



Morality, Patriotism, and Japan's New Curricular Guidelines

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Peter Cave

A response to Tawara Yoshifumi ["The Hearts of Children: Morality, Patriotism, and the New Curricular Guidelines."](#)

With a rejoinder by Adam Lebowitz

I respect the intention of Tawara Yoshifumi to alert the Japanese and international public to the designs of the nationalist right-wing on the Japanese school curriculum – with which designs I have no sympathy. However, the errors, exaggeration and misleading sensationalism in his article 'The Hearts of Children' (posted at Japan Focus on 25 August 2008) only serve ultimately to discredit liberal views on education, thus rebounding to the advantage of the right. This is unfortunate, especially given that the article also contains useful information. This brief reply aims to point out some of the ways in which Mr Tawara's article misleads.

First, the article is tendentious on the issue of educational reform. Mr Tawara argues that 'education reform' in the new Curricular Guidelines 'smacks of elitism since its aim is to intensify competition, increase the number of curricular hours and eliminate the more relaxed "yutori" approach to education'. How precisely do the new Curricular Guidelines intensify competition and 'aim to separate children as quickly as possible into "winners" (kachigumi) and "losers" (makegumi)', and why does Mr Tawara think that increasing the number of curriculum hours smacks of elitism? The opposite argument could be made; since 2002, when public but not private schools were forced to adopt the five-day school week, students at public schools have received fewer classroom hours than many of their private school counterparts, which presumably favours the privately educated 'elite' (Cave 2003: 98). Increasing the number of curricular hours in public schools is, in part, an attempt to redress the balance and make education fairer.

It is also debatable whether the new Curricular Guidelines do actually 'eliminate' the so-called 'yutori' approach. The Ministry of Education has argued that because curriculum hours will increase more than curriculum content, this will actually make it feasible to bring more 'yutori' (room to think) into the classroom – a reasonable argument. Moreover, the new Curricular Guidelines do not eliminate Integrated Studies, the major new component of the 2002 curriculum, though they do reduce its hours to allow more hours for traditional subjects. But even if we were to agree that the 'yutori' approach has been eliminated, that would not be self-evidently elitist. Highly reputable educators with educational equality at heart can be found both supporting and criticising the 'yutori' reforms. Notable among the critics are Professors Kariya Takehiko of Tokyo University and Fujita Hidenori of International Christian University, both of whom worry that 'yutori' education has widened educational inequality (Cave 2007: 19-21). There are good arguments on both sides – the point is that Mr Tawara should not give the impression that this is a cut-and-dried 'goodies versus baddies' issue.

Mr Tawara's contention that general aptitude tests have been abandoned 'by the UK' is also misleading. First, there is no overall educational authority for the entire UK – England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have separate authorities. Scotland and Wales have indeed abandoned the national tests he refers to, but they continue (much to the displeasure of many teachers) in England, which is by far the largest part of the UK. It is also worth noting that in England, the test results of each school are published nationally, which does indeed promote competition between schools, but is a feature which Japanese policymakers have for the most part sensibly avoided adopting (though some local authorities have chosen to publish the results, notably those in Tokyo).

Mr Tawara is certainly right to say that right-wing nationalists have used the passing of the revised Fundamental Law of Education (FLE) to press for greater emphasis on patriotism and morals in the curriculum. He is also right to say that nationalists won a victory in requiring that children sing the national anthem in all grades. This is indeed of some concern. However, the extent of the Right's success should not be exaggerated. I don't think that singing the Kimigayo and similar relatively minor changes, will automatically lead to a nation of mindless patriots, as Mr Tawara implies. It is worth noting that well-known right-winger Yagi Hidetsugu (former Chair of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, and so-called Abe 'brain') criticised the revised Curricular Guidelines in a Sankei Shinbun op-ed article for what he saw as their failure to reflect the revised FLE adequately (Yagi 2008).

Mr Tawara's comments on the revisions concerning moral education are also misleading. He refers to a 'class hour in Morals/Patriotism', as if that were the name of the curriculum area (note that Morals (*dĀto*) is still not a 'subject' (*kyĀka*), despite pressure from the Right to that effect). The name is actually still Morals. Mr Tawara may think that 'Morals/Patriotism' would more accurately reflect the content, but I do not find the evidence he provides convincing, as indicated below. Mr Tawara also says that 'patriotic education' is placed under the section of the curriculum headed 'general directives', 'suggesting education is primarily at the service of the state'. First, the words 'patriotic education' appear nowhere in the section that Mr Tawara refers to. The section's second part (which is not an innovation, and has been in the curriculum since at least 1989) does concern moral education, and the new revision does state briefly that moral education should foster 'love of country and native places'. What Mr Tawara fails to mention is that besides passing mention of 'loving the country', this part says a great deal more about the purpose of moral education, which gives a very different impression: for example, that it is for the sake of 'raising autonomous (*shutaisei no aru*) Japanese people who open up the future and prize public spirit, work hard for the development of a democratic society and state, respect other countries, and contribute to the development of international society and peace, and the conservation of the environment' (MonbukagakushĀ 2008, my translation). What this part makes clear, if read properly and not with Mr Tawara's extreme selectivity, is that incorporating moral education across the curriculum is very easily done without touching on patriotism at all – precisely because moral education as defined in these (and earlier) Curricular Guidelines has so many aims and facets. Finally it is perhaps worth pointing out that the section quoted by Mr Tawara as such an alarming aim of Morals ("raising consciousness of being Japanese, loving the nation, and contributing to cultural development as recipients of superior tradition (*sugureta dento*)") only appears in the junior high (not elementary) Curricular Guidelines, and as just one of no fewer than 23 aspects of the content of moral education. The translation is also misleading (even if official): '*sugureta dento no keishĀ to atarashii bunka no sĀZĀ ni kĀken suru*' would be more

accurately (if more woodenly) translated 'contributing to the inheritance of excellent tradition and the creation of new culture' – but maybe that doesn't sound so alarming.

Finally, I certainly do not want to defend the screening of textbooks carried out by the Ministry of Education. However, if Mr Tawara dates increased openness of textbook publishers to demands for more patriotic content to 1993, how does he explain the fact that the editions of the junior high school history textbooks that passed the 1996 screening contained more information about Japanese wartime atrocities and colonial oppression than any before or since? Also, it is very debatable whether he is correct to say that Japan is 'the only G8 country with a screening process'. It may perhaps be the only G8 country with a national screening process, and the exact nature of the process differs from country to country. But Canada, France, Russia, Germany and the United States, for example, all have textbook approval processes involving state authorities (KyÅkasho KenkyÅ« SentÅ 2000). The impact of the approval process on history textbooks in the United States has indeed been trenchantly criticized by Loewen (2008) among others.

I sympathize with what I presume to be Mr Tawara's desire for a fair, egalitarian, internationalist and humane education system in Japan. However, putting forward a highly misleading tissue of selective facts, exaggerations, and errors does nothing to further that aim – on the contrary, it takes it further away.

References

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Adam Lebowitz responds to Peter Cave

I would like to respond to Peter Cave's comments on Tawara Yoshifumi's article on Japanese education, in particular to his criticisms of the alarmist tone of the article. I write as translator of the article and one who, like the author is interested in issues of Japanese education. Tawara's beliefs are shared by many other Japanese. As a piece of "movement journalism" from the *Shukan Kinyobi*, he writes to galvanize readers' concern and activism.

The most important issues concern the future implications of educational changes. My concern – as a father of two children in the school system – is with the ideological momentum behind the revised Fundamental Law of Education (FLE) and the Curricular Guidelines, and the education priorities that may evolve from these policies. Peter writes: "I don't think that singing the *Kimigayo* and similar relatively minor changes (to the Guidelines), will automatically lead to a nation of mindless patriots". Perhaps not, but changes in the wording of the fundamental national law of education, the first such changes made in six decades, particularly where the issues have been fiercely contested over many years, can have major reverberations. There is little in the composition of the new Aso Taro cabinet to reassure the wary.

The wording of the description for "Moral Education" (Pt 2 of Sec 1 General Directives) is a case in point. Peter correctly points out that Moral Education was incorporated in previous versions. He also points out the additions in the revised version: "...respecting culture and tradition, and loving the country/ (Waga Kuni) and native places/homeland (*gyodo*) that support them." I have translated these key words differently than Peter because I think they bear greater weight than simply "passing mention". In fact, these are key concepts in the new FLE and the fact that they precede "development of a democratic society and state" in the Guidelines should indicate this. As I suggest in "Hammering Down the Educational Nail: Abe Revises the Fundamental law of Education" (JF 870), policy documents containing words like "culture" "tradition" and "homeland" favored by nationalists are potentially problematic for two reasons: they are not legal terms and therefore can be defined by whomever is in power; and "homeland" appeared in the wartime National Education Edict.

Peter's next point that– "incorporating moral education across the curriculum is very easily done without touching on patriotism at all – precisely because moral education as defined in these (and earlier) Curricular Guidelines has so many aims and facets" – is also a viable perspective in theory, but the practical implications remain worrying. Again, due to the primacy of place that patriotism is given textually I find it difficult to believe that a teacher could supplant this idea with other "aims and facets". I think we have to view this definition of moral education as hierarchical: patriotism first, then everything else. In addition, it is precisely because there are so many aims and facets that the document is authoritarian. As I mentioned in the same article, one of the major differences between the old and revised FLE is the size: the revised version is twice the length approaching the wartime Edict and includes new "Objectives" for teachers. Pt 1 of the "general directives" section as well as pt 2 concerning moral education are twice as long as their predecessor, suggesting that there will be less autonomy for teachers.

Speaking of autonomy, the phrase "*shutaisei no aru*" also bears mention. Peter's translation is "autonomy" (for the individual), but I see it more as "subjectivity" (of the state) that citizens must adopt. The term has been added to the revised Guidelines in the first general directives section replacing "thinking for oneself" and preceding "developing individual character".

Peter is, I believe, correct in suggesting that Tawara was reading selectively from the Junior High Guidelines concerning the exact aim of "morals". In fact, the passage Peter points out is not a revision at all but appears in the previous version. On the other hand there is a worrying development in the opening to this section. It is rather difficult to translate, but the old guidelines read, "(...) moral education should be conveyed during special activities and general coursework..." The revised version reverses these so that "general coursework" precedes "special activities" in the sentence. Not a particularly significant revision perhaps, but it is followed directly by this sentence added to the Guidelines: "The contents of moral education to be taught as part of the overall curriculum are as follows." Basically, this is consistent with Tawara's argument. Peter correctly notes that moral education appeared in earlier forms of the Guidelines; what is different is their importance during regular school hours, which the current Guidelines have expanded considerably.

Finally, I thank Peter for mentioning the *Sankei Shinbun* article by university professor Yagi Hidetsugu. As an ideologue who believes in the sanctity of the male line of the Emperor and whose views of "tradition and culture" are so narrow that they exclude several thousand years of Jomon civilization, his criticism the Guidelines for not reflecting the ideals of the Fundamental Law is hardly surprising nor cause for comfort. I

imagine that Guidelines more to his liking would bind the hearts of children even more cohesively to the subjectivities of the state, creating as I have argued previously “national subjects” (rather than citizens) in the wartime mold.

In conclusion, it is the narrow definition of morals and the degree to which educators and students are expected to adhere to these definitions that alarms Tawara and merits our attention. It is possible to say that a strict adherence to morals, even if dictated by the state, is not necessarily deleterious to society. However, if recent history is a guide, and I believe that Tawara is reflecting on history, the moral values or respecting “tradition” and “loving” the “homeland” espoused by the current Japanese political leadership have a definite pre-war ring to them. Finally, I agree with Peter that had Tawara adopted a more critical eye concerning *yutori* education and testing, his message concerning a very serious subject would have been more effective.

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