

Recent Japanese government policy and a case study of a school library in Japan

Iwasaki, Rei

Professor, Kyoto Notre Dame University, Japan

Introduction

Japanese school libraries have not developed much, but a legal framework exists and they are slowly advancing through various efforts. In this article, after a brief explanation about laws and institutions of Japan's school libraries, I introduce the effort in Aoi Elementary School which is a research school of school library education as an example.

Japanese laws and efforts about school libraries

In Japan, the School Library Law was enacted in 1953. The intention was that school libraries would be developed, but they could not develop much because of the delayed obligation to create teacher librarians. Therefore, in 1997 the School Library Law was amended after half a century, realizing the intention to require teacher librarians, and in 2014 the obligation to provide school librarians was legislated. Although they face practical problems, some policies of the government have been carried out since then, and now is a period of growing social concerns.

The Government takes budgetary measures for policies of school libraries from time to time. In particular, since 1995 cooperation of school libraries and public libraries has been established in order to enhance the educational activities among some school library development projects by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). After 'Informatization and activation promotion model area business of school libraries' (1995-2000), 'Resource sharing model regional business of school libraries' (2001-2003) and so on were carried out, 'Resource sharing network promotion business of school libraries' (2004-2006) realized the promotions of the regional cooperation network by the cooperation with public libraries and with other school libraries, including the establishments of functions of school library support center. Also 'school library support center promotion business' (2006-2008) intended to enhance and strengthen the function of school libraries by placing school library support staff to intend to cooperate with other school libraries, to operate each school library and to support its opening to local people. As a matter of fact, the school libraries which local people can use are not so many, as there are the causes of the safety of children and the shortage of library collection. 'Activation to promote comprehensive business of school libraries' (2009-2012) intended to support voluntary and proactive students' learning activities, and to strengthen support functions of teachers by cooperation with public libraries, etc. for the establishment of student reading habits, the enhancement of reading guidance, and the realization of library utilization learning shown in the official guidelines for school teaching. These programs have been held by government initiative.

In addition, with the partial opening of the International Library of Children's Literature in 2000, the 'Promotion of Children's Reading Act (Act No.154 of 2001) was legislated in 2001 and Basic Plan for the Promotion of Reading Activities for Children (from 1st order (2002) to 3rd order (2013)) had been approved at a Cabinet meetings. During this period, there were also some international influences. The Bookstart program in the United Kingdom had been introduced, and programs started with the same name in Japan. The introduction of picture books for infants had already begun, but the bookstart program from the UK attracted attention to the importance of reading aloud in infancy, and efforts of local governments to carry out bookstart programs have drastically increased. Moreover, as the result of the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 attracted attention in the country. Since the proportion of 15-year-olds in Japan who did not enjoy reading was over 50 percent, it was a chance to promote reading activities. The result of PISA after 2003 was focused more on the relationship

between reading comprehension and the improvement of study achievement rather than the enjoyment of reading.

The relation with school education is mentioned also. The official guidelines for school teaching published in 2011 and 2012 describe utilization of school libraries, and the significance of the utilization is to be reconsidered in conjunction with the measures mentioned above. Actually, however, how to adopt library use in lessons is still under consideration, although there are advanced examples.

In 2014, the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) inquired of the Central Council for Education about “the way of standards for curriculum in primary and secondary education” which mentions ‘Active Learning’ in the document. Although this document did not mention school libraries directly, the minutes of “the meeting of the surveyors and researchers regarding of the development and enhancement of school libraries” described the importance of linking active learning and school libraries, and deeper relations in the future. The practice of active learning through the use of school libraries is also becoming more popular. The practices are reported not only in school library related events such as study meetings of school libraries, but also in the mass media such as newspapers and TV. There are various methods, such as learning with a focus on reading, use of ICT, cooperation with News in Education (NIE) and so on. Newspapers in Education (NIE) is an international program that promotes and increases our children’s literacy by using the newspaper as a teaching tool. It began in the United States in 1930s, then was introduced to Japan in 1985. It spread all over the world and is held by over 80 countries such as France, Germany and South Korea.

Activities in Aoi Elementary School with the school library

Aoi Elementary School is a public school in Kyoto. The school library in this school has been an average school library, which is not so useful or active. A teacher librarian is announced officially, but he or she must do the work as a teacher librarian while also working as a full-time classroom teacher. So a teacher librarian has no time to work in the school library. As many Japanese public schools have the same problem, in 2014 part of the School Library Law was amended, promulgated and enacted to set school librarians in school libraries.

The school library in Aoi Elementary School was improved by parent volunteers in the 2010 school year. They reorganized the classification symbol of books, repaired books and changed the layout of the room. This challenge was undertaken by a former librarian and some parents with qualifications as librarians. In the 2014 school year, Aoi Elementary School had been one of the schools selected by the Kyoto City Board of Education as ‘leading schools for rich learning.’ Hence this school selected effective utilization of a school library as the research theme of this project. In the 2014 school year they focused on basic library instruction. In the 2015 school year they challenged a project to build lessons. The yearly plan focused on using the school library, utilizing ‘News in Education,’ and incorporating active learning. I explain the project of 2015 in this article.

Upon commencement of this project, they analyzed the type of pupils in this school as follows. They are full of intellectual curiosity. They can have their own opinions but they can think only in a limited scope. They don’t feel enough self-importance, in spite of they have enough capability if they do. They are not good at communication with others. The teachers in Aoi Elementary School decided in their policy that they can practice using the school library to make the situation of the pupils better.

At the base of this policy, they are confident that synergy between reading, which can be considered pseudo-experience, and the real experience is born, so it is intended that the results are children's growth. In addition, by combining it with NIE and active learning, reading can enhance the ability to judge, express, and think. That is to say, in addition to basic learning from textbooks, beyond that it is possible to acquire a wide range of education and knowledge in terms of living in modern society and to develop a force to receive diversity both in books and in the real world.

As there were some lesson plans through this school year, the open classes and meeting about them were held this February. This type of events are held most of elementary schools in Japan. The open classes are open to teachers of other schools, to the parents of the school children and sometimes to the local people. After the open classes, teachers of the school and other schools have a meeting for the reflection.

The following is the open class content of each school year.

1st grade class; the subject 'Japanese'

The goal of this class is to learn how to use information. The pupils master how to use an illustrated encyclopedia, then read information, process data into the writing by themselves, and report.

2nd grade class; the subject 'Japanese'

The goal of this class is to be able to read while comparing multiple books.

In conjunction with NIE (News in Education), the pupils write articles about books which they read.

3rd grade class; the subject 'Japanese'

The goal of this class is to be able to work with dictionaries well. The pupils find proverbs in dictionaries while using the table of contents and indexes. By using more than one dictionary, they will be able to compare or to categorize proverbs.

4th grade class; the subject 'periods for integrated study'

The subject 'periods for integrated study' has a relatively high degree of freedom. Teachers can plan along with the policy of each school beyond the framework of the subject.

The goal of this class is to know the basis of the classification of books in libraries and to be able to find books that match their themes. From a plurality of information they choose that which suits their purposes. Then the pupils, by devising a configuration, put what they found and the opinion from the information together by using a suitable representation method, such as text, pictures, or graphs.

5th grade class; the subject 'art'

The goal of this class is to capture the intention of representing ways of change and expressions of work, through reading about the lives and ideas of painters from books. The pupils draw pictures to express emotions on their own, then appreciate the pictures drawn by their classmates. This type of work is very popular learning style in Japan. After that, they began new type of learning. They write appreciation statements about the works of Picasso at various ages, and compare with commentaries of the works. At last they make information cards based on their searches, discuss the intention of representing the way of change and representation in the works of Picasso.

6th grade class; the subject 'periods for integrated study'

The goal of this class is to think deeply about their own ways of life as part of career education. The pupils make a "nice adult Declaration" to consider the future. Before they make it, they take advantage of multiple books and other materials, such as biographies and documentaries, to think about the way of life.

Special class for children with disabilities

The goal of this class is to learn how to use a library. The children in this class are have difficulties in using a library by themselves, as well as reading and studying. However, reading and studying are very important rights for them.

In Japan there are official guidelines for school teaching. Stressing the importance of fundamentals of basic subjects, it is common for to try to maintain a standardized quality of classes across the country. These lessons in Aoi Elementary School also go along with the guidelines, with the intention to take advantage of the school library. Among them a fifth-grade art class was especially interesting because a lesson has a portion that exceeds the standards and it seems successful. In 'art' classes in Japan, the most common ways of learning are seeing pictures with sensibility and actually painting or working. However, in addition to learning according to the official guidelines for school teaching, this

class is attractive because the pupils use articles to examine the events that happened in the historical background and the artist's own work, and they talk about the impact on the work. In addition, as conventional library utilization is often carried out at a time of 'Japanese' and 'periods for integrated study,' it has a good challenge that can also be utilized in other subjects.

This initiative was to incorporate library utilization in the classroom. In Japan, how to take advantage of the school library in school education is a major challenge. There are relatively advanced effort at private schools, but actually there are many difficulties, such as rich collection in school libraries and full-time teacher librarians, to overcome in order to perform well in public schools. This initiative, under the leadership of the principal and carried out by teachers who studied with each other as they proceeded, is believed to be one of the models of public school efforts.

Conclusion

In Japan during the past 20 years, not only laws about but also practical measures have been enhanced regarding school libraries. But the methodology of change has not been well established, and penetration in schools is a future challenge. Teachers responsible for lessons as well as school library staff should learn the methodology of performing effective lessons by using school libraries.

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