
Research Paper

Current State of Nature Experiences Activities and Nature Schools in Japan with Special Reference to Educational Reform

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Abstract

In Japan today, the importance of nature experiences activities (NEA) has been recognized in school and social education. Recently, about 1000 Nature Schools (NSs) have come into existence in Japan. Most of the NSs have a function to provide opportunities for NEA for the general public, especially for the young generation. This paper presents a brief discussion on the reasons why the number of NSs is recently increasing in Japan and on the current state of NSs. The work was conducted along the following lines: (1) Brief summary of educational reform; (2) Present situation of the relationship between Japanese children and NEA; (3) Current state of NSs in Japan.

Key words: *Educational reform, environmental education, five-day school week system, nature school, nature experiences activities, period for integrated study, zest for living.*

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INTRODUCTION

In Japan today, the importance of nature experiences activities (NEA) has been recognized in school and social education. The term social education in Japan refers to all forms of organized educational activities done outside the range of educational activities conducted as part of a school curriculum (<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/org/social/06a.htm>, 2002/07/26).

This article holds the view that NEA stud-

ies, nature studies, rural studies, field work, environmental studies, outdoor education and adventure education seem almost self-explanatory, being a group of approaches to education that share a focus on environmental experiences (Palmer 1998).

Palmer (1998) states that in the early days of “nature” and “rural” studies, emphasis was very much on teacher-directed “show and tell” techniques. In more recent years, fieldwork and environmental studies have encompassed more of what might be described as participa-

tory, problem-solving techniques, but with a strong emphasis on scientific approaches involving detailed observation, measurements, and the gaining of empirically derived knowledge. Outdoor and adventure education are broader in scope and encompass outdoor activities in which students engage with the environment, such as canoeing, hiking and climbing. They aim to provide opportunities that encourage enjoyment, appreciation and awareness of the environment. Those working in the outdoor and adventure education fields strive to help change attitudes by exposing young people to new and relevant experiences which will lead to a better understanding of themselves as well as their environment. Such activities often operate from centers or specialist bases, rather than schools. In this article, we call such a center a Nature School (NS).

Recently, about 1000 NSs have come into existence in Japan. Most of the NSs have a function to provide opportunities for NEA to the general public, especially to the young generation.

This paper presents a brief discussion on the reasons why the number of NSs is recently increasing in Japan and on the current state of the NS. The work was conducted along the following lines :

- (1) Brief summary of educational reform in Japan.
- (2) Present situation of the relationship between Japanese children and Nature Experiences Activities.
- (3) Current state of Nature Schools in Japan.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Most of the data concerning the educa-

tional reform were obtained from home pages of the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (MEXT) as follows:

<http://wwwwp.mext.go.jp/eky2000/index-1.htm> (2002/06/12)

<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/org/reform/03.htm> (2002/06/14).

Several NSs' data were obtained from their home pages and pamphlets.

The information on the current state of the NSs in Japan was given from the Report on Outdoor Education Programs of Private Organizations (The Outdoor Education Society 1999).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Brief summary of educational reform in Japan

“Why is educational reform necessary now?” has been published by MEXT's home page as follows :

Today, as we stand before the dawn of the 21st century, Japan is seeing the rapid advancement of an aging society with a dwindling birth rate, the information society and internationalization. In addition, economic activities, which had been consistently increasing and developing during the postwar period, now have long been at a standstill, employment issues are worsening and other problems are emerging. Therefore, we are now said to be gearing toward a new phase of reform following the Meiji Restoration and the revival during the period after the Second World War. Consequently, bold reforms have been moved forward as existing systems are reviewed across various sectors of society, including politics, administration, finance and economic structure.

In the field of education, the cornerstone of all social systems, there is a need to move forward actively and swiftly with spearheading reforms befitting a new age while being based on the results of education to date.

Since the end of the Second World War, education in Japan has been conducted under the fundamental ideology of realizing equal opportunity in education, in which opportunities for education are equally assured in accordance with capability, aptitude and will, and regardless of birth, household income or class status. It has spread remarkably, promoted by the nationality that set great store by education and the improvement in income levels of the Japanese people to among the highest in the world. The remarkable dissemination of education itself has served as the engine for what we now can refer to as Japan's miraculous development.

At the same time, a dwindling birth rate, the trend toward nuclear families and the advancement of urbanization have led to a striking decline in the educational functions of the home and local community which had always shouldered the responsibilities of teaching children how to behave with people, cultivating self-discipline and collective spirit, and passing on culture and traditions. Such circumstances have formed a backdrop against which various problems have emerged, including bullying, non-attendance at school and the worsening issue of juvenile delinquency. Moreover, school education to date has fallen into a form by which knowledge is one-sidedly instilled in students, thus leading to the neglect of education and activities that cultivate thinking faculties and an enriched humanity. In addition, with the excessive emphasis placed on equal opportunities in education, the con-

cept of education in accordance with the essentially diverse individuality and capabilities of each and every child has not been taken into full consideration. These are many points upon which we must reflect.

On the other hand, if one casts a glance around the rest of the world, education reform has become one of the most important common challenges facing developed countries, and at the G8 Summit held in Cologne, Germany, in June 1999, education was raised for the first time as a major topic and active discussion was conducted (<http://www.mext.go.jp/eky2000/index-4.html>, 2002/06/12).

The 15th session of the Central Council on Education started in September 1995. The first report was issued in July 1996. In this report, entitled "The desirable shape of Japanese education in the perspective of the 21st century," it is stated that against the framework of severe and turbulent social change, there is a need for children to be imbued with a "Zest for living," in other words, "To have the abilities and aptitudes required to identify issues, learn for themselves, think independently, make their own judgments, act independently and work toward better solutions."

Also "while standing on their own feet, to cooperate with others and develop a rich fund of emotions and a spirit that shows considerations for and sympathy toward others;" also "to develop a healthy body that will enable them to lead a strong and vigorous life" (Kozawa 1998).

In order to promote Zest for Living, the NEA is vitally important and effective. Therefore, in July 2001, both the school education law (Article 18-2) and the social education law (Article 5-12) were revised and the following phrase was added: to try to enhance experi-

enced study activities including the NEA and social service through volunteer activities of children and young people.

In addition, MEXT is implementing measures such as (1) providing opportunities to engage in a variety of outdoor activities, such as long-term stays of about two weeks at outdoor activity facilities or family farms, environmental conservation activities in national parks, and other outdoor activities at rivers, seas, and forests, (2) promoting hands-on activities to foster sociability such as community service activities and hands-on activities that target troubled youth through schools and communities, (3) expanding the Children's Dream Fund, which assists private sector youth organizations that sponsor hands-on activities and other programs, (4) providing opportunities and venues for a variety of hands-on activities for young people as well as training instructors at the National Olympic Memorial Youth Center and youth educational facilities such as National Youth Nature Houses and National Youth Houses throughout the country, and (5) assisting youth organizations that play an important role in sponsoring various activities for young people

A New system in Japanese school life, that is, the Comprehensive Five-day School Week System, started in April, 2002. It aims at letting the children spend more time free from pressure at home and in the communities and engage in social contribution activities and nature oriented experiences to nurture "Ikiru Chikara" in Japanese (zest for living) in their daily lives including the abilities to learn and think by themselves, rich humanity, and healthy development and physical strength to lead vigorous lives. This system should be realized only with mutual cooperation among

schools, families, and communities with their respective skills in education.

In 1994, the MEXT conducted a survey on "Concerns for five-day school week system."

Parents of elementary school were asked "What activities do you think should be emphasized at elementary school?" The result was hands-on activities 74%, environmental education 37%, health education 33%, volunteer activities 27%, international understanding 26%, education corresponding to IT society 20%, other 1% (Eda 1999).

MEXT is also implementing "Comprehensive Promotion of Educational Abilities and Experience Activity Programs in the Communities" as follows:

Besides schools, homes and communities are requested to work together to act out their own roles to develop the neighboring environment suitable for raising children and to improve the approaches to nurture them to be emotionally sound and tough. For the purpose of activating the community educational abilities, nurturing the humanity of young people including sociality and compassion, MEXT establishes the nationwide system and supports schools and communities for the activities to give youth more abundant opportunities to have a variety of activities, including social service such as volunteer activities inside and outside schools, as well as nature-oriented experiences.

From the beginning of the new school year in 2002, a new curricular system, "Period for Integrated Study (PIS)" started. The new system is a required subject for elementary to upper secondary school levels. Annually, 105 or 110 school hours are allocated to PIS for 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th graders at elementary school

and more than 70 school hours for lower secondary school students, 105-210 hours for upper secondary school students (Kimura 2001).

The PIS aims at helping children develop the ability to discover problems by themselves and solve those problems properly. Interdisciplinary and comprehensive studies, which reflect each individual school's efforts, and studies based upon children's own interest will help children independently and creatively cope with problem-solving activities and/or inquiry activities, and deepen their understanding of their own way of life. It is assumed that children's knowledge and skills acquired in individual classes will be related to each other and deepened through the activities in the PIS, and that they will work comprehensively for children (Kimura 2001).

In order to introduce the five-day school week system and the PIS, MEXT reduced learning contents by 30% and shifted that content to upper grades. So, some citizens and scientists are anxious that the academic ability of Japanese children may be lowered due to the reduction of the content taught to children through the revision of the Course of Study (national curriculum standard and guidelines for teaching).

MEXT's answer to this anxiety is as follows: the amount of total knowledge they acquire will be lower, but we aim to firmly establish basic abilities and skills through the respective studies in a flexible school life, and to cultivate in children the desire to learn by themselves and to teach children study methods, maintaining the existing standards of educational content at the upper secondary school level in order to prevent the lowering of academic ability.

2. Present situation of the relationship between Japanese children and nature experiences activities

The Youth Education Activity Research Group conducted a comparative survey of lower secondary school students with regard to their outdoor experiences in 1984 and 1995 (Eda 1999).

The questions were "Have you ever ----"

- Climbed a mountain higher than one thousand meters?
- Picked fruits, nuts or mushrooms to eat?
- Seen a sunrise or sunset?
- Fished?
- Climbed a tree taller than your height?
- Caught a butterfly or a dragonfly?
- Slept in a tent? "

"Yes" decreased for every question in 1995 compared to 1984.

The Japanese educational system is drastically changing through the educational reform, and nowadays as the aging society come rapidly, we must make our life plan for a long span of 80 to 85 years rather than 50 years in the past (Kozawa 1998). As a result, we need "lifelong learning." MEXT explains lifelong learning as follows: the maturation of Japanese society, as evidenced by expanding leisure time, and the aging of the population, is reflected in increasing demand for learning activities that contribute to spiritual enrichment and enjoyment of life.

From a consideration of the above-mentioned results, it may be concluded that the reasonable factors for the increase in the number of NSs in Japan are educational reform, the maturation of our society, and the decrease in the number of children who have NEA.

Currently, a large number of Japanese people consider NS very useful and important for

implementing educational reform and for increasing the number of children who have nature-oriented experiences, NEA.

3. Current state of Nature Schools in Japan

The Outdoor Education Program Society conducted a survey to gauge the current status of Japanese NSs and published the report on the present program of public or private organizations engaged in the outdoor education in 1999. The purpose of the survey is to obtain the basic data for developing a new standard program adapted to outdoor education in the 21st Century. The questionnaires were distributed to the representative 118 organizations and individuals, not including YMCA, YWCA, National Camping Association of Japan, Scout Association of Japan and Japanese Association of Recreation.

Fifty three percent of those questioned responded. The respondents were mainly specialists of public organizations, NGOs and NPOs engaged in the development of NEA.

A brief summary of the questionnaire results is as follows:

(1) Distribution of Nature Schools in Japan.

Thirty seven percent of NSs were located in Tokyo.

(2) Type of administration at Nature Schools in Japan.

The results are as follows:

- a) NS has become independent of the mother company, or joint-stock company and has been managed as a profit-pursuing organization (28.8 %).
- b) NS has been managed as an individual company (22.0 %).
- c) NS has been managed as an arbitrary NPO or NGO (20.3 %).

d) NS has been managed as a public service corporation such as a foundation (13.6%).

e) NS has been managed as a profit-pursuing section of the enterprise such as a limited company (6.8 %).

f) NS has been managed as a nonprofit-pursuing section of the enterprise (3.4 %).

g) NS has been managed as a public facility business (1.7%).

h) Others

(3) Do you have your own facilities and fields for nature experiences activities?

Fifty one percent of the respondents answered "Yes."

(4) Do you have accident insurance for the participants?

Ninety five percent of the respondents answered "Yes."

(5) Do you have liability insurance for the participants?

Eighty three percent of the respondents answered "Yes."

(6) What kind of program for NEA do you have?

Over 150 items from programs were generated. Representative items of the programs are shown in Table 1.

(7) Costs for nature experiences activities.

Thirty nine percent of the respondents answered that a two-day course (nightly rate) is ¥ 11,000 (US\$ 88) on average and ranges from ¥ 6,000 (US\$ 48) to ¥ 15,000 (US\$ 126).

As a result of the questionnaire survey, a complete image of Japanese NSs and their current state have roughly come into view.

Table 1 Program for Nature Experiences Activities in Nature School - Best 20 -

Rank	Category of program items	No. items used
1	Ice-breaking game	20
2	Camping	19
3	Camp fire	18
4	Nature game	17
4	Group work training	17
6	Initiative game	16
6	Hiking with nature observation	16
8	Nature craft	15
9	Night hiking	13
10	Mountain climbing	12
11	Canoeing	10
11	Stone painting	10
14	Alpine skiing	9
14	Town watching	9
14	Meditation	9
14	Camping on the snow	9
18	Slide program	8
18	Camping solo	8
18	Nature skiing	8
18	Observation of constellation	8

The number of NSs has surely increased in comparison with that of 10 years ago; however, there are several problems with the present NSs in Japan.

First, although items in the NEA program were not investigated qualitatively in the survey, it is necessary to perform a qualitative guarantee of the educational content of the NEA program. Most of the NSs in Japan maintain very poor standards in their NEA programs and cannot be compared with the NSs of Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South America, Europe or the USA. In Japan, the Council for Outdoor and Nature Experiences (CONE) was founded in 2002 as an NPO, and

it includes about 150 organizations which are interested in environmental education through NEA. The main purpose of CONE is to develop a standard curriculum and manual for leaders involved with NSs. In order to solve the above-mentioned problem, the activity of CONE is very important and useful.

Secondly, we do not have a so-called market price for the program that a NS has to offer. In Japan, a NS is not yet approved socially as a business. We have to make efforts to construct a social system which can correctly value and reward the quality of the program.

From now on, it will be necessary for NSs in Japan to seek customers' opinions of the

quality of the organization's products (NEA programs) and services, and to build up mutual cooperation and allot roles to social education directors, librarians of the public libraries, museum curators, leaders of parent-teacher associations, youth associations, and other private-sector social education bodies at the national, prefectural and regional levels.

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