

# **Reforming of National Curriculum Standards of Japan: Implementation and Impacts on Education in Schools for the Blind**

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## **1. Introduction**

The Curriculum Council of Japan received an inquiry from the Minister of Education in August 1996 about "reform of the national curriculum standards of kindergarten, elementary school, lower and upper secondary schools and schools for the visually disabled, the hearing impaired and the otherwise disabled". The Council comprehensively discussed this and reached the conclusion that the national curriculum standards should be reformed. Targets of the new curriculum are helping children's well-balanced development and how to educate them to be sound members of the nation and the society living independently in the 21st century. [1-8]

In conjunction with this reform, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) carries out the education for the disabled from "special education,"

which means providing education at special places depending on the degree of disability, to “special support education,” which means providing appropriate educational support depending on the educational needs of individual disabled pupils and students. Thus, MEXT promotes the concept that disabled children will be able to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to achieve their independence and participate in the society. [6]

Coincidentally, a new university, Tsukuba University of Technology, was launched on October 1, 2005 as the first four-year national university exclusively for the hearing or visually impaired. Persons concerned with this field, both inside and outside of Japan, look to this new university for the promotion of education for the blind.

## **2. Purpose of the Research**

The new national curriculum has been carried out from the school year of 2003 in upper-secondary level schools for the disabled, as it has with other high schools. This curriculum forced some new concepts, e.g., selected contents of subjects, correspondence to the information society, cultivating a "zest for living," such as the ability to learn and think independently in the 21st century. Schools all over the country were required to implement the concurrent operation of the old and this new curriculum system during the conversion period. On the other hand, the slimming of the educational content has invited criticism that this will provoke the deterioration of students' scholastic abilities

In this transitional phase, as well as for the practical attainment of the new curriculum, we would like to know how teachers realize the concepts of the new curriculum and what they feel are the practical difficulties in implementation of the new system. It is worthwhile to survey concerned teachers about how they see an expansion of the discretion of curriculum building of each school. Additionally, we will ask what expectations or requests they have for the new national university for the deaf and the blind, Tsukuba University of Technology, as a university their graduates will be expected to go on to.

### **2.1. Survey Procedure**

The research was based on a survey. We sent a questionnaire to the principals of

upper-secondary level schools for the blind across the country in October, 2004. Answers were collected by the middle of December in the mail.

The questionnaire consisted of questions related to, "attainment of new curriculum", "evaluation of the reform of the national curriculum", and "expectations to and requests for our new university."

### **3. Results and Discussion**

Forty-five of the sixty schools for the blind answered. Percentages of collection are 75% of the total. Respondents were principals, head teachers, etc.

#### **3.1. The Attainments of New Curriculum in Schools for the Blind**

Under the new curriculum, the adoption ratio of each academic subject of schools for the blind is shown in Table 1. There is a big difference in adoption in terms of subjects in the same area and also in among schools.

Subsequently, we describe some characteristics of the differences in adoption of subjects between subject areas. Actually, we conducted this survey together with schools for the deaf to better evaluate the needs of our new university for students with both impairments. In terms of the Japanese language subjects, the adoption rates of "Japanese Language Expression 1", "Integrated Japanese Language", and "Contemporary Japanese Language" are high both in schools for the deaf and for the blind. In addition, schools for the deaf give more time for Japanese language education than schools for the blind.

In geography and history subjects, it is remarkable that with both "World History" and, "Japanese History" adoption rate of an "A" (2-credit value) subject is high in schools for the blind. As opposed to the special schools' selection, regular high schools tend to adopt a "B" (4-credit value) subject in this subject area because of the advantage for university entrance examinations. This adoption causes concern that narrower options may be available in selection of universities or colleges to which they wish to apply.

Adoption of "Contemporary Society" is most popular in area of subjects for civics. On the other hand, those adopting "Ethics" and "Politics and Economy" are in the minority.

In terms of the mathematics area students in most schools for the blind and for the deaf learn "Mathematics 1", "Mathematics 2", and "Mathematics A". The adoption rate of "Mathematics B" was less than 40%. Study of "Mathematics B" is required for the examination for most national universities of science departments, therefore this situation narrows the range of choice for going to university.

There are many subjects in the science field. Adoption of "Basic Science", "Integrated Science A", and "Integrated Science B" were high. In addition, adoption of "Biology" and "Chemistry" was less than "Physics" and "Earth Science." Difficulty in teacher placement is one of the presumed causes of this situation.

In regards to the tendency of foreign language subjects, at the schools for the blind adoption of "English 1" and "Oral Communication 1" exceeds 85%. On the other hand, in deaf schools, "Oral Communication 1" drops to 40%.

"Information" is a newly introduced subject for adapting to the IT times. "Information A" was studied in most schools for the blind and for the deaf.

### **3.2. Teachers' Evaluation for New System**

These are questions and response rates of each option.

*Q. 1. Do you think the academic achievement of students is being changed by the enforcement of the new national curriculum?*

Choices of the teachers in schools for the blind are as follows.

(1) Students' academic performance is improving	-	11 %
(2) There is no influence on students' academic performance	-	35 %
(3) Students' academic performance is deteriorating	-	11 %
(4) I do not know	-	39 %
(5) Otherwise	-	2 %
(6) No Answer	-	2 %

Teachers in schools for the blind think that the reforming of the national curriculum will not induce much effect on education for the blind. But in their free responses, some teachers expressed their welcome to the expansion of discretionary powers by schools in the new system.

*Q. 2. Do you think that education for the disabled is influenced by the introduction of the new curriculum?*

Choices of the teachers in schools for the blind are as follows.

(1) Education is advancing with the new curriculum	-	14 %
(2) Education is retrogressing with the new curriculum	-	43 %
(3) Education does not change through the new curriculum	-	5 %
(4) I do not know	-	34 %
(5) Otherwise	-	2 %
(6) No Answer	-	2 %

As in the response for Question 1, teachers in schools for the blind felt that the reforming of the national curriculum would not induce much effect on education for the blind.

*Q.3. What views or opinions do you have regarding the education of academic subjects throughout the education system in schools for the deaf and for the blind, especially for the recently-introduced policy change for Special Needs Education (SEN)?*

Teachers in schools for the blind answered this question by certain evaluation with a feeling of understanding of the new system. But therewith about eighty percent of the teachers felt that through the new curriculum the academic level of students could not be improved.

Whatever the case may be, teachers may have a recognition that education for the disabled can not change by curriculum reform or by concept change, such as the philosophy of Special Needs Education (SEN).

Q. 4. *What expectations or requests do you have for the new national university for the deaf and the blind, Tsukuba University of Technology?*

This question elicited many demands for the expectation of Tsukuba University of Technology enlarging "Departments for Liberal Arts or Literature", and the establishment of "A Teacher-Training Course".

Regarding curriculum development of for Tsukuba University of Technology, we have to review this result and base it on the actual situation in education for the blind and the deaf. We would like to keep a dialogue open between us and teachers in schools for the disabled. And we have to make sure that we do not have any more misunderstandings. And it will be immediately required to build a curriculum for bridging our university and secondary education for the disabled.

#### **4. Conclusion and Discussion**

Teachers certainly appreciate the new curriculum, although there are broad discrepancies in the adoption rate of subjects in academic areas between schools. They do not see the new system as yielding strong improvements in the academic achievement of disabled students.

A recent backlash to the introduction of a more relaxed overall national education policy and the shifting from special education to special needs education may pose a threat to big conceptual changes to schools for the blind.

The tide of educational reform is giving rise to the situation of a decrease in the number of schools for the blind. Actually, it has begun to appear. One of the old-line schools for the blind was closed in March of 2006. The change will affect the percentage of students pursuing higher education from schools for the blind as well. A recent rise in the university advancement rate from schools for the blind, and a decrease of the blind applicants to the National Center Test (for university entrance) has happened at the same time. The sharp fall in the number of students (due to the declining birthrate) and diversification of the entrance system of universities, might have brought about such a situation. The recent educational reforms may add to this situation because the studying

of fewer subjects does not necessarily work against passing the examination.

Also, an increase of students with impairments in universities through the system of recommendation from their schools, or selection by each university admission office, both without subjects' examination, has caused another problem. These students were out of the screening process of the university entrance exam. Special measures for the entrance examination, e.g., the Braille exam, time extension, etc., came to be admitted through the efforts of those related to the education of the blind. There is concern however, that after going into universities, that these students will not be able to easily adapt to the learning situation.

Because of these ongoing efforts, combined with the progressive policies of the national government, we are looking forward to the promotion of an improved situation for visually-impaired students on all levels of education. Finally, for the advancement of education for those with visual impairment, respondents expressed high expectations of the new university for the hearing and visually impaired, Tsukuba University of Technology.

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