

# Teacher Centers in Japan

Amity P. Buxton

*An observer of Japanese teacher centers reports on their purpose, scope, and activities—using British and American centers as a frame of reference.*

The purpose of my visit to Japanese teacher centers in 1974 was to study the centers, the teachers, their training/investigation work, and the classroom results if possible. While I did gather a great deal of information on these subjects, the greatest impact came from the informants themselves—the teacher center staff members, teachers, and other educators. There was a seriousness of purpose and dedication, a command of content, and both a liveliness and patience of mind which I have rarely encountered among educators, with the exception of some involved in British teacher centers and a few in American teacher centers.

The second surprise was the tremendous size and scope of the teacher center facilities. Like university plants, the buildings were

staggering in size. There were separate laboratories for staff and for teachers, for example.

The third unexpected discovery was the expressed concern for individual potential and for individualized work in local curricular development within what had been described to me as an authoritarian bureaucratic structure.

*Kyoto Science Center for Youth, Japan.*





*Science Education Institute of Osaka Prefecture, Japan.*

Thus, the visit and study proved to be a rewarding experience. It could not have been achieved, however, without the tremendous help and cooperation of individual Japanese educators and researchers.

#### **Staff Development in Japan: 1930-1974**

Beginning attempts to improve education in Japan seem to have preceded World War II. Between the wars, I was told, there was a "New Educational Movement" of individual Japanese educators led or supported by university professors, administrators, and teachers who were interested in what was happening in England (especially in London), the United States (Dewey), France, and Germany.

Two important conditions of the movement were voluntarism and creativity. Thus, after the war, when there were "official" directives and unofficial advice from the Occupation Education Advisory on ways to disseminate and to implement the new democratic educational system and to disseminate the democratization, there were already in existence embryonic groups of teachers who wanted to

have a place—a center or institute—where they could voluntarily study to improve their own teaching capacities.

Further, I was informed, the Japanese had a vision of meeting more than their severe physical needs after the war; they also had a vision of spiritual regeneration for a New Society in which teachers, too, demanded a place. Their new educational system (six years of elementary school, three of junior high, three of senior high, and four of college) was to be their own thing—not a copy of the United States system.

Within two or three years, local institutes of educational research or study were started in many places on the basis of: (a) the desire of teachers; (b) leadership of local boards of education; and (c) the moral (not financial) support of the central Ministry of Education. Kyoto, a comprehensive center, was the earliest of these.

The Law for the Development of Science Education, passed in the early 1950's, gave tremendous impetus to the founding of new centers. This law emphasized the important role education would play in developing a new democratic society and

the important part science plays in the basic training of students and teachers, in teaching methods, and in the curriculum. To these ends, science centers were established in 1960 for retraining teachers in science education in the prefectures of Chiba, Gifu, Toyama, Osaka, and Yamaguchi. By the mid-1960's, fifty centers or institutes for science education had been established covering half of all the prefectures.<sup>1</sup>

Following the impact of this science education law was the Ministry's move to expand the scope of retraining institutes beyond science to include areas in which teachers had received only average or below average formal education, that is, academic areas such as the Japanese language and mathematics. In 1965, "Educational Training Centers" were established to meet this need. Now, every prefecture has its teacher center, although each varies in budget and governing personnel.

In sum, the teacher centers appear to have been established and developed to meet two complementary objectives: (a) the improvement of a teacher's teaching capacities, as measured by his or her own criteria of professional excellence, and (b) the improvement of the teacher's techniques for teaching the National Course of Study. Center work toward meeting these objectives is of two kinds, training and research. "Research" in Japanese centers means systematic investigation—data-gathering; analysis and report; and/or developed product (equipment or apparatus) or learning sequence.

### Teacher Centers in Japan: 1974

Centers<sup>2</sup> range from small local branch centers in the Chiba prefecture to large centers serving a region like the Hokkaido Educational

Research Center, which serves the entire prefecture. Some are single purpose like the Osaka and Kyoto science education centers.

Center staffs range from 12 persons to over 140. Center size ranges from 600 square meters in a two-story, old building to 21,000 square meters in a multi-storied edifice. Center equipment is usually of a somewhat higher level than that found in secondary schools and includes some new apparatus like gas lasers or x-ray diffraction machines. Financing can come from four sources: national Ministry, prefectural Board of Education, municipal Board of Education, or P.T.A. This financing covers facilities, operation, and teachers' work.

A major concern of the Ministry in its efforts to disseminate the National Course of Study seems to be how to organize the educational system as a whole, especially the in-service activities of teachers. In-service at the national level therefore serves to train teaching personnel at the prefectural level. In-service at the prefectural level, in turn, serves to train teachers at the municipal level.

Despite this national concern and systematization, teachers do not have to engage in in-service activity. In Tokyo, for example, the law says that it is their obligation and right to do so but it is up to their own initiative to participate. How fine a

<sup>1</sup> Bentley Glass. "Japanese Education Centers." *Science* 154:221-28; October 14, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the formal, organized teacher centers in Japan, there are other kinds of unofficial types of in-service work available and actively engaged in voluntarily by teachers. These types all receive money from local boards of education. They differ from "official" centers in that they are not sponsored or planned by local, municipal, prefectural, or ministerial boards.



line there actually is between free choice and "being expected to" is a matter for more extensive interviewing at another time. One teacher told me that the observable results of a teacher's work at the centers make the other teachers appear worse so that they decide to take course work and "bridge the gap." In Tokyo, I received the impression that teachers felt pressured to enroll in center work. Regional local groups—public and private—who have studied teachers' perceptions of in-service have discovered that many teachers want to make use of such centers for their own improvement. In Kyoto, I received the impression that teachers indeed want to.

While teachers themselves want to go to centers to improve their teaching capacities, there are several outstanding factors preventing them from so doing (some of which are similar to factors in the United States). First, demands of the job make them too tired to attend night courses. Second, lack of a sufficient number of substitutes makes it impossible to have released time for center work. Third, the educational budget is allocated to building needs rather than to in-service work. Fourth, certain ideological conflicts among teachers' groups, which are articulated by the outspoken minority of union members, oppose the work of teacher centers as symbolizing the work of the Ministry.<sup>3</sup> Fifth, sheer numbers of teachers prevent continuous work on a regular basis. These factors were mentioned by a number of educators I interviewed.

The Ministry is very interested in attracting new teachers to the profession. Heretofore, the salary scale was not a drawing card. Thus, for the first time in Japanese history, the Diet has legislated a major raise in teachers' salaries so that after ten to twenty years of teaching, teachers

can have incomes on a par with those of personnel in government and large business enterprises.

There has also been a variety of schemes to facilitate teachers' engaging in teacher center work. The availability of financing at the local level is the most obvious. Of the selection schemes, one has been a lottery among teachers who wish to participate and another has been a rotation system.

Even with rotation, however, any one teacher generally can have only one chance at a teacher center during the first three to five years of teaching; a second chance or challenge after that "plateau" period; and a third chance as a senior teacher for leadership in his or her school or locality. This retraining cycling resembles the pattern outlined by retraining legislation proposed in England.

In respect to the research aspect of teacher center work, the Ministry does not oppose teachers' developing new materials. Only a minority, however, utilize this freedom, that is,

<sup>3</sup> Background of the teachers' union movement and opposition to the Ministry of Education is described elsewhere as follows: "Several moves to form a teachers' union were initiated as early as December in 1945 soon after the end of the war and eventually led, after various twists and turns, to the creation of the Japan Teachers' Union in June 1947. Thus a nationwide organization encompassing the bulk of the teachers in Japan was born for the first time. In the midst of the economic hardships following Japan's defeat in war, the Japan Teachers' Union was more in the nature of a 'labor union' for protecting the teachers' livelihood than an association of professional workers. In the ensuing [sic] years, the union further strengthened this character and involved itself in the postwar process of determining educational policies as a powerful political pressure group opposed to the Education Ministry." (Makoto Aso and Ikuo Amano. *Education and Japan's Modernization*. Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1972. pp. 69-70.)



have time and energy to do so. While I was told that the formal education of Japanese teachers is not adequate for their developing their own curriculum or methodology, I observed that the combination of specialists and teachers at a teacher center could develop materials, course units, and learning sequences.

### Some Generalizations

Because the form of each of the five centers I visited is similar, it is easy to generalize about their operation—government-supported, focused on retraining, housed in large buildings, linked to research activities, run by large staffs. Within the general pattern, however, there are unique aspects characteristic of particular centers. Kyoto has its children's program, Tokyo its long-term training courses, Hokkaido its residential facility, Chiba its branches, Osaka its intensive short-term course.

Each center plays a different role in relation to classroom implementation. The Kyoto center lies in a prefecture which supports change, while Osaka plays a major supportive role for individual teachers who wish to introduce innovations. At the Hokkaido center, teachers can devise their own curricula, whereas in other centers unions may keep teacher centers from playing such a creative role in education. Tokyo Institute, which operates with the competition of many voluntary study groups, contrasts with Hokkaido, which operates in a relatively "open" situation, politically and educationally. Chiba has a specific charge to supply elementary teachers to remedy a teacher shortage in the area.

In all of the five centers, the teacher participants come on a voluntary basis although implicit expectation seems to play a large part in attendance. Teachers are selected

by examination or recommendation or lottery. There is little room for spontaneous, "drop in" involvement as in many centers in the United States.

The process of learning in the five centers is generally seminar/discussion for courses in the liberal arts; laboratory and participatory activities in language and science; and either seminar/study/curriculum revision or workshop approaches in mathematics. Workshops in mathe-



tics are uncommon, a contrast to the number of such workshops in British and United States centers. Except for the residential center at Hokkaido, the social aspect of learning is minimized, unlike the work in British and United States centers.

Most of the center programs are short-term, that is, half a year or less with sessions held on a regular schedule (weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly). The subject areas covered are those stressed in the National Course of Study and include science, Japanese and foreign language (English), management, moral education, mathematics, and technical arts (homemaking, for example).

All of the centers require some

kind of a product from their participants. Many of the programs involve a written report of the work done by the teachers. These reports remain as references for other teachers coming to the center. British centers, too, often have this kind of written report from their study



groups, but it is not the general practice in most United States centers.

While I could not visit classrooms during this visit, my informants reported that content, methodology, and some activities or apparatus are taken back into the classrooms by the teachers. How much of the commitment, inquiry approach, active learning process, or thematic framework shown by the staff members is internalized by the teachers to transform their teaching is a question to be answered by further investigation—in the classrooms. In view of the striking dedication and competence of the staff members, there is an obvious need for such a systematic review of the classrooms of the teacher participants. What “products” or learnings are actually carried back? To what degree are they used? How? How do they fit into the teachers’ perception of their

curriculum and of their children’s learning?

Two of the most important generalizations about the Japanese centers concern the “why’s” of their very existence. First, the universities do not as yet have in-service programs (although there is a move in this direction). Second, both the Ministry and local boards of education recognize the importance of retraining and are willing to finance training-center work.

I was comforted, in view of our own situation in the United States, to find out that Japanese teachers are also too overworked to take full advantage of teacher center activities. What I was surprised to discover, however, was an apparent lack of systematic procedures for providing such time for teacher center work in daily schedules. I was also surprised to find no systematic procedure for surveying classroom implementation of teacher center learning. There is informal feedback to the principals, to the boards of education, and to center staff members, but there is no formal kind of survey. Several center persons indicated that they see this lack of follow-up as regrettable.

The quality of the staff members in all five centers I visited emerged as one of the key generalizations to be made about the centers. I inquired of Professor Masui, Research Director of the National Institute of Educational Research (NIER) and Professor of Comparative Education, as to the qualifications of center staff members and the means of selecting them. There are three criteria: intellectual competence, mechanical competence, and exemplary personality or moral character. The latter criterion refers to a person’s interpersonal relationships. Staff members are selected by the board of education by means of an interview and the recommendation of

their respective principals. These criteria confirmed my impression of the teachers' command of content and of methodology in their fields and their generosity of spirit. The number of such staff members in each center far exceeds that of most centers in England and the United States.

The similarity of organization among the Japanese centers contrasts with the variety of patterns observed among centers in the United States—some within and some outside of the educational system. The similarity of organization, however, resembles that of the British centers, each of which is usually linked to the local education authority. The huge size of the Japanese centers contrasts with the generally small and local dimensions of the United States centers, but resembles some of the large residential centers in England. The separation of the university system and the teacher centers in Japan differs from the ties (of various degrees) between universities and teacher centers both in the United States and in England, although there are individual examples of Japanese professors' working with center staffs in the centers in a manner such as is found in both the United States and England.

Next to size, type of program, and organization, the major observable difference between the teacher centers I visited in Japan and those I know in Britain and the United States lies in the apparent locus of initiative for the center retraining. Historically, Japanese teachers wanted to improve their teaching at a local level prior to the post-war democratization. The institutionalization of the retraining and research programs in the huge, government-financed centers, however, suggests a top-down, non-"grass roots" process. At the same time, teachers can and do participate voluntarily. Perhaps the

locus of initiative is a moot question.

Since teachers attend voluntarily and continue to do so, they must want or feel that they need the retraining. Certainly, their preferences and responses are considered in program planning by the staff members of the centers I visited. Certainly,



the individual needs of the teachers are considered in the center teaching, which I observed or discussed with staff members. What is needed in this respect, as in the matter of classroom implementation, is a further investigation into the teachers' perceptions of their work at the centers in terms of their individual wishes and needs. In general, however, even from my limited observation, it appears that both the teachers' and the Ministry's needs for improving teaching in Japan are being met by the teacher centers. *ET*



*Amity P. Buxton  
is Director,  
Teachers' Active  
Learning Center,  
San Francisco/  
Oakland, California.*

Copyright © 1976 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.