

Title: Constructing Inquiry Learning in Japan: A Vertical Case Study of Competency-Based Education Reform

Overview: In this presentation, we explore how competency-based curriculum reforms have constructed inquiry learning in public lower secondary schools in Shibuya, Japan. Drawing on a vertical case study approach, we demonstrate that the tension between two national key concepts— “individual” and “collaborative”—poses significant challenges for teachers’ educational practices.

Purpose: This presentation explores how diverse actors construct approaches to learning in Japanese lower secondary schools amid the global expansion of competency-based education reforms and the increasing adoption of inquiry learning in Japan. Discussions of competencies, or “twenty-first century skills,” have been noted for their striking rhetorical similarity across national contexts. Meanwhile, debates in comparative education have long been shaped by the tension between perspectives that emphasize the global convergence of educational practices and those highlighting the cultural particularities of individual nations, with ongoing efforts to reconcile these positions (Takayama, 2012). In this context, there is a growing call for studies examining how the global diffusion of competencies is implemented in classroom practice across diverse local and national settings (Anderson-Levitt & Gardinier, 2023).

Method: We conducted observations, interviews, and archival research based on two years of fieldwork at a public lower secondary school in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo, Japan. Shibuya’s initiatives have attracted considerable attention, even within national-level

debates. Therefore, examining this case is likely to provide valuable insights into future discussions in Japan. Drawing on a vertical case study approach (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014), that traces the processes through which educational discourse is constructed across multiple levels—global, national, and local—we address the following research questions: (1) How have policy documents in Japan referenced global trends in competency-based education reform? (2) How has Shibuya engaged with the national momentum toward inquiry learning in developing its local educational initiatives? (3) How do teachers in lower secondary schools in Shibuya design and implement inquiry-based curricula?

Results and Discussions: First, we examined the revision process of Japanese education policy documents. Japanese schools have long been group-oriented, emphasizing commonality and showing a reluctance to respond to the diverse needs of individual students (Tsuneyoshi, 2001). In the late twentieth century, Japan introduced national-level reforms to incorporate inquiry-based learning that respected students' individuality. More recently, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the expansion of ICT in education, diverse and complex concepts such as “individual optimization of learning” and “collaborative learning” have emerged, contributing to apparent confusion in school settings. Our analysis reveals that, while informed by discussions advanced by international organizations such as the OECD, Japanese education policy has developed a dichotomous conception of learning as either “individual” or “collaborative.”

We then analyzed the process by which inquiry learning was introduced into Shibuya's curriculum. Under the leadership of the local board of education, reforms

related to inquiry learning were implemented in elementary and lower secondary schools. By adopting a policy framework introduced by MEXT that allows for greater flexibility in curriculum design, Shibuya schools have, in recent years, reduced the time allocated to subject-based instruction while expanding the time for integrated studies. In addition, with support from the board of education, private sector advisors have provided consultations in schools, and ICT devices have been actively introduced into classrooms. Under these conditions, teachers are expected to exercise autonomy when designing inquiry-based curricula. Analysis of policy documents and interviews with administrative actors reveals a particularly strong tendency to privilege the “individual” over “collaboration” in Shibuya.

Finally, we investigated how teachers at three public junior high schools designed and implemented the inquiry learning curricula. All three schools shared a common approach: students were grouped into classrooms according to their individual interests, and inquiry activities were conducted across grade levels. At first glance, this structure appears to promote collaborative learning. However, many teachers emphasized that inquiry should fundamentally be grounded in individual interests, viewing collaboration primarily as a means rather than an end in itself. At the same time, some teachers sought to expand the concept of collaborative inquiry learning and challenge the existing models of learning. Nevertheless, such efforts have been hindered by structural constraints, including school-wide frameworks that predefine lesson formats and a lack of time and professional development opportunities for deeper teacher collaboration. In a local context where prioritizing individual learning remains the dominant perspective, incorporating meaningful forms of collaboration into a curriculum presents a significant challenge.

In conclusion, we demonstrate that the tension between two nationally promoted concepts—“individual” and “collaborative”—poses significant challenges for teachers’ educational practices. Previous studies have implied that some educational practices in Japan produce and reinforce interdependent selves and inhibit the rise of ontological individualism (Komatsu and Rappleye 2020). However, our findings indicate that recent national educational reforms may have unsettled these assumptions at the local level.

Keywords: Inquiry Learning, Competency-Based Education Reform, Vertical Case Study, Japan