

Career Education

Learning for the “Real Life” after School

Creating ties with the professional world is clearly positioned as one of the objectives of education in Japan, with the significance and purpose of career education explicitly outlined under newly revised curriculum guidelines and the government’s Basic Education Promotion Plan. *The Japan Journal* reports on some of the specific policy initiatives now being undertaken to better connect school children in Japan with the world of work.

In a policy speech to the 170th session of the Diet in September 2008, his first since assuming office, Japan’s 92nd Prime Minister Taro Aso declared that Japan would push full steam ahead with a New Economic Growth Strategy designed to stimulate demand and generate new jobs through the creation of new industries and technology. In a subsequent policy speech to the 171st session of the Diet in January 2009, Aso similarly stressed the need for economic growth founded on reform, setting out a focus on job and market creation based on the New Economic Growth Strategy.

Initially devised in 2006, the New Economic Growth Strategy (“Growth Strategy”) was revised in view of subsequent socioeconomic conditions in September 2008 before being approved by the Cabinet. The Growth

Strategy sets out four visions of what will be required to achieve its aim of “new growth” in the face of a declining population, namely creating a “global innovation center,” “new value,” “a nation rich in human resources” and “a country in which people are confident in their national wealth,” through initiatives such as the creation of “a virtuous cycle of innovation and demand.”

One of the specific policies set out in an effort to achieve these goals is that of developing human resources as the root source of innovation. The Growth Strategy aims to promote “industry, government and academia education partnerships” and push ahead with initiatives such as creating an environment conducive to career education from elementary school onwards and practical vocational education at universities and other such institu-

tions, thereby laying the foundations required to harness human resources over the medium to long term.

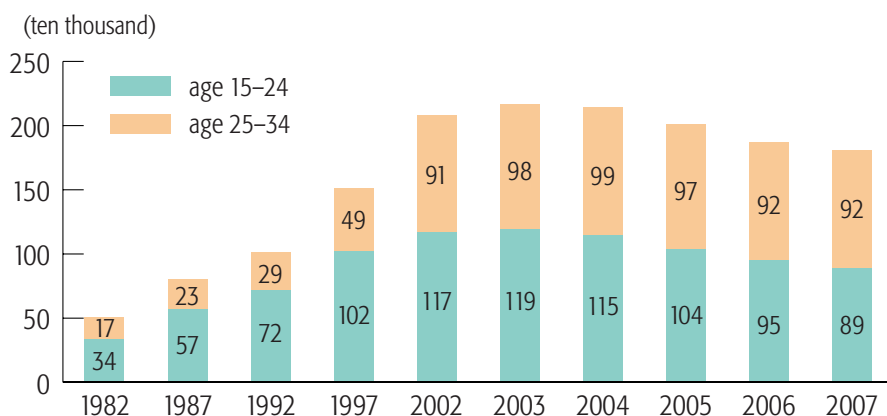
National Policy

The government began to promote career education in earnest at the end of the 1990s, initially in the form of professional awareness education, as a preliminary stage before students embarked on internships. This was inspired primarily by a report published in December 1999 by the Central Education Council, entitled *Improving Links between Elementary/Secondary Education and Higher Education*. The report stated that “career education needs to be provided from elementary school onwards, in line with different stages of development,” using the term “career education” for the first time within the context of specific proposals to the education authorities.

According to Research Coordinator Teruyuki Fujita from the National Institute for Educational Policy Research’s Guidance and Counseling Research Center, “the report clearly underlined the need for career education in order to create a link between students’ school lives and subsequent working lives. From 2002 onwards, a group of experts within the Ministry of Education launched a study to examine what form career education should take. This was prompted by a major shift in employment patterns after the collapse of the bubble economy, with the rate of employment amongst high school graduates bottoming out and youth employment issues such as growing numbers of NEETs (not in employment, education or training) and “freeters” (people opting for temporary over permanent employment) starting to emerge just as the study was getting underway. Career education was an attempt to address this situation in collaboration with organizations outside schools.”

Since the publication of a report

Figure 1: Number of “freeters”



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications

on the promotion of career education in 2004, career education has started to be rolled out as a specific national policy. Rather than being overseen exclusively by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the government's career education policy is implemented in conjunction with the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the Cabinet Office amongst others.

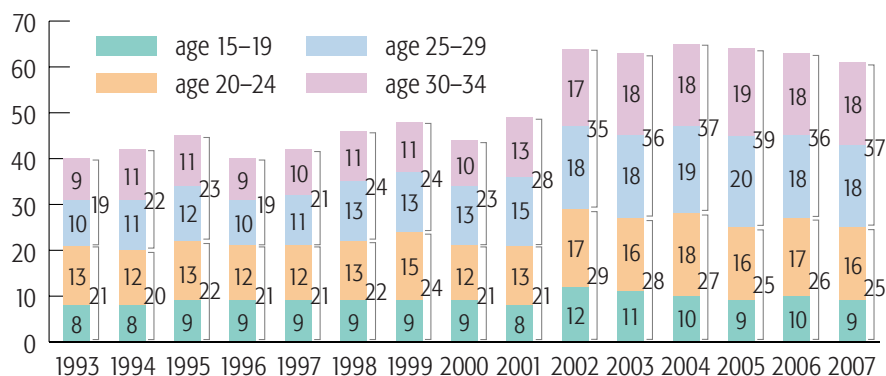
As a result of revisions to the Basic Law on Education in December 2006 and the School Education Law the following year in March 2007, creating ties with the professional world is now clearly positioned as one of the objectives of education in Japan, with the significance and purpose of career education explicitly outlined under revised curriculum guidelines and the government's Basic Education Promotion Plan in an effort to facilitate classroom activities in schools.

Community Schools

At Daiyon Elementary School in Mitaka, Tokyo, career education and entrepreneur schemes are organized for students in every grade. This approach originally stemmed from the recognition that too much emphasis was being placed on knowledge through learning and upbringing, with students' after-school activities revolving around cram schools, to the detriment of relationships with the local community. The school has been striving to make itself more open to the community since 2000 and has set out a policy of strengthening exchange in its capacity as a focal point where students learn about life in the local community and get to experience aspects of society and nature. One of the key features of the school's activities is that they involve around 200 local volunteers registered as Community Teachers. The school also promotes entrepreneur education via the Dream Support Network, a NPO set up in 2003, primarily by the same local volunteers. The school's aim is to become a participation-oriented community school that equips students with both

Figure 2: Number of unemployed young people

(ten thousand)



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications

personal capabilities and social capabilities (to help them make the transition into society) through collaboration between the school and the local community, working hand in hand with local people.

As part of career education, students engage in structured, practical activities from the first to sixth grades, including listening to talks from adults they encounter in their everyday lives, getting to know themselves, thinking about the reasons why people work and starting to think about life plans. As part of entrepreneur education meanwhile older students work with the Dream Support Network to come up with ideas for products that harness local resources, specifically Edomurasaki clematis, a plant traditionally used for dying kimono fabric. The pupils collected the plants and produced crepe wrapping paper, tissue case covers and the like using the distinctive dyestuff. They established hypothetical companies and produced plans covering everything from prototype production through to sales. They then submitted their plans and received funding from the school, enabling them to actually go out into the community and sell their products.

Initiatives such as these were commended by MEXT in November 2008 as practical examples of how educational capabilities within the local community can be harnessed extremely effectively.

Teruyuki Fujita from the National Institute for Educational Policy Research regards the initiatives being carried out at Mitaka Daiyon Elemen-

tary School as an excellent example of well-balanced harmony between leadership from the school's principal and NPO support. He believes that the foundations are there for practical education based on a functioning local community and that the involvement of businesses commissioned under the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI)'s Local-Oriented Private Sector-Involved Career Education Project has also been a factor in the success of the school's initiatives. Fujita rejects any suggestion that this is a one-off case that can't be used as an example for other communities.

"Initiatives such as those at Mitaka Daiyon Elementary School would be equally feasible in other communities too. Even less populated communities where there are no companies can still provide career education using the unique resources they have available, such as agriculture, forestry or fishing for instance. The problem is how to provide experiences that reshape children's perspectives from scratch. It is because of their small scale that communities can play their part. It is also important that teachers recognize the need to provide career education."

Essentially, children need to come into contact with members of their community, see what sort of jobs are out there, understand how each profession functions and get to know how those involved in each profession work. That is the basis of career education. Teachers and instructors therefore need a discerning eye in order to identify and bring out such

aspects of education.

Work Ability

As one might expect from a school that has been commended by MEXT, Misono Junior High School in Tokyo's Ota Ward has been organizing experience-based education in manufacturing, harnessing local industry in the area, since fiscal 2006. Brimming with over 5,000 backstreet

nation (getting acquainted with and experiencing a profession) and (4) self fulfillment (drawing up a life plan).

Students progress through the program by researching jobs in the local community and visiting local workplaces in the first grade, undergoing work experience placements and thinking about their own aptitudes in the second grade and thinking about career options in the third grade. Surveys carried out after students have

nical personnel to come in and give talks. The idea didn't go as planned however as schools responded negatively, claiming that it was unworkable due to safety concerns.

The turning point came when a private organization that happened to be researching collaboration between schools and the workplace, called Gakushoku Renkei Net (cooperative network of education and career), started to organize meetings for managers of local factories, teachers and anyone else interested in career education.

One factory manager got the ball rolling by saying "there may be some difficulties, but we'll give it a go. I know there are some issues to be addressed, but I'm sure we could work something out with the help of the Ota City Industry and Economy Department. I'll try approaching them too." Ota Industrial Union Corporation also started to take action and Ota City began to address career education as well. The issue of ensuring students' safety was resolved through "a last-ditch policy of asking industrial schools to provide advance training sessions for students going to local factories and catering colleges to provide training for those going to food-related plants," Hayakawa says.

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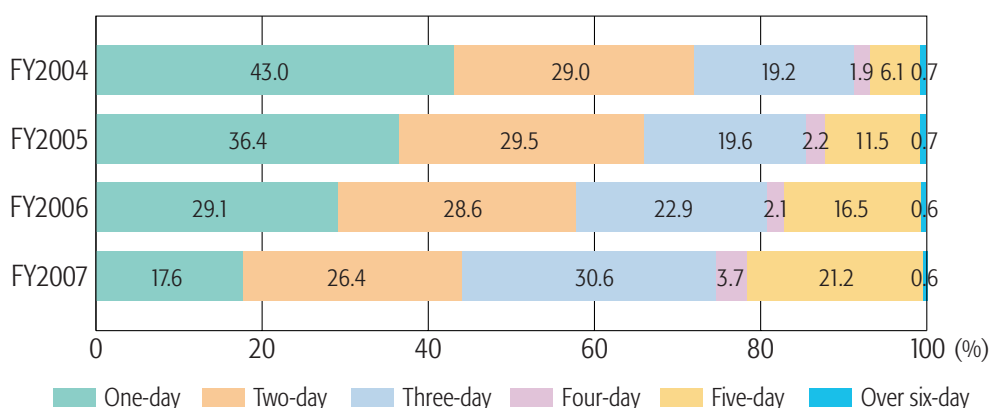
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Securing Placements

Securing placements as part of career education is no easy matter, placing a considerable burden on teachers in schools. By way of support, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Education Bureau compiles a list of companies offering placements.

"We are trying to emphasize the importance of career education to various different industries," explains Shuichi Yamamoto, a teaching con-

Figure 3: Junior high school students' working experience by days



Source: National Institute for Educational Policy Research

factories, Ota Ward is one of the main centers of the manufacturing industry in Japan, alongside Higashi Osaka, and provides support for everything from prototype production for cutting edge industries the world over to the manufacturing of components.

As part of its career education policy, since fiscal 2005 METI has been promoting a program called Career Start Week, whereby junior high school students experience life in the workplace for a period of at least five days, and is working to lay the foundations for increased collaboration between the likes of schools, industry and related government bodies.

As part of this program, Misono Junior High School has set out the objective of providing students with an outlook on work and a professional viewpoint through career education and also equipping them with "the ability to work," namely (1) self-awareness (getting to know oneself and thinking about the future), (2) self-discovery (thinking about a profession and aptitudes), (3) self exami-

undergone work experience in the ward, in places such as convenience stores, hair salons, hotels and small factories, show that 87% learn that work can be interesting and 82% learn how great it is to be an adult. The school's efforts were commended on the basis that they improve students' understanding of the local community, equip them with a realistic outlook on work, help prepare them for life after leaving school to a certain extent and nurture the ability to work.

From companies' point of view however, there are always difficulties with regard to issues such as assigning placement supervisors, reorganizing operations to accommodate students and ensuring student safety.

Takayuki Hayakawa, a teaching consultant at the Board of Education in Ota Ward, viewed the idea of asking schools to provide work experience placements as merely an extension of their experiences prior to the Career Start Week program, including organizing factory tours for students and inviting engineers and other tech-

sultant at the Education Bureau. “We keep stressing that career education is hugely valuable in the long term and asking companies to work with us to help nurture the children that will shoulder the next generation. We have got the likes of department stores in the Kanto area, Japan Railways and childcare and kindergarten facilities on board so far and have compiled a list of over a thousand workplaces. We are currently working to disseminate the relevant information.”

According to a 2006 summary compiled by the Career Education Promotion Committee, a subdivision of the Youth Development Committee headed by the prime minister, the percentage of junior high schools around the country organizing work experience placements lasting five days or longer is on the increase, rising from 7.9% (807 schools) in fiscal 2004, prior to the Career Start Week program, to 13.8% (1,409 schools) in fiscal 2005 and 19.6% (1,983 schools) in fiscal 2006.

According to Yamamoto, the key to increasing this percentage in the future rests with regular educational activities in one respect.

“As it stands, a lack of expert staff and time is both one of the weaknesses and one of the strengths of career education. What I mean is that there are plenty of opportunities for students to learn the basics of career education, such as formal greetings, attire, appropriate language and manners for instance, in the course of their regular lessons and school lives. It is therefore important to specify and place priority on elements of career education within the context of regular educational activities.”

The aforementioned Fujita is keen to stress the importance of career education from a similar perspective. “In addition to preventing students from becoming NEETs or freeters, providing career education from elementary school onwards makes for a wide-ranging education irrespective of issues such as the current state of the economy or youth employment, including helping children to map out their various options in life and equipping them with the values they need to choose the options that are best for

them. Put simply, career education is a form of developmental education that gives children the awareness they need to lay the foundations for a rich, full life in the future.”

In order to effectively achieve this goal, it is essential to work together with coordinators outside school, through organizations such as NPOs and boards of education. Indeed, METI has continued to expand the aforementioned Local-Oriented Private Sector-Involved Career Education Project, whilst MEXT has set up Community School Support Teams as part of its efforts to increase cooperation with local communities. Since fiscal 2008, both ministries have also been discussing standard qualifications for coordinators and minimum requirements for outside-school coordinators.

Nation Building

Japan is a nation founded on manufacturing and has established itself as the world’s second largest economy based on science and technology, accumulating a wealth of intellectual property in

tion building in the future.

The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) is a study that uses standardized tests to assess the level of educational achievement in the fields of numeracy (mathematics) and science amongst fourth grade elementary school students and second grade junior high school students. The TIMSS results for 2007 rank Japanese elementary school fourth graders fourth in the world in both numeracy and science, with junior high school second graders ranked fifth in numeracy and third in science. The level of basic scientific knowledge amongst adults in Japan however is lower than that of other countries. The reason for this discrepancy stems from the fact that Japanese education is geared towards exams, with no real connection between learning and everyday life. It is important however that we learn in order to live. It would be no exaggeration to say that basic learning and career education will form the basis of nation building in the future.

What is important in career edu-

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—Teruyuki Fujita, National Institute for Educational Policy Research

the process. Technology and knowledge could effectively be regarded as the basis of the Japanese people’s wealth. Nonetheless, Japan is currently facing a dwindling birthrate, an aging society and a declining population, ahead of any of the world’s other advanced nations. There is no doubting that technology and knowledge will form the basis of Japan’s efforts to develop new industries and create employment, retain its economic power and contribute to the international community within the context of na-

tion is that it encourages young people to find a job soon after graduating and allows them to find an appropriate role in society and work within it productively and continuously. Having stressed the fact that human development is the basis of nation building, in February 2009 Prime Minister Aso instructed the Meeting on Education Rebuilding to begin discussing career education with direct links to employment. ■

Hitoshi Chiba, *The Japan Journal*