

Teacher Professional Development Policy and Enlightenment of Japan from the Perspective of Lifelong Learning

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Abstract: Teachers are both lifelong learners and guides for lifelong learning. Continuous professional development through lifelong learning remains the key pathway to enhance teachers' expertise. This paper analyzes the content and institutional characteristics of China's teacher lifelong learning system from three perspectives: faculty colleges, the new teacher training system in the Reiwa era, and the teacher certification renewal mechanism. The findings aim to provide insights and references for building a comprehensive lifelong learning framework for educators in China.

1. Introduction

In 1965, French educator Paul first introduced the concept of lifelong education at a UNESCO-sponsored international conference on adult education. His seminal work "Introduction to Lifelong Education" published in 1970 formally established the framework for lifelong learning. Since then, through sustained advocacy by global organizations including UNESCO and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), countries worldwide have implemented comprehensive policies to advance this educational philosophy, effectively realizing its vision.

Teachers are both lifelong learners and guides for lifelong learning. In this era of rapid knowledge and technological evolution, where unpredictable factors in human societal development continue to multiply, the importance of teachers' lifelong learning becomes particularly crucial. This study posits that lifelong learning constitutes the core component of professional development for educators, representing a continuous process of acquiring and updating knowledge and skills throughout their careers.

This paper will analyze the policies and measures adopted by Japan to realize the concept of lifelong learning for teachers, so as to make suggestions for the construction of lifelong learning system for Chinese teachers.

2. Japanese Teacher Professional Development Policy from the Perspective of Lifelong Learning

With the spread of lifelong education concepts in the 1960s, Japan became one of the earliest countries to establish a lifelong learning system. In 1981, Japan's Central Council for Education and Research first adopted the concept of lifelong education in its report "On Lifelong Education,"

emphasizing that such education should align with individual learning preferences, allow learners to choose appropriate methods, integrate educational resources from family, school, and community settings, and strongly support adult continuing education and senior education programs. This ensures continuous learning throughout life cycles and sustainable development of knowledge and skills, thereby achieving a harmonious integration of social governance and personal self-directed learning. The same principle applies to teachers' lifelong education, which requires enhancing pedagogical competencies and practical guidance through pre-service training, in-service development, and professional growth. This ensures sustained improvement in teachers' expertise throughout their careers. Specific measures include establishing teacher graduate schools, implementing professional development programs, and updating teaching qualification certification systems to facilitate lifelong learning and professional advancement.

2.1 Faculty and University System

In April 2008, Japan established the "Faculty University" system, namely the professional degree graduate education system of education master, under the original framework of postgraduate education system, in order to distinguish itself from the education master training mode for cultivating academic research talents.

In terms of educational objectives, the Faculty University focuses on cultivating professionals with strong practical and planning capabilities who are closely aligned with school education[1]. Its primary student body consists of university graduates, in-service teachers, and working professionals. Through graduate-level education, these individuals acquire solid theoretical foundations and hands-on skills for educational reform implementation.

The academic standards for the university graduate program require a two-year study period. To help working professionals balance work and study commitments while reducing academic pressure, the institution has implemented flexible study arrangements: The first option allows extending the program to 3-5 years through a "long-term enrollment system". The second option features a "short-term concentrated study system" where students complete one year of off-site intensive training followed by on-the-job learning, with durations ranging from over one year to two years or beyond.

In terms of degree acquisition conditions, different from the graduation requirements of traditional academic education master's students, there is no need to write a thesis. The purpose of this reform is to correct the shortcomings of overemphasizing academic research and neglecting the practical training of teacher education, and at the same time to ensure sufficient internship time for all kinds of students[2].

In terms of the type of degree awarded, the faculty graduate school awards a diploma with the words "Faculty Master (Specialized)" to indicate that its graduates are different from academic postgraduate students and have highly specialized educational practice ability.

In terms of curriculum design, 54 teacher training universities across Japan currently offer diversified teacher education programs. The core curriculum consists of five major categories: Educational Technology and Big Data, Learning Guidance and Student Development, School Administration Training, Middle Management Training, and Special Education. These are further divided into three specialized tracks: Pedagogy, Student Guidance, and Classroom Management. The program structure includes three components: "Core Subjects" (over 18 credits), "Specialized Electives" (over 15 credits), and "School Internships" (over 10 credits), all designed for all students.

In terms of educational internships, the internship periods are categorized into three types: 1. Full-year program: 8 hours per week for approximately 38 to 57 weeks. 2. Six-month program: 16 hours per week for approximately 20 to 29 weeks. 3. Intensive period program: 40 hours per week for approximately 8 to 12 weeks[3].

In terms of class size, small group instruction with 10-15 students is implemented to ensure educational quality. The primary teaching methods include case discussions, simulated experiments, role-playing, and field investigations as practical approaches, aiming to cultivate students' abilities in interpreting, diagnosing, planning, implementing, objectively evaluating, and reflecting on educational issues. The specific approach involves first reflecting on practical educational actions, then practicing after reflection, and finally summarizing experiences to form a "practice-reflection-re-practice-experience summary" action cycle. This establishes a diversified interactive educational practice model.

In terms of faculty composition, the Japan Institute of Teacher Education mandates that each institution must have at least 11 full-time faculty members with strong instructional expertise in their respective fields. Notably, over 40% of these positions must be filled by "practical instructors" who demonstrate exceptional hands-on capabilities. This requirement has set a global benchmark for teacher education reform. According to statistics from Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology as of May 2024, the country's 45 teacher education institutes currently employ 616 such instructors, averaging 13.7 per institution.

By establishing the Faculty Graduate School, Japan has transformed its traditional "closed system" teacher training model. This initiative creates career pathways for fresh graduates, working professionals, and individuals from various sectors who aspire to become educators, ensuring a steady influx of new talent into the teaching profession. The flexible academic program and school-based internship system provide institutional support for teachers' professional growth and lifelong learning, creating sustainable development opportunities.

2.2 New Teacher Training System in the Reiwa Era

In addition to the above-mentioned academic and university system, which can provide smooth channels and institutional guarantees for pre-service education, in-service education, lifelong learning and professional development of Japanese teachers, the Japanese teacher training system provides further institutional guarantees for the integration of pre-service and post-service education system and the deepening of teachers' lifelong learning and development.

Teacher professional development constitutes the cornerstone of lifelong learning systems for educators. Japan's landmark Education Civil Service Special Act (1947) first codified "professional development" as a statutory provision. Subsequent policy milestones, including the 1971 Central Education Council report *Basic Measures for Comprehensive Expansion and Restructuring of School Education* and the 1971 Teacher Training Council document *Guidelines for Enhancing Teacher Development*, emphasized that pedagogical competency cultivation should be integrated throughout teachers' entire careers. [4] This framework demonstrates Japan's commitment to embedding lifelong learning principles into teacher training, specifically through an integrated system encompassing recruitment, professional development, and continuing education. Since the 1980s, Japan has implemented tiered professional development programs targeting new faculty members, core educators, and administrators. The initiative also emphasizes collaboration with higher education institutions and prefectural education boards to develop high-quality professional development resources and curricula.

This integrated pre-service and post-service teacher education system design spans the entire lifecycle of professional development, providing robust resources and platforms for teachers' sustainable growth. However, the monotonous content and excessive homogeneity in professional development programs fail to address individualized training needs, ultimately hindering educators' ability to fully engage in self-directed lifelong learning.

Furthermore, Japanese primary and secondary school teachers face heavy workloads and burdens.

With the rapid development of artificial intelligence technology, the teaching profession must keep pace with the times and social development. This has raised new requirements for teachers' professional competence and development, necessitating that the teacher training system and content evolve to meet the demands of lifelong learning.

To address the challenges in traditional teacher training and meet the demands of modern professional development, Japan's Education Council released a 2021 advisory report titled "Japanese-Style School Education in the Reiwa Era." This initiative aims to stimulate students' potential through personalized learning, adapt to complex social changes, and contribute to Japan's sustainable development. In 2022, the Central Education Council further proposed two reports: "Teacher Training, Recruitment, and Professional Development for School Education in the Reiwa Era" and "New Models of Teacher Learning." These documents require educators to continuously learn, actively embrace social transformations, maximize students' learning potential, and guide self-directed learning throughout their careers. The report proposes a future-oriented approach to "Japanese-Style School Education in the Reiwa Era." To align with contemporary educational needs, Japan has established "learning-oriented" teachers as the ideal image for the Reiwa era, requiring them to maintain a "learning ethos" [5], continuously enhance professional knowledge and skills, and ensure quality education for all students. In 2022, Japan revised the "Special Law on Educational Civil Servants" and "Teacher Qualification Act" to establish a new teacher training system for the Reiwa era.

The new teacher training system has introduced innovative components to the existing management framework. Building upon the original structure, it incorporates enhanced qualification improvement guidance. Specifically, Japan's teacher training operates under a four-tier top-down management system spanning national, prefectural, municipal, and school levels. The national government establishes overarching guidelines for teacher development. Prefectures then design specific programs including induction training for new teachers and professional development for core educators, maintaining detailed implementation records. Municipal and village education committees organize localized training initiatives, providing tailored guidance and information based on these records to enhance teaching competencies. School principals, supervised by local education authorities, conduct in-school training sessions while offering professional support. This collaborative system effectively delivers customized training content, fosters teacher autonomy and initiative, and ensures meaningful professional growth through coordinated efforts across all levels[6].

2.3 Teacher Qualification Certificate Renewal System

In 2006, the China Education Review Advisory Report titled "The Future State of Teacher Training and Licensing Systems" proposed implementing a teacher qualification renewal system. This initiative was officially legalized on June 20, 2007, and came into effect on April 1, 2009. The renewal system serves dual purposes: it strengthens measures to remove unqualified teachers from the workforce while encouraging continuous professional development to keep pace with societal changes.

In Japan, teaching qualifications are generally granted by prefectural education boards. These qualifications are categorized into three types: General Teaching Qualification, Specialized Teaching Qualification, and Temporary Teaching Qualification. The General Teaching Qualification is awarded after completing teacher training programs. The Specialized Teaching Qualification is granted to individuals with subject-specific expertise, experience, and skills. The Temporary Teaching Qualification is reserved for candidates who cannot obtain the General Teaching Qualification, with a validity period of three years.

3. Implications for China

Despite differences in national conditions, social systems, and educational frameworks between China and Japan, the shared characteristics of teaching professions and similar challenges in teacher education allow us to draw valuable lessons from Japan's "Teaching Graduate School" system. This includes strengthening faculty development, enhancing professional training programs, and implementing integrated pre-service and post-service teacher cultivation. China should actively promote the dual-mentorship system to optimize master's education faculty teams, clarify training objectives for teacher development, adopt integrated pre-service-post-service training models, improve teacher certification renewal mechanisms, and advance lifelong learning and professional growth for educators.

4. Conclusion

Through establishing the Faculty Graduate School, creating a new training system for the Reiwa era, and implementing a teacher certification renewal mechanism, Japan has established effective pathways for lifelong learning in education. Specifically, addressing the traditional pedagogy master's program's overemphasis on theory, the Graduate School recruits "practical educators" to develop practice-oriented courses, ensuring comprehensive pre-service training. The new Reiwa-era training system establishes a vertical network with prefectural education committees, achieving seamless integration between pre-service and post-service education. The teacher certification renewal system continuously drives educators to evolve with societal changes. These three institutional measures collectively form an effective policy framework that safeguards teachers' lifelong learning and professional development in Japan.

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