Ensuring Professional Competencies of Japanese Teachers and Emerging Challenges

Teruyuki Fujita
University of Tsukuba

Abstract

In Japan, revisions to the Educational Personnel Certification Law in 2016 and the Enforcement Regulations of the Law in 2017 have entirely renewed the contents of the curriculum for pre-service teacher training programs for the first time in two decades. The centerpiece of this change is the introduction of a "core curriculum" in the teacher training programs. The core curriculum is a common set of qualifications and competencies that students must acquire in each of the subjects concerning the teaching profession, as specified in the revised Educational Personnel Certification Law.

Today, the development of human resources in higher education institutions requires the fostering of the capabilities to respond to the demands of the rapidly changing society. Assuming these demands, the purpose of creating the core curriculum is to present the qualities and competencies that should be acquired through teacher training programs at all universities in Japan. Universities are required to ensure the common content and standards required for teacher preparation, but at the same time, they can further promote distinctive features by adding their originality and ingenuity.

In the first half of this presentation, I will explain the specific characteristics of this core curriculum for teaching. The second half of the presentation will focus on the professional qualities of teachers that were challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic of COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on schools throughout the world. Japan, of course, has been no exception. On February 28, 2020, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology issued an administrative notice calling for a simultaneous temporary closure of schools.

The government called for the active use of ICT to ensure the continuation of learning at home, but only a few primary and secondary schools, except for higher education institutions, were able to respond to the call. In the early stages, most primary, junior, and senior high schools adopted the strategy of distributing paper-printed teaching materials and homework assignments to each family by mail, collecting them, and returning them after scoring and correcting.

Of course, even before facing this pandemic, Japan was well advanced in the development of "ed-tech" suitable for the era known as the fourth industrial revolution. However, the demand from teachers for their implementation was not strong enough, and the budget for the necessary infrastructure, ICT equipment, and software was not secured adequately.

This pandemic, however, is rapidly changing the very foundations of this outdated way of teaching in Japan. The government has allocated a huge amount of money for the realization of the "GIGA School Program", which aims to "provide a tablet personal computer for each student as well as a high-speed, high-capacity communication

network for each school". Today, an environment has already been created in which almost every student can use his/her personal tablet computer.

So, is it possible for the schools in Japan to get back on track? In this presentation, I will discuss the challenges and possibilities for Japanese schools and teachers in the post-pandemic era.