

0. Title

Possibilities of Distance Learning Systems for Realizing “Networked Public Education”:
A Case Study of Online Social Studies Community Study with Wide-Area Communication

1. Research Overview (50 words)

This study examines a Japanese distance learning program connecting multiple schools online to explore the institutional conditions necessary for “networked public education.” Through document analysis and interviews with administrators and participating schools, the study identifies how organizational support, school autonomy, and free access sustain participation and educational acceptance.

2. Purpose

This study aims to clarify the possibilities and challenges of distance learning systems for realizing “networked public education” by analyzing the operational characteristics and school-level acceptance of “Online Social Studies Community Study with Wide-Area Communication.”

In this study, “networked public education” refers to a new model of public education that guarantees educational opportunities through collaboration among multiple schools within the same municipality using ICT and online technologies.

Traditionally, compulsory education in Japan has been based on a “single-school completion model,” in which each school independently provides and completes the curriculum. However, following school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and rapid developments in ICT and AI technologies, increasing attention has been paid to new forms of online educational opportunities.

Nevertheless, distance learning in Japanese compulsory education has mainly been introduced as a response to existing educational problems, such as support for absent students or small rural schools. Consequently, limited research has examined distance learning as a sustainable model for future public education systems.

This study focuses on “Online Social Studies Community Study with Wide-Area Communication,” a collaborative project conducted by Hiroshima University and the Higashihiroshima City Board of Education. The program connects three or more schools online and promotes interactive dialogue-based learning. Since 2021, more than 80 classes have been implemented, with cumulative participation exceeding 20,000 elementary school students.

Rather than treating distance learning as a temporary solution to urgent educational issues, this study examines how the program has been institutionally sustained and positively accepted as a new model of educational opportunity.

3. Methods

This study employs three research methods.

First, the operational system of the program was analyzed through public documents, reports, and previous studies in order to identify its institutional and organizational characteristics.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with university staff members and local board of education officials involved in the project. These interviews focused on project objectives, collaborative structures, operational strategies, and implementation challenges.

Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals and administrators of participating schools. These interviews explored the reasons for continued participation, decision-making processes, and perceptions of educational outcomes.

Through these analyses, the study examines the institutional conditions and challenges necessary for supporting distance learning systems within “networked public education.”

4. Results and Discussion

The findings reveal three major factors supporting the continuous implementation of the program.

First, the program was institutionally and financially supported as an official municipal educational policy through close collaboration between the university and the local board of education. This organizational foundation contributed to the program’s stability and legitimacy.

Second, participation decisions were left to the autonomy of individual schools. Rather than being mandated, the program operated through voluntary participation, which encouraged schools’ proactive engagement and ownership.

Third, the program was provided free of charge to participating schools through municipal and national financial support, reducing economic barriers to participation.

In addition, participating schools did not view the program merely as a solution to existing educational problems. Instead, schools positively evaluated it as an opportunity for teacher professional development and for providing students with learning experiences unavailable in ordinary classroom settings. The program was therefore accepted not only as a means of guaranteeing educational opportunities, but also as a platform for boundary-crossing learning and professional collaboration.

These findings suggest that realizing “networked public education” requires institutional support from educational administrations and universities, organizational structures that preserve school autonomy, and sustainable financial systems that ensure free access to participation.

At the same time, this study has several limitations. In particular, interviews were conducted only with participating schools, and the perspectives of schools that chose not to participate were not sufficiently examined. Future research should investigate the reasons for non-participation and the institutional barriers that may limit broader implementation of networked public education.

5. Keywords

Networked Public Education; Compulsory Education; Distance Learning; Online Learning;
University–Government Collaboration

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