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Educational Responses to the Pandemic in Japan: Primary and Secondary Education Policy Issues

Hiroshi Sato

Abstract: *In 2020 in Japan, schools were closed nationwide in March and reopened in June. During this closure period, almost no online classes were provided, which is attributed to the slow development of information and communication technology (ICT) systems in schools. In April 2020, the Japanese government announced a policy with relevant budgetary measures, to accelerate the development of the ICT environment in schools. While the government also discussed the possibility of shifting the start of the academic year from April to September, the prime minister deferred the September start decision due to the difficulties expected with hasty implementation. In the days ahead, schools are expected to continue operations despite the pandemic. To realise learning and teaching outcomes that correspond with the future of society, the task is to fully utilise ICT in schools.*

Keywords: Education policy, information and communication technology, leadership, schools

Introduction: Research Objective and Questions

The Abe administration's response to the novel coronavirus has been slow, and distrust has grown among the people of Japan. On February 27, with the purpose of ameliorating the distrust, Prime Minister Abe requested that all primary schools, junior high schools, senior high schools, and special support schools in Japan close for a month starting on March 2 (S. Sugiyama, Abe's bold school closure move appears spurred by criticism of virus response, *The Japan Times*, February 28, 2020). The abrupt request rattled local governments and schools, but they complied and started preparing for the closures on February 28.

As a result of the closures, two major policy issues surfaced. The first is the underdevelopment of online learning systems. ICT development in Japanese schools is extremely delayed (NIER 2019: 9-10). Schools were therefore unsuccessful in switching to online learning during the closure period, and ICT development has since become a major

policy issue. The second issue involves the start date of the academic year. Because of the delayed learning caused by the closures, there is debate about changing the start of the academic year from April to September as a compensatory measure. Abe has expressed his intention to examine the issue (M. Koizumi, Japan school closures reignite debate on shifting academic year to September start, *The Japan Times*, May 4, 2020). Abe's interest has encouraged discussion among government and political party personnel.

The objective of this paper is to examine the impact of primary and secondary schools of the policy measures taken by the Japanese government, The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and boards of education to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus. The research questions are as follows:

- 1) How did the government and MEXT close and reopen schools in response to the pandemic?
- 2) What problems pertaining to online learning were revealed in Japan, and how is the ICT environment going to be developed in schools?
- 3) What is known about the discussion about moving the start of the academic year?

In this paper, existing policy documents and other relevant documents are analysed. The paper is unique because there is no preceding research, in either Japanese or English, on primary and secondary school education policies to cope with the novel coronavirus.

Government and MEXT Responses to the Spread of the Novel Coronavirus: From School Closures to Reopening

The day after the school closure announcement, MEXT issued a notice, 'Temporary Closures at Primary Schools, Junior High Schools, Senior High Schools, Special Support Schools, Etc. Responding to COVID-19 (Notice)', to superintendents of prefectural boards of education, prefectural governors, and heads of private schools. The outline of the notice is as follows (MEXT 2020d: 1-3):

- 1) guide students to avoid outings, stay at home, and apply appropriate hygiene measures;
- 2) take necessary actions to avoid learning delays, such as assigning proper homework;
- 3) show flexibility regarding the shortage of hours in the classroom so that students are not disadvantaged in terms of graduation and advancement;
- 4) pay sufficient attention to the infection of teachers, and if a teacher shows relevant symptoms, suspend the teacher from school; and,
- 5) ensure boards of education cooperate with welfare offices to secure places for students with disabilities.

By March 17, 97.8 per cent of schools nationwide were closed (MEXT 2020e: 26). Following the increase in the number of domestic infections in March, the government declared a state

of emergency on April 7. The declaration made it possible for prefectural governors to request and direct restrictions on the outings of citizens, the use of school facilities, events and entertainment activities, and so forth. Following this declaration, the nationwide school closure period was extended to May 2020, which again raised the issue of students' delayed learning.

Seeing the decrease in the number of infections as a result of restricted outings, the government lifted the state of emergency on May 25. Accordingly, schools were reopened step-by-step through local government decisions starting on June 1. On June 5, MEXT issued a notice, 'Guidelines for Sustainable School Administration and Comprehensive Package to Guarantee Student Learning Responding to COVID-19 (Notice)', to superintendents of prefectural boards of education and prefectural governors throughout Japan (MEXT 2020a). These policies include reducing the risk of infection, shortening the summer vacation period to compensate for delayed learning, applying the education curriculum in a flexible manner, increasing the number of teachers, allocating additional funds to schools for reopening, promoting ICT use and online classes, and adjusting the scope of questions on senior high school and university admission examinations. In accordance with these policies, boards of education formulated more detailed measures before reopening schools.

Problems Involved with Implementing Online Classes: Promotion of ICT Development in Schools

Online classes can guarantee learning during school closures, and they are commonly used by schools in many countries (A. Hata, Japan's students left behind as world embraces online classes, *Nikkei Asian Review*, April 22, 2020). However, as of April 2020, only 5 per cent of 1,213 municipalities in Japan implement two-way online classes in public schools (MEXT 2020b: 1). A reason for this is the delayed development of ICT in Japanese schools. According to the 2019 MEXT survey report, the number of students per computer was 5.4, 40.7 per cent of classrooms were equipped with a wireless local area network, and 52.1 per cent of classrooms were equipped with a large video display system (MEXT 2019). In response to this situation, MEXT formulated the 'Global and Innovation Gateway for All (GIGA) School Concept' on December 19, 2019, to promote the development of the ICT environment in public schools. The GIGA School Concept includes a plan to provide a computer to each student by the end of March 2023.

Amid the pandemic, the government regarded the lack of online classes as a problem and decided to accelerate the implementation of the GIGA School Concept. On April 7, the government decided to allocate about 229.2 billion yen to promptly guarantee education for all students through the utilisation of ICT (MEXT 2020c: 1), with the realisation of the GIGA School Concept by the end of March 2021. The budget was approved on April 30 at the 201st session of the Diet. The unexpected pandemic thus led to the approval of a budget that promotes ICT development in schools.

Academic Year Change Debate: Maintenance of April Start or Shift to September Start

To encourage studying abroad, the government has long been discussing shifting the academic year to be in line with that of the USA and Europe (Prime Minister's Office 2007: 7). However, this shift remains unrealised. To guarantee learning during the school closures due to the pandemic and to facilitate studying abroad, the governors of Tokyo, Kanagawa, and Osaka suggested shifting the current academic year start from April to September. In response, Prime Minister Abe expressed his intention to discuss the matter widely on April 29 (Abe open to delaying start of Japan's school year, *The Japan Times*, April 29, 2020).

However, the ruling parties of the Liberal Democratic Party and Komeito Party announced their opposition to the September start, citing difficulties expected to accompany hasty system changes during the pandemic and the necessity of additional financial expenditure. The Japanese Educational Research Association also declared opposition to the September start (JERA 2020). The prime minister abandoned the idea of introducing the September start in the next academic year in favour of more prolonged discussion of the issue among government personnel (T. Osaki, Abe's proposal to shift the academic year to September faces increased opposition, *The Japan Times*, June 2, 2020). A major policy change such as altering the academic year start date requires careful preparation. Though the proposal invited debate, it was not a realistic policy to cope with the pandemic.

Conclusion: Promotion of School Education Innovation Triggered by the Pandemic

Schools in Japan were closed for three months, from March to June 2020. Since almost no online classes were provided during the closures, students' learning is now behind schedule. As the pandemic revealed the underdevelopment of the ICT environment in schools, the Japanese government initiated its development. The pandemic also triggered debate over shifting the start month of the academic year from April to September. However, a hurried change in the school system was extremely difficult to achieve, and the government had no choice but to discard the idea. As seen by the government's decision to develop the ICT environment in schools and the renewed debate over introducing a September start to the academic year, the pandemic has substantially influenced Japan's education policies.

Promoting ICT in schools will be necessary both to respond to the second and third waves of the pandemic and to nurture students' competency to meet the future society (OECD 2018: 3-7). In the wake of the pandemic, further promotion of the innovation of Japan's education system is expected. Appropriate education policies and budgets will be necessary, and the leadership of superintendents of boards of education and school principals will have significant impact.

Limitations and Future Research

This paper examined primary and secondary education policies responding to the pandemic in Japan. Since the targets of this examination were primarily relevant policy documents, the paper does not include an analysis of the actual situation of boards of education and schools. The plan for future research is to conduct a case analysis to illuminate how boards of education and schools responded to the pandemic.

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