

Characteristics of the Elementary School Teacher Training Curriculum and Basis for Practical Teaching Skills in Contemporary Japan

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1. Introduction: Issue identification and objectives

Teacher training education in Japan is characterized by its principles of openness and university training. On that basis, the 1984 Ad Hoc Council on Education proved to be a turning point from which the rapid introduction of various policies began; still continuing today, this process is leading to the reform of teacher training.

Specifically, the Central Council for Education report “Improvement of the qualities and abilities of teachers who bear the responsibility for future school education: Aiming for the creation of a teacher training community for mutual learning and enhancement,” issued in December 2015, brought about major institutional reforms. This sequence of events has led to substantial changes in the teacher training curriculum. In turn, naturally, the universities conducting teacher training have been tasked with constructing various new aspects of the teacher training curriculum.

The field of elementary school teacher training, in particular, has seen the emergence of numerous and diverse changes.

This paper aims to examine the status quo and issues of the elementary school teacher training curriculum in contemporary Japan.

2. Structure of the current elementary school teacher training curriculum

The current elementary school teacher training curriculum is regulated by the Education Personnel Certification Act and configured with a focus on the following categories of course subjects: (1) course subjects relating to school subjects and instruction methods thereof; (2) course subjects relating to fundamental understanding of the teaching profession; (3) course subjects relating to teaching methods for school subjects such as ethics and integrated studies, and to student guidance, educational counseling, etc.; (4) course subjects relating to educational practice; (5) course subjects independently established by each university; (6) course subjects stipulated in Article 66–6 of the Ordinance for Enforcement of the Education Personnel Certification Act.

The minimum number of credits required to obtain an elementary school class 1 teacher’s license is 67, broken down as follows: 30 credits in course subjects relating to school subjects and instruction methods thereof; 10 credits in course subjects relating to fundamental understanding of the teaching profession; 10 credits in course subjects relating to teaching methods for school subjects such as ethics and integrated studies, and to student guidance, educational counseling, etc.; seven credits in course subjects relating to educational practice; two credits in course subjects independently established by each university; and eight credits in course subjects stipulated in Article 66–6 of the Ordinance for Enforcement of the Education Personnel Certification Act.

First, with regard to course subjects relating to school subjects and instruction methods thereof, Article 3 of the Ordinance for Enforcement of the Education Personnel Certification Act stipulates the completion of one or more courses involving specialized content related to the following school subjects: Japanese language (including handwriting), social studies, arithmetic, science, living environment studies, music, art and handcraft, home economics, physical education, and foreign languages. Thus, an elementary school teacher's license re-

quires broad-based study of all subjects, as suited to a class-based teacher assignment system; it is substantially different, in this respect, from the teacher training curricula for junior high school and high school teacher's licenses, which involve in-depth study of the subject(s) of specialization, as suited to a subject-based teacher assignment system.

Next, Article 3 of the Ordinance for Enforcement of the Education Personnel Certification Act stipulates the following with regard to the required number of credits for course subjects relating to fundamental understanding of the teaching profession: (1) Course subjects relating to the significance of the teaching profession, etc. (significance of the teaching profession and teacher's role; teacher's job description (including training, duties, guarantee of status, etc.); provision of opportunities that contribute to career selection, etc.). (2) Course subjects relating to basic theory of education (principles of education and education-related history and ideology; physical and psychological development processes of infants, children, and teenagers, including those with disabilities; education-related social, systematic, and management matters). (3) Course subjects relating to curricula and instruction methods (significance and composition of curricula; instruction methods for each subject; instruction methods for moral studies; instruction methods for special activities; teaching methods and techniques, including the use of teaching materials and information devices). (4) Course subjects relating to student guidance, educational counseling, career guidance, etc. (theory and methods of student guidance; theory and methods of educational counseling, including basic counseling-related knowledge; theory and methods of career guidance). (5) Student teaching. (6) Practical teaching seminars.

Furthermore, the "Act on Special Provisions Concerning the Education Personnel Certification Act in Relation to Granting Regular Licenses to Teachers at Elementary Schools and Lower Secondary Schools" enacted in June 1997, which came into force in 1998, introduced the requirement of a seven-day nursing care experience at a special support school and a social welfare facility.

Based on the above characteristics, elementary school teacher-training courses are generally limited to childhood education or teacher training-type departments.

As described above, the Ordinance for Enforcement of the Education Personnel Certification Act stipulates the categorization of course subjects and the general content of the necessary courses, thus regulating even the basic framework and credit requirements of the teacher training curriculum. Universities offering teacher-training courses, therefore, must follow certain basic standards in terms of the learning content they provide and the imparting of knowledge and skills related to such contents. Before a teacher-training course is certified, the instructors in charge are examined in each of the course subjects offered in order to ensure a uniform standard of instruction.

3. Participation in on-site practice aimed at fostering practical teaching ability

In recent years, the development of practical teaching ability has been emphasized, specifically at the training level, and particularly in elementary school teacher training. Furthermore, teacher training curriculum reforms have made rapid progress through a back-and-forth exchange of theory and practice.

Originally, the term “practical teaching ability” was often used when discussing the issue of teachers’ qualifications and abilities. The event that caused this term to enter common usage was probably the discussion of “improving the qualifications of teachers” in the second report of the Ad Hoc Council on Education of 1986, which contained repeated use of the expression.

Thus, the acquisition of a basis for practical teaching ability and the improvement thereof came to be identified as crucial points in university-based teacher training and in-service training, respectively. Practical teaching ability became a key term in the training of novice teachers in particular. Subsequently, the Curriculum Council report of December 1987 stressed the “improvement of practical teaching ability” in its discussion of education and in-service training as one of the “matters concerning the improvement of curriculum standards.”

Specifically, with measures such as the systematization of school internships, school volunteering, and the student teaching based thereon as stages of training, elementary school teacher-training curricula emphasizing the acquisition of practical teaching ability have been developed and implemented at various universities.

Comprehensive four-year elementary school teacher training programs have indeed devised curricula that systematically integrate school internships and student teaching in cooperation with local schools, other practice sites, and boards of education.

These initiatives aim to foster practical teaching ability through continuous involvement with practice sites at the stage of training, and to improve the quality of teacher training through organic connection with university study as the training stage.

In response to these developments, a trend has emerged in which universities, year by year, have begun to require internships or compulsory school volunteering as part of the curriculum.

However, in terms of the teacher training curriculum, it is important to determine how these activities are understood in their capacity as stages of training, as well as in respect to the student teaching positioned as their natural extension.

Therefore, if the aim of student teaching is to integrate educational theory and practice, it is necessary to examine whether it is positioned organically with the teacher training curriculum at universities.

One of the fundamental perspectives on student teaching in terms of the betterment of the teacher training curriculum is the expansion of the concept of student teaching, coupled with attempts at restructuring based on explorations of the realities of education and educational practice research; another is the necessity of aiming to position student teaching as an integrated component of the teacher training curriculum.

4. Enhancement of elementary school teacher training

As one in a series of concrete policies on reform of the teacher training and certification system, the Central Council for Education report entitled “Future Directions of the Teacher Training and Certification System” of July 11, 2006, recommended the establishment of a system of graduate schools of education. Subsequently, the expansion of graduate schools of education has been consistently pursued, with reports on “Policies for the comprehen-

sive improvement of teachers' qualifications and abilities in all contexts of their professional lives" (Central Council for Education report, August 28, 2012), "Enhancement and reform of teacher training at the graduate school level" (Report of the Council of Cooperators for the Implementation of Immediate Advancement Policies Concerning the Improvement of Teachers' Qualities and Abilities, October 15, 2013), and "Improvement of the qualities and abilities of teachers who bear the responsibility for future school education: Aiming for the creation of a teacher training community for mutual learning and enhancement" (Central Council for Education report, December 21, 2015).

In elementary school teacher training, curricula fostering advanced practical teaching ability have been developed, particularly through partnership and cooperation with local boards of education. In general, the curricula of graduate schools of education are composed of five common core subject areas in addition to advanced subjects and student teaching subjects, and characterized by progression in the form of seminars and student teaching. A distinctive peculiarity of the curricula of graduate schools of education is long-term student teaching at partner schools, through which the curriculum develops toward research on challenges in school education.

Teacher training within the graduate school of education system plays a crucial role as part of the enhancement of elementary school teacher training. However, the question of how to grasp the practical nature of the curriculum as well as the dialogue between theory and practice requires further enhanced content.

5. Enhancement of teacher training on the part of educational administration, including teacher training centers

As described above, under the postwar education reforms, teacher training had openness and university education as its fundamental principles. In contrast, from the 2000s on, a growing trend has emerged toward teacher training by prefectural and designated-city school boards—so-called local governments—in the form of institutions such as teachers' colleges and teacher training centers. This trend has been central in teacher training for elementary school in particular.

The aspiring educators studying in teacher training centers and other such training projects acquire the vocation and sense of responsibility required by their future profession through lectures given by in-service teachers and teaching supervisors as well as on-site experiences at schools. Furthermore, they are trained with the aim of gaining a deep understanding of local public education and enhancing the practical teaching ability necessary to meet the diverse needs of school education today. Some elementary school teacher training courses offer credits accepted by university teacher training curricula, and are likely to have a significant impact on elementary school teacher training curricula in the future.

Needless to say, the background for this development is the mass retirement and hiring of teachers which is occurring especially in metropolitan areas. Great importance is attributed to the role played in the hiring of teaching staff by local governments with regard to the improvement of teachers' qualities and abilities in particular. More plainly, it can be said that they have spearheaded the integration of hiring and training. Approximately 30 teacher

training projects throughout the country have been launched by prefectural or designated-city local governments empowered to directly appoint teachers.

The first among these to be called a “training center” was the Tokyo Training Center for Student Teachers, opened by the Tokyo Board of Education in 2004.

Thereafter, the Tokyo Training Center for Student Teachers became the model for over 35 training projects developed by local government administrations, proving extremely influential.

The goal of the Tokyo Training Center for Student Teachers is to impart to human resources, beginning at the student level, both practical teaching ability and abundant humanity, through which they may accurately understand societal changes and the wishes of children and their parents or guardians.

In the 16 years from its foundation until today, the Center has accomplished the training of 1970 teachers for public elementary schools and municipal special support schools in the Tokyo area.

The learning program is extremely unique. First, there is “special student teaching” conducted at designated teacher training schools. Continuous student teaching takes place once a week three times a year, with at least 40 days of student teaching yearly, involving at least 40 hours of lesson practice.

Second, 10 days a year are dedicated to a series of lectures on school-subject instruction training. This course aims to improve practical teaching ability, promoting in-depth learning through lectures, seminars, and discussion. In concrete terms, the course is composed of lectures on school subjects, class management, the teacher’s mission, the curriculum, and English.

Moreover, the Tokyo Board of Education has integrated university teacher-training curricula, school board hiring processes, and post-hiring training, focusing on elementary school teacher training, by formulating an Elementary School Instructor Teacher Training Curriculum aimed at enhancing teachers’ qualities and abilities.

Since the creation of the Elementary School Instructor Teacher Training Curriculum seven years ago, amid increasingly complex and intricate challenges in education, the Special Act for Education Personnel and Courses of Study have been amended. In FY2017, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced its Teacher Training Core Curriculum, which details the common requirements of all university teacher-training courses throughout the country in terms of the qualities and abilities to be acquired by students on the basis of the Ordinance for Enforcement of the Education Personnel Certification Act. In accordance with this series of developments, the Tokyo Metropolitan Teacher Training Curriculum was formulated, detailing the minimum knowledge requirements that civil servants in the field of education should acquire from the training stage, and the qualities and abilities necessary to address and appropriately resolve pressing issues within the school curriculum as members of educational institutions.

The structure and content of this curriculum comprise: I. Minimum qualities and abilities required of teachers by the Tokyo Board of Education (objectives and specific requirements); II. Response policies and main initiatives for teacher-training courses on the part of the To-

kyo Board of Education; III. Student teaching; IV. Teaching practice seminar check sheet and models for curriculum composition.

The “objectives and specific requirements” in Part I detail the minimum requirements in terms of the qualities and abilities that newly hired teachers should acquire. This section outlines objectives and specific requirements in the following four areas: “desired characteristics of teachers,” “practical teaching ability in school subjects, etc.,” “handling of the curriculum,” and “class management”; it further clarifies the qualities and abilities that should be developed in each of these areas.

The heightened approach to teacher training by educational administrations is expected to have an even more substantial impact on university teacher-training curricula in the future, in synergy with teacher development indicators as well.

Within the integrated reform of education, hiring, and training, a major challenge faced by university teacher-training curricula is the issue of the principles of training at university.

6. The Teacher Training Core Curriculum and new teacher training curriculum of 2019

In conclusion, let us discuss the future prospects of elementary school teacher training curricula. Discussing the challenges in teacher training, the 2015 Central Council report “Improvement of the qualities and abilities of teachers who bear the responsibility of future school education” recommended improvements in the division and segmentation of course subjects in relation to school subjects and teaching subjects, as a necessary condition to confirm the awareness of the fundamental minimum learning requirements and ensure and enhance the quality of teacher training courses. In response to these recommendations, the Education Personnel Certification Act and the ordinance for its enforcement were partially amended. The existing tripartite classification of course subjects (relating to school subjects, to the teaching profession, or to either of the two) was abolished, and course subjects were reclassified by aggregating the existing categories into larger ones: “course subjects relating to school subjects and instruction methods thereof”; “course subjects relating to fundamental understanding of education”; “course subjects relating to teaching methods for school subjects such as morals and integrated studies, and to student guidance, educational counseling, etc.”; “course subjects relating to educational practice”; and “course subjects independently established by each university.” The required contents and credits for each category were specified as well.

In response to the expansion of foreign language activities in elementary school, the category “course subjects relating to school subjects and instruction methods thereof” was expanded to include “foreign languages and their instruction methods.” Moreover, in the category “course subjects relating to fundamental understanding of education,” the understanding of infants, children, and teenagers who require special support was introduced as a new requirement; in addition, the contents of “handling of the school as a team,” “handling of school-community cooperation and school safety,” and “curriculum management” were specified in more detail, revealing the profound impact of reflection on emergency evacuation during the Great East Japan Earthquake and responses to the ongoing challenges in education reform.

The category “course subjects relating to teaching methods for school subjects such as morals and integrated studies, and to student guidance, educational counseling, etc,” was specified to include “the addition of new instruction methods for integrated studies, as well as basic items concerning morals theory and career education within guidance counseling.” As for “course subjects relating to educational practice,” a new option allows up to two credits to be obtained through school internships in place of student teaching; accordingly, the number of students experiencing school internships is expected to increase further in the future. Furthermore, “course subjects independently established by each university” was instituted as a new item. As described above, to encourage awareness of the teacher training curriculum on the university side, the existing course subject categories were aggregated, allowing for the creation of more flexible curricula that may blend courses relating to school subjects and to the teaching profession. This measure was intended to encourage universities to consider their teacher training curricula more proactively, as a unique characteristic of this reform.

Finally, as the latest development to date, FY 2019 saw the introduction of the Teacher Training Core Curriculum.

The Teacher Training Core Curriculum outlines the common requirements of all university teacher-training programs nationwide in terms of the qualities and abilities that must be acquired by students, on the basis of the Education Personnel Certification Act and the ordinance for its enforcement. The universities administering teacher training, the boards of education and educational institutions conducting hiring and training, MEXT in its capacity as the authority presiding over the educational system, and all other parties involved are encouraged to use the Teacher Training Core Curriculum while sharing their perspectives with one another, so as to ensure the quality of teacher-training curricula and improve teachers’ qualities and abilities.

In concrete terms, the qualities and abilities to be acquired by students through completing the relevant teacher-training curriculum activities are addressed as “overall goals,” of which the contents are grouped into “general goals.” The individual criteria for enrolled students to achieve these general goals are expressed as “objectives.” For example, in the case of “significance of the teaching profession; teachers’ roles and job descriptions (including handling of the school as a team),” the overall goal is “In view of the increased importance of the teaching profession in today’s society, (students are to) understand the significance of the teaching profession, the teacher’s role, the teacher’s qualities, abilities, job description, etc., and to enhance their motivation to teach, further determine their suitability, and understand the characteristics of teaching, as contributing to career selection.” The general goal in “(1) Significance of the teaching profession” is “Understanding the social significance of school education and the teaching profession in Japan today.” The objectives to achieve these general goals are described as: “1) Understanding the goals of public education and the *raison d’être* of the teachers who conduct it; 2) Understanding, upon career selection, the professional characteristics of teaching through comparison with other occupations.”

These goals regulate the educational contents of teacher-training curricula; the number of goals does not determine the number of credits from university course subjects, the number of classes, etc.

Thus, despite the existence of a Teacher Training Core Curriculum detailing “course subjects relating to the teaching profession,” with significant commonality across a wide range of school types and occupations, it is undeniable that the elementary school teacher training curricula offered at individual universities will have a significant impact in the future as well.

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