
Lessons for Developing “Societal Perspectives/Approaches” in Japan: Characteristics and Tasks

Kiyomi Iwano
Wakayama University

Introduction

Iwata once referred to the “societal perspectives/approaches” seen in the research of Japanese social studies, as below.

“Many people would agree with the opinion that an objective of social studies is to develop societal perspectives/approaches. However, when it comes to deciding what the societal perspectives/approaches are, it becomes difficult to answer.”¹

What does it mean when Iwata refers to “difficult to answer?” In this thesis, I will interpret various opinions regarding “societal perspectives/approaches” in order to show the characteristics of the “perspectives/approaches” and elucidate specific areas for lesson studies to develop the societal perspectives/approaches, through the discussion of the actual class lessons in the civics field of social studies in junior high schools.

The following are the research questions of this study.

- 1) How are “societal perspectives/approaches” thought about in Japan? Especially, what are the characteristics of “societal perspectives/approaches” in “curriculum guidelines” that most influence Japan’s educational practices?
- 2) How are actual lessons aiming at developing “societal perspectives/approaches” implemented in junior high schools in Japan? What are the steps required for them?

In Japan, curriculum guidelines are renewed every ten years. Curriculum guidelines that are produced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, have a great influence on school classes along with the obligation to use authorized textbooks. The next renewal due in 2017 has already demonstrated a policy for further strengthening the development

of “societal perspectives/approaches”. Based on this situation, it is meaningful to clarify the status-quo and tasks of Japanese lessons aiming at developing “societal perspectives/approaches”.

Frameworks to Analyze Various “Societal Perspectives/Approaches”

Japanese “societal perspectives/approaches” are said to focus on normative/fundamental studies on the principles of lessons². There are a wide variety of discussions about the definitions and interpretations of “societal perspectives/approaches”. In this study, I classified these ideas into two axes: the perception of knowledge and the meaning of learning.

The first axis shows the perception of knowledge. It is meant to show the tendency of whether to seek accuracy of knowledge or to seek knowledge as a tool for recognizing facts. First, I will explain the former.

According to the standpoint of seeking accuracy of knowledge, “societal perspectives/approaches” are considered to be the framework social scientists use when they interpret and explain social issues or problems including definitions, models, types, concepts of the social science which are accomplishments of those frameworks, as well as general theories³. It assumes the society around us is an object, and explains that an intellectual understanding based on situations where it is not possible to confirm our way of understanding, emotions, feelings, and ethical judgments of each other is what should be sought in a social studies class⁴. The advantage of acquiring this scientific concept is that it enables us to classify and explain complicated social issues as tools. However, in order to distinguish it from the standpoint of “knowledge as a tool” which will be explained next, I have expressed it as “interpretation without a misunderstanding of facts”

The standpoint of “knowledge as a tool” focuses on how “societal perspectives/approaches” function in order to collect facts or information when building recognition of social issues, to interpret collected facts and information, as well as to predict possible events in the future. Such a standpoint thinks that it is not only the concept of social sciences which is considered to be knowledge without inaccuracy, knowledge classified in analysis, but also knowledge of procedures such as collection methods of information which are included in perspectives and approaches.

The second axis represents a discussion of the meaning of learning. One pole is the social recognition/judgment by an individual while another pole is the construction of relationships. The former takes a stance that the meaning of learning “societal perspectives/approaches” lies in the development of humans who can perceive / interpret society based on scientific recognitions

considered correct, or knowledge which is considered useful. The latter (the construction of relationships) also takes for granted the necessity of social knowledge which is considered correct and social recognition which is considered useful. However, it further sets a goal of “societal perspectives/approaches” in the development of humans who can construct relationships with each other through these prerequisites. Here, the latter will be explained more precisely.

Mori insisted on the importance of teaching lessons which focus on the construction of cooperation with others through reflection and examination of oneself through demonstrating other’s viewpoints as one of the societal perspectives/approaches. According to Mori, the task of social studies is to oppose the separations imposed by society and to renew the sense of cooperation among people⁵. In addition, introducing multicultural education as implemented in Hawaii, Kawasaki emphasized the construction of relationships with others having different merits, insisting that if we understand the premise of the existence of others with viewpoints different from ours, the perception of equity considering diverse merits as equal will be the societal perspectives/approaches⁶. In short, while the former are considered as perspectives/approaches in order to “understand the society”, the latter are taken to “produce the society”.

In this way, this research has organized the discussions regarding “societal perspectives/approaches” in Japan. While, in Japan, there are diverse “societal perspectives/approaches”, the teaching guidelines and authorized textbooks by the Education Ministry have a great influence on social studies lessons in schools. Given this, how is the Education Ministry demonstrating “societal perspectives/approaches”? In the next section, a brief outline of societal perspectives/approaches as defined by the Education Ministry will be shown.

“Societal Perspectives/Approaches” by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology - Japan

As was partly shown in the last section, there is a lot of research regarding “societal perspectives/approaches” in Japan. On the other hand, it is true that school lessons are greatly framed by *the curriculum guidelines and commentary* which set the goals and contents of each subject at school. How then are “societal perspectives/approaches” treated in the curriculum guidelines? In this section, *Commentary on Junior high school curriculum guidelines: Social studies* (the Education Ministry, 2008)(hereafter *Commentary*) will be analyzed in order to seek the characteristics of “societal perspectives/approaches” .

1) Construction of *Commentary on Junior high school curriculum guidelines: Social studies*

Commentary consists of three chapters as follows.

Chapter1. Review

1. History of the revision
2. Meaning of the revision for social studies
3. Main points of the revision for social studies

Chapter2. Goal and Contents of social studies

Section1. Goal of subjects

Section2. Goals and contents of each field

[Geographical field]

1. Goal
2. Content
3. Handling of contents

[Historic field]

1. Goal
2. Content
3. Handling of contents

[Civics field]

1. Goal
2. Content
3. Handling of contents

Chapter3. Programming of teaching plans and handling of contents

1. Points to consider in programming teaching plans
2. Activity using materials, and learning based on work/experience
3. Handling of issues regarding politics and religion

2) “Societal perspectives/approaches” seen in commentary

Then, how often is this expression “societal perspectives/approaches” used in *Commentary*? It is shown in Table1(see next page).

In Table1, it is shown that “societal perspectives/approaches” appear most frequently in three parts. One of them is where the meaning and points of curriculum guidelines are described. The others are the goals and contents of the geographical fields and civics field. In both of these two fields, the expression “societal perspectives/approaches” is seen in every article of goals, contents, and the handling of contents.

Thus, it is noted that “societal perspectives/approaches” is the main subject of the curriculum guidelines in 2008, especially in the geographical field and civics field. If this is so, what is it used for in the *Commentary*? Table2(see next page) shows examples of how “societal perspectives/approaches” are used in the *Commentary*.

Table1. “Perspectives/approaches” in *Commentary on curriculum guidelines*

Chapter1		Chapter2						Chapter3	
		Section1	Section2						
		once	Geographical field		Historic field		Civic field		
Section	Frequ-ency	clause	Frequ-ency	clause	Frequ-ency	clause	Frequ-ency	Section	Frequ-ency
1	none	1	8times	1	none	1	7times	1	none
2	4times	2	7times	2	none	2	23times	2	none
3	10times	3	6times	3	none	3	9times	3	none

Table2. Usage of “Perspectives/approaches” in *Commentary on curriculum guidelines*

			Frequency
Concept of goal		Diversified Perspectives/approaches as a goal of social studies	once
Definition	Perspectives/ approaches of the con-temporary society	Basic/conceptual Framework for grasping the contem-porary society	12 times
		Something to emulsify the social communities or life	once
		Framework for conceiving issues in the contemporary society	once
	Geographical perspectives/ approaches	To conceive the future tasks of communities	once
To conceive various issues in a position or in a spacious expansion and to consider it in a framework of locality		3 times	
Expression		Opposition and agreement, as well as efficiency and. fairness	3 times
		Consideration of respect for humans	once
Methods of development		Development through the meaning of social issues, learning these meanings, and learning to explain char-acteristics of issues and the relationships of each issue	8 times
No meaning *			42times

* “No meaning”, is an example where there is no description about what “perspectives/approaches” means. For example, here is a quotation from “Commentary” page 124:

“It is important to not only make use of [perspectives/approaches] taught here in the further lessons but also to examine them repeatedly and develop them.”

According to Table2, “societal perspectives/approaches” mainly consists of three meanings.

One is “societal perspectives/approaches” as a goal of social studies. According to *Commentary* page 20, to acquire “societal perspectives/

approaches” is a goal of the social studies which aims at seeking diverse viewpoints and approaches. In spite of the fact that there is only one example, it is meaningful that “perspectives/approaches” are set as a goal in the context of Japanese education studies on social studies where it has been the norm to place great importance on the corporate vision of lessons.

The second is “societal perspectives/approaches” as a conceptual framework. For example, in *Commentary* on page 23, it is stated that “to grasp phenomena in Japan as well as in the world, taking the position or expansion of spaces into consideration, and to discuss these events in the framework of locality”. In addition, it is also said that “there are viewpoints such as opposition and agreement as well as efficiency and fairness, as a basis of the conceptual framework for grasping the present society through thinking about how things are decided in social life and what the meaning of rules are.” (*Commentary* p.117) shows “perspectives/approaches” as “a conceptual framework for grasping the present society”. According to *Commentary* page 113, “The basis of viewpoints regarding the present society is meant to enhance the quality of the democracy and lives of citizens, as well as to promote understanding of economic activities and social communication” which shows an expectation that these approaches will be of some help for each student to use as a tool to recognize/ determine social issues.

The third is “perspectives/approaches” as a fruit of specific learning activities. For example, in *Commentary* page 56, it is said “to develop perspectives/approaches regarding the society through learning to explain the characteristics or relevance of events”. Here, it is not clarified what “societal perspectives/approaches” means. However, there is a reference to “something to nurture through the studies of explaining the characteristics or the relevance between issues”. It surely is considered as what is learned by specific learning activities.

3) Characteristics of “societal perspectives/approaches” seen in *Commentary*

As we have hitherto learned, “societal perspectives/approaches” in *Commentary* are not only a conception of the goals and contents of learning but also stipulate learning activities needed to nurture them. Given this, what are the characteristics of these “perspectives/approaches” in “*Commentary*”?

The characteristics of these “perspectives/approaches” in “*Commentary*” will be shown below, while introducing the discussion of perspectives/approaches in Japan.

A. “Perspectives/approaches” as a conceptual framework

The first is the characteristic of “perspectives/approaches” as a conceptual framework, which can be expressed as focusing on the usefulness of knowledge as a tool. “Perspectives/approaches” in *Commentary* are “to grasp social phenomena while considering position or expansion”, as well as “opposition / agreement, and efficiency / fairness”, which are viewpoints of considering things or a framework of thinking, not what is called the concept of social science. The reason why these are considered “societal perspectives/approaches” is because they are thought to be useful as a framework for considering social phenomena.

B. “Perspectives/approaches” as a basis of recognition/ judgment by individuals

The second characteristic of “perspectives/approaches” in *Commentary* is that it works as a basis of recognition/ judgment by individuals, because acquiring “perspectives/approaches” makes it possible to “understand the society more deeply”. It places an importance on the “ability to understand the society”.

Based on the hitherto described discussion, it can be said that “societal perspectives/approaches” as stipulated in Japan’s curriculum guidelines have a characteristic of discussing social events using “perspectives/approaches” which is an abstract conceptual framework. How then, are students’s viewpoints nurtured in the actual classes and what are the tasks for researchers? In the next chapter, examples of classes aiming at developing “perspectives/approaches” in Japanese social studies classes will be shown while considering potential improvements for them.

Examples of Lessons Aiming at Developing “Perspectives/Approaches” in Japan.

Lessons in social studies and civics conducted at A Junior High School, on 27th September, 2016 will be shown as an example. In the fourth hour of lessons for the unit “perspectives/approaches for understanding contemporary society” (consisting of four hour-long lessons), lessons were implemented aiming at the goal that students would be able to recognize the necessity of reviewing regulations when necessary, and to discuss them in diverse ways based on five criteria for criticism.

Concretely, after confirming the procedure of the lesson, a discussion among several groups of students was implemented with the theme “how to decide which regulation to use for bicycle parking areas and how to revise them? ”, while considering “societal perspectives/approaches” in terms of

“opposition and agreement as well as efficiency and fairness”. The following are the examples for the students.

There is an apartment complex for 100 households. It has a parking area for 100 bicycles. Each family uses one unit. However, there are complaints of a shortage of parking units. Therefore, it is expected that a vacant space in the ground will be used as additional units for another 20 bicycles. There are 30 families who apply to use them.

On the other hand, according to the textbook by Tokyo Shoseki , “societal perspectives/approaches” for “efficiency and fairness” to be used in the class are explained as below

- Efficiency : whether money, materials, land, and labor which belong to all are used without a loss.
- Fairness :
 - Fairness of the procedure for creating regulations: whether all the members can participate in the procedure,
 - Fairness of the opportunities and result: whether only one group/individual is given disadvantages, when the regulation is implemented.

Discussions among each group started on the theme “In what situation is parking admitted?”. Students introduced regulations as below. ([] means a code by a reporter.)

- [Frequency of use] those who most frequently use the unit will be the first to use it
- [Necessity] those who have the most serious reason to use it will be the first to use it.
- [Distance] those whose destinations are near will be excluded.
- [Alternative means] Students in junior high or high school will be the first to use it. Adults should acquire licenses.

The class where lessons were implemented consisted of ten groups, each with three and four students. Among the ten groups, discussions were recorded for five. Among the five, there were three that submitted all of the four regulations mentioned above, one that submitted three regulations, and one that submitted two regulations. Considering that multiple regulations were submitted in all the groups whose discussions were recorded, a basis for deepening the discussions was considered enhanced.

Next, each group moved forward with discussions talking about regulations for admitting use. They referred to 1) regulations for admitting usage, 2) how to revise regulations for the usage of parking units, 3) a draft of a revision of the regulations. Due to the limited time available, there were no groups that discussed all three subjects.

Seen from the viewpoint of the perspectives/approaches regarding “efficiency”, it is problematic to figure out how to handle scarce resources (money, materials, land, and labor belonging to all). In other words, if the resource is “parking space”, it is not possible to distribute units to all those who need one, as there are only 20 units. However, if the resource is the “capability of using bicycles”, more people will be able to take advantage of the usage of the resource. Because some of the users do not need to use a second unit every day, others will be able to use one in place of them on such days. Whether students are wise enough to recognize this or not is an important point for discussion.

Furthermore, when it comes to perspectives/approaches regarding “fairness”, there will be another problem. Whether to consider the right to use the parking lot as personal, or as an attribute, and how to determine regulations will be the problems to solve. In the case of taking the right to use the parking lots to be personal, reasons for needing to use the parking units might include those that will be gone for certain periods, for example, “dropping off and picking up children at nurseries”, and “commuting”. It will be difficult to determine who is allowed to use the parking lot, and how often the regulations will be revised.

Based on these viewpoints, the result of the analysis for discussions conducted by the students is shown in Table3 (end of this report).

What can be imagined from Table3? It can be said that neither the goal of evaluating the regulation using an appropriate criterion, nor of developing “societal perspectives/approaches” regarding “efficiency / fairness” were achieved. This is because there was no reflection by the students on how to create regulations of their own with the measures they invented, and no consideration of the viewpoints of efficiency / fairness which the group members had earlier were observed.

It is important to show that what is to blame for this is not the lesson structure, but the following two points.

- It is difficult to discuss (put into practice, or practicalize) concrete examples, using abstract concepts such as efficiency or fairness.
- It is difficult to objectify simple concepts (viewpoints on procedures for deciding efficiency, fairness, and the rules which we learn from the daily life).

Hypothetical measures to solve these difficulties are shown in the following.

- To adopt the learning of metacognition in the lesson structures so that

students will objectify and examine their viewpoints/perceptions

- To adopt a procedure where students will compare and examine proposed solutions in order to learn objectification and the evaluation of the perspectives/approaches behind them.
- To make efforts to enhance curriculum management by providing lesson units so that students will develop abstract approaches through the investigation of concrete examples (social problems) and the invention of solutions (policies) for them, as well as those where students will be induced to tackle problems in nurturing their viewpoints.

Conclusion

“Societal perspectives/approaches” in Japan’s curriculum guidelines are considered a conceptual framework as well as a cornerstone of individual recognition / judgments. However, as it was difficult to apply the abstract “perspectives/approaches” to concrete examples in the actual classes, it is often the case that students discuss things based on simple concepts they have nurtured in their daily lives. In this research, hypothetical measures for solving these tasks in actual lessons are shown. Hereafter, it is necessary to verify the effectiveness of these measures through implementing them in actual lessons.

Notes

- ¹ Kazuhiko, Iwata.(1982). Setting the Contents of Lesson of Social Studies by Using System of Hypotheses. *Social Studies Education*. No.229, March 1982, pp.116-124.
- ² Kazuhiro, Kusahara.(2012). Characteristics of Research Methods on Social Studies Education in Japan: Focusing on Similarities and Differences between J.P. Shaver’s and T. Moriwake’s Views. *Bulletin of Japanese Educational Research Association for the Social Studies*. Vol.48, March 2012,pp.97-108
- ³ Takaharu, Moriwake.(1971) Experimental/Positive Research on Education of Recognizing Society. Iwao, Utsumi(ed).*Theory and Practice of Education of recognizing Society*. Kyoto: Aoi Shobou.
- ⁴ Takaharu, Moriwake.(1978) *Theories and Methods of Social Studies Lesson Composition*. Tokyo: Meiji Toshō.
- ⁵ Saizo, Mori.(2008). The Social Studies Lesson of History which Aims to Grow the Critical Individual against Society: Lesson Unit “Modern Japan’s war”. Japanese Educational Research Association for the Social Studies(ed). *Journal of Educational Research on Social Studies*. Vol.68,pp.11-20
- ⁶ Seiji, Kawasaki.(2011). *Multicultural Education and Education for Cross-Cultural Understanding in Hawaii*. Kyoto: Nakanishiya Shuppan.

Table3. Discussions among the five groups

	1	2	3	4	5
Total number of statements to admit parking regulation	42	85	125	133	98
Number of statements which proposed sharing of bicycles for the first time	1	2	84	none	none
Reference to the fact that some of the reasons for needing bicycles are only temporal	None	None	None	Reference	None
First number of statements				35	
Reflection on the result of discussion				None	
Way to decide regulation	All representatives who hope to use the second parking unit	The household members who hope to use the second parking unit (regardless of the number)	No reference	No reference	30 households that hope to use the second parking unit.
Way to decide regulation	No reference	Unanimous	No reference	No reference	Majority
	None	None	None	None	None
Reference to the efficiency/fairness [() means the number of the statement]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is necessary to set a charge to share bicycles depending on the frequency of use(40) 	No reference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is not inefficient if someone uses it only two times a week (59). It is inefficient that there is some space unused after the regulations on parking unit usage were made stricter(68). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is not fair if someone is admitted to use the units for the reason that there will be a necessity in the future (62). It is not fair not to charge those who use the second unit. The final decision will be made by a majority as unanimous vote was not attained(68). 	