

# Extracurricular Club Activity Reform in Japanese Public Junior High Schools: The Case of Takarazuka City

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## Abstract

This paper examines the current state of Extracurricular Club Activities (ECAs) in Japan, focusing on the case of ECA reform in the Takarazuka City Board of Education (TCBE) and junior high schools in Takarazuka City. First, we provide an overview of the current status of ECAs in Japan. ECAs originated in the Meiji period (1868–1912) and grew out of the newly established Free Study subject under the post-war education reform. Furthermore, in the modern era of nuclear families and declining birthrates, ECAs have played an essential role as an educational activity that provides students with opportunities to engage in group activities with students of a variety of ages and to develop their communication skills. At the same time, the government has been promoting reform of ECAs with the aim of reducing the burden on teachers under the principles of the ‘school as a team’ and ‘work-style reform’ efforts. Next, we describe ECA reforms that our research group has implemented in cooperation with

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TCBE. In FY 2020, we conducted a questionnaire survey of students, parents and teachers to ascertain the status of ECAs in Takarazuka City. The results of this survey contributed to supporting the formulation of several education policies. We also recommended measures for ECA reform that TCBE should implement. First, the school board should allow students to commute out of the school district if a secondary school within a designated school zone does not have an ECA of their choice. Second, the school board funding for ECAs in each school should ensure that there are at least two instructors supervising each club. Third, the school board should encourage each school to train junior and senior high school students to become volunteer personnel in ECAs. We need further research into how local education boards and schools could train junior high and high school students for these volunteer roles.

## 1. Introduction

Extracurricular club activities (ECAs) in Japan originated during the Meiji period. Sporting culture flowed in from Western countries at this time, and university students began to take up sports as a leisure activity. Then, in the latter half of the Meiji period, Kōyūkai associations, the predecessors of the current ECAs, were established in the former junior high schools. After the war, in 1947, the Ministry of Education published the Courses of Study (Draft) and established Free Study as a new subject within the curriculum. In this draft, the Ministry of Education gave examples of desirable uses of Free Study, such as forming clubs where like-minded students could get together to study music and sports, regardless of their grade level. Current ECAs are educational activities that grew out of Free Study (Kawaguchi 2020a).

ECAs are educational activities that enable students to improve their

communication skills through diverse relationships. In today's schools, educational activities are mainly carried out by same-age groups, with the classroom as the fundamental group. In contemporary Japanese society, the nuclear family and birthrate are declining. According to the 'Overview of the Comprehensive Survey of Living Conditions' (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2021), in 1989, 69.5% of all households were nuclear families, and 37.2% of all households with children were families with one child. In contrast, at the time of the 2021 survey, 82.6% of households were nuclear families, and 46.8% were households with one child. These circumstances suggest that students have increasingly fewer opportunities to interact with adults other than parents and teachers, or with peers of different ages (Nakamura 2012). ECAs allow students to engage in group activities daily through relationships with people of the same and different ages. In addition, ECAs constitute a diverse group of students with different grades, individual abilities, attitudes and levels of motivation for engaging in them. Therefore, ECAs are valuable educational activities as they enable students to develop their communication skills and to understand the different ideas and positions of others.

The Government has been reforming ECAs to reduce the burden on teachers. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) promoted ECA reform in the late 2010s to establish a sustainable ECA management system in schools. The promotion of policies concerning the reform of sports ECAs has been a particular focus of the government's 'school as a team' and 'work-style reform' principles. MEXT mainly aims to reduce the burden on teachers, by, for example, legalising ECA instructors and formulating guidelines for sports ECAs, which set out rest days and activity times (MEXT 2017a, Japan Sports Agency 2018). Furthermore, in the 2017 Junior High School Course of Study, the

Government mentions the need to create a system for schools and communities to manage ECAs sustainably (MEXT 2017b). One example of how schools could achieve this is by consulting with local sports clubs and social communities on how to manage ECAs.

This paper examines the future of ECAs, considering their current state as described above. To this end, we first give an overview of the current situation of ECAs in Japan. Next, we describe the reform of ECAs in public junior high schools that our research group has been working on in collaboration with the Takarazuka City Board of Education (TCBE) in Hyogo Prefecture since 2020. Finally, based on the findings obtained through these studies, we make recommendations regarding the organisation of ECAs by local education boards and schools in Japan.

## **2. Overview of ECAs in Japan**

Japanese schools provide opportunities for students to engage in sporting and cultural activities inside and outside the curriculum. In primary schools, pupils can participate in club activities as part of the school curriculum. On the other hand, junior high and high school students engage in ECAs as extracurricular activities. There are approximately 3.24 million junior high school students in Japan, of whom more than 57.8% participate in sports ECAs (Nippon Junior High School Physical Culture Association 2022). If students participating in cultural ECAs are added to this data, the participation rate is even higher. Next, we compare ECAs in Japan with sports ECAs in other countries. As is clear from the preceding discussion, in Japan, it has been standard practice for schools to organise ECAs and for teachers to run them. In contrast, in many European and North American countries, it is common for ECAs to exist alongside community clubs. In China and South Korea schools are also the main

organisers of ECAs, but only few pupils with exceptional athletic abilities are allowed to join them. In Japan, ECAs are school-led and run, so student participation is high, but this form of implementation is rare internationally (Nakazawa 2014).

ECAs have provided students with opportunities to develop interpersonal skills that are indispensable in the vertical Japanese social structure that has developed throughout the history of the Japanese people (Kawaguchi 2020a 1970). This principle has become one of the defining characteristics of Japanese culture. For example, vertical relationships, such as seniors and juniors or superiors and subordinates, are deeply rooted in the nature of Japanese society. Although students engage in educational activities in groups of the same age, such as classes or grades, vertical relationships continue to be important in wider Japanese society. That is why schools need to develop the interpersonal qualities and skills required in a vertical society through their students' educational activities and to enhance students' social skills; ECAs are essential for developing students' abilities to navigate vertical relationships (Cave 2004, Kawaguchi 2020a).

On the other hand, the impact of teacher-led ECAs on teachers' working hours has, as widely highlighted by the media's reporting on a 2014 OECD report (OECD 2014), created a social problem. Japanese junior high school teachers work an average of 53.9 hours per week, longer than in other countries surveyed. In other countries, the supervision time for ECAs was 2.2 hours per week, significantly lower than Japan, where teachers spend an average of 7.7 hours per week supervising ECAs. Here is a day in the life of one junior high school teacher in Japan. He graduated from university in 2019 and has worked as a public junior high school teacher since April. According to what the author has learned from him, he gets up

at 6:00 am every morning and rides his bicycle for 20 minutes to work at the junior high school. He then leads an early morning practice for the basketball team in the gymnasium from 7:15 am, though he has no experience with basketball. He then has classes from 8:45 am to 3:30 pm. After school, he again supervises the basketball team in the gymnasium. After 6 pm, when the students have finished their ECAs and gone home, he can settle down and tackle his work. He prepares for the next day's classes, does paperwork and leaves school at 21:30. This grueling routine made him ill and led to him taking several days of sick leave during the year. The following year, he negotiated with the principal to be replaced as the basketball coach by another teacher. He was made coach of the football team, which did not practise early in the morning. The Government has relied on teachers' overtime work to run ECAs. Schools, students and parents have taken it for granted that teachers would lead sports ECAs even though they have no experience in that sport. However, after the publication of the OECD study, the media and teachers' unions became aware of the issue of teachers' long working hours as a social problem. This awareness of the problem also influenced the reform of ECAs.

MEXT has been promoting a policy to reform ECAs by shifting their management body from schools to community groups. In February 2018, MEXT issued 'Gakkô ni okeru hatarakikata kaikaku ni kansuru kinkyû taisaku no sakutei narabini gakkô ni okeru gyômu kaizen oyobi kinmujikan kanritô ni kansuru torikumi no tettei ni tsuite' [On the formulation of urgent measures for reforming work, successfully implementing work hours management and improving working conditions in schools] (MEXT 2018). This announcement states that teachers do not need to supervise ECAs. The announcement also emphasises the importance of further improving working conditions in schools. Furthermore, the Japan Sports

Agency and the Agency for Cultural Affairs, an offshoot of the Ministry of Education, have published recommendations for the reform of ECAs, '*Gakkō bukatsudō oyobi aratana chiiki kurabu katsudō no arikata tō ni kansuru sôgôteki na gaidorain*' [Comprehensive guidelines for extracurricular club activities and new community clubs] in 2022 (MEXT 2022). The recommendations refer to the need for local boards of education and schools to work towards shifting the management of holiday ECAs from a school-based to a regional basis between 2023 and 2025. Each local school board has set up a committee to study the transition of ECAs to a community-based system and is currently looking for ways to operate ECAs in line with the government's recommendations. The reform of ECAs is now a top-down, government-led initiative.

So far, this paper has reviewed the current status of ECAs in Japan. More than two-thirds of students in junior high schools participate in ECAs. The reason for the high participation rate of students in ECAs is that schools take the initiative in running them, which is rare internationally. Furthermore, ECAs are an essential educational activity in Japan (McDonald and Kawai 2017), where households are becoming increasingly nuclear, as they enable students to develop their communication skills through activities in mixed-age groups. However, the government has traditionally relied on schools to provide students with opportunities to engage in sporting and cultural activities. This traditional nature of schools has had the negative effect of forcing teachers to work long hours. For this reason, MEXT has recommended shifting the governing body of ECAs from schools to community clubs and other organisations. Efforts to shift the governing body of ECAs from schools to regional clubs, etc., need to consider the actual situation in each region and the current state of schools. In the following section, we describe a case

study in which our research group worked with the Takarazuka City Board of Education, a local government body, to promote ECA reforms that take into account regional characteristics.

### **3. Public junior high school ECA reform in Takarazuka City**

#### (1) Current status of public junior high school ECAs in Takarazuka City

Takarazuka is located in the southeastern part of Hyogo Prefecture, in the Kinki region of the Japanese archipelago. As of May 2023, the city had a population of 229,000. There are 23 primary schools and 12 junior high schools in the city (Takarazuka City Office 2023). The number of junior high school classes in this district is one in each grade. On the other hand, the school zone boundaries of each junior high school are complicated, leading to some students having to attend junior high schools that are far from their homes. The number of primary and junior high school students in Takarazuka peaked in the 1980s, but by 2022 it had decreased to less than 60% of this peak. Meanwhile, Takarazuka City estimates that its population under 15 will be 21,943 in 2030, a 27% decrease from 2015. In Takarazuka City, it is evident that the number of pupils in junior high schools will decrease. The total number of ECAs in public junior high schools in Takarazuka City is 143 groups, with the number in each school ranging from 3 to 17 groups and averaging 11.9 groups. The size of the school also affects the number of ECAs in each school. Junior high schools have sports ECAs such as baseball, softball, football and basketball, and cultural ECAs such as brass band, arts and crafts. All schools tend to have more sports ECAs and fewer cultural ECAs (Kawaguchi 2022). The percentage of students joining ECAs in each secondary school ranges from 72.6% to 87.7% giving an average of 80.0%.

Our research group surveyed ECAs in Takarazuka public junior high



**Table 1**

The number of respondents and response rates for the questionnaire survey

ECA	n	Response rates
Students	1408	26.8%
Parents	2288	43.5%
Teachers	179	50.7%

schools in 2020 to gain a more complete picture of the above-mentioned situation. We conducted a questionnaire survey to ascertain how students, parents, teachers and others perceived the significance of ECAs and the current status of ECAs (Table 1). The survey items and methods of the questionnaire were developed jointly with the Takarazuka City Board of Education, and were developed with reference to previous surveys by Kawaguchi (2020b, 2020c). The survey results inferred that students and parents were generally satisfied with the current ECAs, but some students and parents were dissatisfied with the teachers' technical teaching skills. On the other hand, the survey of teachers suggested that, while they appreciated the educational significance of ECAs, they felt uneasy about providing technical instruction in ECAs and found supervising them quite a burden (TCBE 2021b).

## (2) Improving teachers' ECA coaching skills and reducing their workload

In FY 2021 and FY 2022, TCBE developed various education policies based on our recommendations, which had been formulated based on a questionnaire survey conducted in FY 2020. First, our research group proposed the establishment of a study group to systematically promote the reform of ECAs in public junior high schools in Takarazuka City. Based on this proposal, TCBE established a committee to study ECAs in March

2021. This committee comprised junior high school principals, vice-principals, teachers, academic experts and Board of Education staff. In addition, our questionnaire survey in 2020 indicated the need to address teachers' concerns about their coaching skills in ECAs. To this end, the education board's supervisors visited each junior high school to gather more detailed information on the current state of and challenges in running ECAs. The results of the interviews conducted by TCBE's supervisors revealed that teachers felt that they faced specific challenges in running ECAs, particularly in creating groups within which the individual well-being of each student could be realised. TCBE responded by organising a workshop to improve teachers' ECA coaching skills, in an effort to help resolve these issues. A sports coaching expert led the training workshop and provided teachers with guidance on desirable development methods.

Meanwhile, in 2019, TCBE had formulated the 'Takarazuka City Extracurricular Club Activities Guidelines (TECAGL)' (TCBE 2019), which instructed schools to operate ECAs with at least two days of rest per week. However, as indicated in the 2020 survey mentioned above, there is still considerable room for improvement when it comes to teachers' feelings of being overburdened by running ECAs. Therefore, TCBE revised the TECAGL in 2022, specifying specific examples of setting rest days and limiting daily activity hours. It then requested each junior high school to manage teachers' working hours properly. Next, between June and August 2022, TCBE organised training sessions to help teachers manage ECAs in compliance with TECAGL at their schools (Katagami 2023).

### (3) Recommendations on the future of ECAs

The authors recommend the following measures for the future reform of ECAs in Takarazuka based on the research results obtained through joint

research since 2020. The first recommendation is that if a junior high school within a designated school zone does not offer ECAs in which the student wishes to participate, the TCBE may authorise the student to commute outside the school district. In Japan's compulsory education system, local education boards set school zones. In principle, children have to enrol in primary and junior high schools within the school zone defined by their place of residence. However, a student may attend a school outside the zone if they meet specific requirements. On the other hand, TCBE currently does not allow a student to transfer to a school outside their designated school district to participate in an ECA (TCBE 2022). In Takarazuka, the population under 15 is declining and this decline is estimated to continue in future. In addition, some junior high schools have stopped offering or suspended some ECAs due to a decrease in the number of students and the corresponding decrease in the number of teachers. However, given that local boards of education require students to engage in ECAs as part of compulsory education, schools need to implement an operating system that allows students to join ECAs of their choice. For example, by dividing the 12 junior high schools in Takarazuka into several areas and establishing base schools for specific ECAs, schools can address the problem of the lack of ECA leaders, and students can choose the school with ECAs they want to join. Currently, in Takarazuka, when one junior high school cannot organise a single team, students from neighbouring junior high schools may be brought together to form a joint team to compete in matches and tournaments. This situation arises because schools maintain the traditional number of ECAs despite declining student numbers. Furthermore, TCBE's decision to allow students to commute out of the school district in order to participate in ECAs of their choice is a step towards resolving the inherent problems of Takarazuka

City's complex set of school districts, as well as enhancing educational opportunities for pupils living in depopulated areas. Moreover, this flexible operation of school districts in a way that takes students' needs into consideration can be handled at the school board's discretion and does not require a significant budget.

The second recommendation is that the number of ECAs in each school be made commensurate with the size of the school. Table 2 shows the number of ECAs and the number of teachers in 12 secondary schools in Takarazuka. The right-hand side of Table 2 then shows the number of teachers and staff in each school divided by the number of ECAs. For example, at Junior High School A, there are 1.7 teachers per ECA. Recently, TCBE has encouraged schools to assign more than one instructor to supervise each ECA to reduce the burden on teachers. However, as indicated by a questionnaire survey of teachers conducted in 2020, some

**Table 2**  
The Number of ECAs and Teachers in Takarazuka City Junior High Schools

School	ECA (A)	Teacher (B)	(B) ÷ (A)
A	15	25	1.7
B	17	27	1.6
C	12	28	2.3
D	3	7	2.3
E	10	22	2.2
F	11	24	2.2
G	12	29	2.5
H	13	25	1.9
I	10	14	1.4
J	16	26	1.6
K	13	23	1.8
L	11	25	2.3
Total	143	275	1.9

junior high school teachers may need more support regarding how to run ECAs. Schools must ensure that teachers are not overburdened by ECA coaching commitments. For example, if TCBE wants to promote the assigning of two or more instructors to each ECA, it may be necessary to consider reducing the number of ECAs in junior high schools where the number of instructors is too low to achieve this. As local education boards need to consider how individual schools manage ECAs according to the actual conditions in each school and region, it is necessary to consider realistic measures using these figures as reference values.

This section has made recommendations for the future of ECAs in Takarazuka City public junior high schools based on the findings of our research group through its joint research with TCBE from 2020 to 2022. Firstly, the Board of Education should introduce greater flexibility in the enrolment process for junior high school, allowing students to enrol in or transfer to a junior high school outside their school district in order to participate in particular ECAs. Secondly, each school should adjust the number of ECAs that it offers to be commensurate with the number of students and teachers in the school. In FY 2021, Takarazuka City allocated JPY 12.4 million as part of the ECA promotion project. If TCBE were to provide all 12 junior high school sports ECAs with a personal coach for three hours a day on holidays, the annual cost would be JPY 23.4 million. This is equivalent to approximately double the ECAs budget for FY 2021. In addition to securing the budget, school boards also need to secure personnel to supervise ECAs. While coaches for sports popular with students, such as baseball and football, can be secured, it is difficult to secure coaches for other sports. The measures promoted by the Government for the regional transition of ECAs require cooperation with local sports clubs and private organisations, which must also secure

coaches. Local authorities will need to secure huge budgets. In addition, if private organisations are to run ECAs, it is inevitable that the parents of students who are the beneficiaries of these activities will have to bear part of the cost. In underpopulated areas and in local governments with insufficient budget amounts for education, it is difficult to promote government-led ECA reforms such as those described above. Therefore, in order for local education boards to promote ECA reform they also need to implement feasible education policies that they can apply flexibly, at their own discretion, and that do not require significant budget appropriation.

The first author interviewed representatives of organisations supporting community sports clubs in Australia in March 2023. According to this research, the biggest challenge for community sports clubs in Australia was how to secure volunteer coaches; and, rather than community sports clubs utilising paid coaches, it was more common for parents, high school and university students to volunteer as coaches. Historically, community sports clubs have provided opportunities for children to engage in sporting activities in Australia. The case of Australia, where community sports initiatives have a longer history than in Japan, suggests that making use of volunteer staff as coaches may be a possible reform idea for Japan's ECAs. The Government of Japan has recommended that local governments transfer ECA functions to community groups, but local governments will have to secure the financial resources needed for this policy on their own. It is possible for local governments to encourage junior high schools to develop student interest in coaching ECAs as a volunteer activity in the future through classes and ECAs, and to create a system for high school and university students to engage in coaching ECAs at junior high schools as a volunteer activity, without requiring a large budget. This is a sustainable measure that does not require a large budget from local

authorities. Involving high school and university students in junior high school ECAs as part of their volunteer activities can enrich their social experience and help them in their future career development.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper began with an overview of the current status of ECAs in Japan. ECAs originated in the Meiji period (1868–1912) and are educational activities that grew out of Free Study, a subject newly established under the post-war educational reform. Furthermore, in the modern era of nuclear families and declining birthrates, ECAs have played an essential role as an educational activity that provides students with opportunities to engage in group activities with students of the same and different ages and to develop their communication skills. At the same time, the government has been promoting reform of ECAs with the aim of reducing the burden on teachers under the principles of the ‘school as a team’ and ‘work-style reform’. From 2023, the government has also been trying to facilitate the transition from school-based ECAs to community-based ECAs.

In the following section, we described ECA reforms that our research group has implemented in cooperation with TCBE. In FY 2020, we conducted a questionnaire survey of students, parents and teachers to ascertain the status of ECAs in Takarazuka City. The results of this survey contributed to supporting the formulation of several education policies. For example, we conducted an interview survey of teachers to gain a more detailed understanding of the actual situation at each school, set up a study group to systematically implement ECAs, and conducted training for teachers who were in charge of ECAs. We also recommended measures for ECA reforms that TCBE should implement. Firstly, the school board should allow students at secondary schools to commute out of

the school district if the school within their designated school zone does not have an ECA of their choice. Secondly, the school board should adjust the number of ECAs in a school so that there are at least two instructors supervising each ECA. Thirdly, the school board should encourage each school to train junior and senior high school students to become volunteer personnel.

In summary, this paper has examined the current state of ECAs in Japan, by looking at the practice of ECA reform in TCBE and junior high schools in Takarazuka City. The current government-led policy for the regional transition of ECAs envisages the use of regional sports clubs, private sports organisations, and paid external coaches to transition school-based ECAs to community-based ECAs. However, it does not envisage using junior high and high school students as coaching staff. We need further research into how local education boards and schools could train junior high and high school students as volunteer personnel for ECAs.

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