. So why did it get started? With the benefit of hindsight, a lot of people now recognize that it was due to personal prejudice and persistence of the then Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. No one would deny this reasoning. The enforcement was declared by the above-mentioned minister in question at the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy in November 2004, and then it was decided by the cabinet in June 2005. In such a speedy way, the system got started in 2007. What is the prejudice of that above-mentioned minister? According to an accepted notion, it is his opinion, or his somewhat anachronistic assumption, that the Japan Teachers' Union (JTU) is the root of all evils in the Japanese educational community and that weakening JTU's influential power is an urgent task. In early 2005, several colleagues and this author happened to have an informal dinner with the then minister in question. To refresh my memory on that occasion, the minister in question enthusiastically expressed his opinion. Needless to say, I expressed my own

opinion on the spot, arguing that such an all-hands survey would not be necessary, since a sampling survey would be enough to verify educational effects.

As known from the above-mentioned circumstances, and as also inferred from the virtual total absence of positive remarks about this system even in various information transmissions by MEXT, including pieces posted on its website, it seems that only a limited number of people support the continuation of this project, which requires an annual budget of 5.7 billion yen. It has been already announced that the next round will take place on April 20, 2010. I sincerely wish that the DPJ administration would decide that this project should be discontinued so that the next round could become the last one.

Various problems concerning the teacher certification renewal system

As pointed out in the above section, legislation on the national achievement test system proceeded rapidly. Yet, the teacher certification renewal system was inaugurated even more rapidly than that. Deterioration of children's scholastic abilities had begun to get a lot of attention in the year 2000 or so, and as one countermeasures, "improving the quality of teachers" became a hot topic of such debate. In response, then Education Rebuilding Council defined four urgent tasks in the White Paper on Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, which was published in January 2007. Revision of the Teachers License Act (introduction of the teacher certification renewal system) was one of the four tasks. The subject system was inaugurated in such a speedy (hurried) way as follows: The Teachers License Act was revised in June 2007, or just five months after publication of the White Paper; the teacher certification renewal system was implemented on a trial basis in April 2008; and it was formally inaugurated in 2009.

Various problems concerning this subject have already been pointed out, and its fundamental review was clearly stipulated in the DPJ Manifesto as explained in the Introduction section of this article. The Chemical Society of Japan (CSJ) had initially opposed this system, based on questionnaire results from teachers in the field. And yet, once the system was enacted into law, CSJ de-

ecided to set up a renewal training site, from the viewpoint of cooperatively providing significant contents in the field of chemistry. Accordingly, the relevant organization was formed. [*"Kagaku to Kogyo"* (Chemistry and Chemical Industry) **2008**, 69, 895 ; and *"Kagaku to Kyoiku"* (Chemistry and Education) **2008**, 56, 359]

However, as reported by newspapers and other media, dissenting opinions against this system have been spouted out endlessly. Actually, various problems have been revealed. For an example, under the system, a 30-hour training session has become compulsory for teachers, although the frequency is once in 10 years. This additional burden on already busy teachers may have some adverse effects on the entire operation of each school. For another example, quality of a training workshop (for which each participant is required to pay 30,000 yen) is not necessarily assured. The following is a list of other such problems: The subject system is inconsistent with the 10-year experienced teachers' training system, which has been institutionalized since 2003; enforcement of the subject system is causing more time pressure in teacher-training-type departments, where individual teachers have already borne heavier burdens due to personnel reduction; even with laborious planning, the number of participating teachers is small or even zero in some cases. Such situations are occurring frequently; and so on and so forth. Besides, we cannot wipe out concern that post-training evaluation might be arbitrarily manipulated based on biased viewpoints. With regard to exemption from the duty of attending a renewal workshop, "persons in positions to supervise teachers" such as principals, vice principals, and chief / leading teachers are exempted. However, according to some information sources, the scope of exemption has been substantially expanded in private schools, which are not governed by any board of education, so that the actual number of teachers required to attend any renewal workshop can be tactfully reduced. CSJ takes such state of affairs seriously and currently puts off implementation of any renewal workshop, despite the above-mentioned response measure taken initially.

The Democratic Party of Japan reportedly intends to propose revision of the Education Personnel Certification Act as early as next year, with the aim of enacting such revision effective from fis-

cal year 2011. In case this is realized, some forms of compensation will be required in order to wipe out a sense of unfairness. For instance, consideration should be given on how to treat the burden of 30,000 yen borne by each teacher who has been forced to attend a renewal workshop during the two years when the system has been implemented in a halfway manner. With regard to the DPJ's proposal to extend the teacher training program to six years (master's degree) as a new way to improve the quality of teachers, I have personally agreed with this idea since some time ago. Nevertheless, careful consideration will be necessary when it is actually enforced. For instance, consideration should be given on how to cope with the anticipated lower number of applicants due to the enforcement. In this sense as well, I sincerely ask the new administration to set the right direction as soon as possible, and to implement the new system after careful and sufficient consideration.

Closing

Problems of the national achievement test system need to be considered from long-term perspectives with fundamental review on the existing education curriculum. With regard to abolishment of the teacher certification renewal system, this issue is related to another issue on how to liberate teachers from time constraints and mental pressure. Therefore, it has the same root as other challenges, such as increasing the number of teachers and improving their treatment. There is no space left in this article to mention these issues. As a closing remark, this author sincerely asks the administration to carry out measures and policies not in a makeshift manner but from a comprehensive viewpoint.

© 2009 The Chemical Society of Japan

The commentary shown here is written by a commentator assigned by the Society and the author is basically responsible for the contents. The Society acknowledges that this is important and worth publishing. Opinions and comments of the readers are highly appreciated.
E-mail: ronsetsu@chemistry.or.jp

The *Kagaku to Kogyo* (Chemistry and Chemical Industry) Editorial is responsible for the English-translated article.