

Education Policy and Local Government under the Covid-19 Crisis: Forms of Educational Politics that Support Educational Autonomy

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Abstract: This paper explores the challenges in educational policy research from the perspective of educational political research, focusing on the nature of local autonomy in education during the Covid-19 crisis. It discusses the issues surrounding the state of “waiting for instructions” and growing distrust towards education administration in the field of education. The paper also analyzes the influence of education on politics and the manifestation of conflicts in civil society. Additionally, it highlights the importance of reclaiming the voice of the frontline and creating a multi-layered system where decisions can be made on a grassroots level to support educational autonomy. By investigating the forms of educational politics that facilitate educational autonomy, the study aims to create an environment that enables autonomous decision-making in educational practices.

Keywords: Covid-19 crisis; Educational policy research; Educational politics; Local autonomy in education

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1. Introduction

There will be a variety of research issues surrounding education policy that have been revealed and accelerated by the Covid-19 crisis. For example, the issue of poverty and inequality has reiterated the link between the right to survival and the right to learning. There also seems to be a move to accelerate policies in response to the crisis, in the form of the DX policy and the use of emergency declarations to revise the Constitution.

Several issues may also be emerging in relation to local autonomy in education. Issues concerning the relationship between the State and local governments, between the Board of Education and the chief executive’s department, and between prefectures and municipalities over the management of educational institutions (schools, community centres, libraries, etc.) have also emerged, as have issues concerning the relationship between infectious disease control to protect lives and education policy to realize the right to education. In the area of school education, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the Board of Education (BOE), and individual school sites have all been at odds over how to handle the Courses of Study, and differences seem to have emerged among researchers over the evaluation of the Courses of Study.

In this paper, we will consider the challenges of educational policy research from the perspective of educational political research, focusing on the nature of local autonomy in education under the Covid-19 crisis. It will also focus on the form of educational politics (democracy) that can support educational

autonomy, which is essential for realizing learning that should be guaranteed even under the Covid-19 crisis.

Note that this essay is based on a report by the theorist on an issue study at the 28th Research Conference held in July 2021 ⁽¹⁾.

2. The state of “waiting for instruction” in the education field and distrust toward education administration

2.1. Waiting for instructions

Under the declaration of the state of emergency in May 2020, the commentator came across an article of concern. The article introduced the self-discipline of teachers in the field, asking whether “teachers are not waiting for instructions because they cannot make decisions on their own, even though they want to do something.” ⁽²⁾ While some private schools and NGOs are making efforts to ensure “interactivity,” if many public schools are left in a state of waiting for instructions, this is a serious situation. The same situation of “waiting for instructions” was observed at the author’s workplace. On 25 March 2020, the president of Tokyo Metropolitan University announced that classes would start after the Golden Week holidays in May, but even if these announcements were necessary measures to prevent the spread of infection, the decision-making process was never made known to the general teaching staff, students and postgraduate students. Moreover, many staff members believed that these decisions were actually made in line with the policy announced by the Governor and announced in the name of the President, rather than autonomously by the university’s executive board.

This situation also occurred in the municipalities where the author of the paper lives. Not only in public schools, but also in libraries, community centres and other social education facilities, which are regarded as public facilities, they were closed first, without any discussion on a site-by-site basis.

2.2. Discrepancies between the EMXT notification and the response of board of education

On 15 May 2020, a notification was issued under the name of the Director-General of the Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology to superintendents of prefectural boards of education, prefectural governors and others. The notice is entitled “Direction of ‘Learning Security’ in the Implementation of School Education Activities in Light of the Impact of the New Coronavirus Infection (Notice)” (hereafter referred to as the MEXT Notice). The notice stipulated that, while taking measures against infectious diseases, “no one should be left behind and learning should be guaranteed to the maximum extent possible.” Furthermore, in terms of the content of learning that should be guaranteed, schools were required to separate learning activities that can only be carried out at school from those that can be carried out by individuals, and to focus on them. Additionally, the notification clarified that falling below the standard instructional hours alone would not be considered a violation of the School Education Law Enforcement Regulations, while urging consideration for reducing the burden on students and educators. Furthermore, for students other than those in their final year, the notification allowed for the possibility of organizing educational curricula that span across academic years as a special exception.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) notification indicated that the prioritization of learning activities and the possibility of organizing educational curricula that span across academic years, except for the final year, were permitted. However, in actual school settings, different situations emerged from the contents of the notification. In many cases, schools took measures such as adding one extra hour per week and shortening the summer vacation to ensure the completion of all units for each grade within the academic year.

The situation that occurred in many school settings indicates that the education boards prioritize securing class hours over the contents specified in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and

Technology (MEXT) notification. Unlike the MEXT notification, education boards issued notifications to schools, emphasizing the importance of securing learning contents. In some cases, school management policies regarding content assurance were presented to principals and staff without prior discussions during staff meetings. Analyzing the reasons behind these situations should be considered a task for educational policy research.

2.3. Growing distrust toward the education administration in the field of education

Despite various anxieties during the COVID-19 crisis, there seems to be a lack of time and opportunities to openly discuss these concerns among educational staff. More importantly, a deep-rooted sense of mistrust appears to be spreading among the educators towards the statements made by the education boards and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. This growing sense of mistrust is a cause for serious concern.

Indeed, if the standard teaching hours are not secured, there may be pressure from local authorities, such as mayors and councils, on the education boards. Additionally, there is a doubt among educators about whether the policies of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology could easily be changed based on the intentions of the Cabinet. This uncertainty seems to be prevalent among the educators at the grassroots level.

If the board of education cannot make autonomous decisions and resorts to rigid responses, one possible reason is that they are aware of the risk of sudden changes in educational administration due to politics. Such suspicions are inevitable. If the trustworthiness of the educational administration from the perspective of frontline educators is eroding, it must be recognized as a serious situation.

3. The challenges of crisis response actors in educational institutions under “political leadership”

3.1. Export of “crisis” by the state

Interpreting the educational policies of the Ministry of Education, which aim to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, can be explained, at least for the time being, as the export of “crisis” by the nation, borrowing from the analysis of the transformation of the welfare state by Klaus Offe in the early 1980s. According to the work of Tamura, Klaus Offe initially argued for the “impossibility of control” by the welfare state in the 1980s while analyzing the relationship between capitalism and the welfare state ⁽³⁾. This notion coincides with the experiences of researchers studying New Zealand’s education reform, which underwent highly radical policies of decentralization and re-centralization in the early 1990s. These researchers encountered Offe’s ideas through interactions with New Zealand scholars, and it aligns with the perspective of the nation exporting a “crisis.” ⁽⁴⁾

During the COVID-19 crisis, while there has been an aspect of accelerating initiatives like DX in educational policies, there has also been a situation where the state has been unable to handle the “crisis” and has instead thrown it onto local governments and educational institutions. The events that unfolded in school settings during the COVID-19 crisis can be understood in this light.

3.2. Issues concerning the manifestation of conflicts in civil society

According to Tamura’s analysis, in the late 1980s Offe began to focus on the fact that, while institutions are biased by the state, they are also subject to re-interpretation in civil society, as follows.

“On one hand, institutions are biased because of the pervasive power of their designers, but on the other hand, such bias can be changed by reinterpreting the values and norms inherent in the institutions ⁽⁵⁾.”

And Tamura himself has subsequently conducted a series of analyses of the potential of deliberative democracy.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the contents of the MEXT notifications issued in the first half of 2020

were intended as exceptional measures and did not imply that MEXT relinquished its authority over the educational content of schools through curriculum guidelines, for example. Nevertheless, the risk of the state maintaining power increased, and a situation arose where, temporarily, educational committees and school settings had no choice but to handle the crisis. This led to an expansion of the area where reinterpretation became possible, which the researchers consider an important area of investigation in educational policy research.

Viewed in this way, it must be said that the fact that the school field is increasingly “waiting for instructions” in its response is still a serious situation.

At the same time, the theorists believe that the examples of educational sites and school boards attempting to respond to the “crisis” in an autonomous manner can be an important experience for realizing educational autonomy.

The meaning of the situation where the educational curriculum planning is thrown to the education field, and the careful analysis of the response dynamics in the field, could become an important research topic in educational policy studies, even if this situation arose as an exceptional response during the COVID-19 crisis. It would be crucial in exploring the management and operation of educational institutions that can support the autonomy required in educational practices.

3.3. The influence of education on politics

Tamura notes that not only the influence of politics on education, but also the influence of education on politics should be analyzed ⁽⁶⁾.

Tamura analyses the shift that occurred in Offe’s political theory in the 1980s, and is probably one of the researchers who have paid attention to Offe’s theory of deliberative democracy since the late 1980s, and are trying to develop it. Tamura’s focus seems to have been on the possibility of promoting deliberative democracy in both civil society and the state ⁽⁷⁾.

In any case, the point that the role of policy is not only to redistribute wealth but also to develop the rational capacity of each individual citizen may also be an argument for the right to education. Exploring the value of being able to deliberate from multiple perspectives and the mechanisms that make this possible is a point that should be considered if free learning as a right is to be realized through the governance structures of each educational institution.

In an article written in 2018, Tamura also mentioned the “educational effects of participation” in participatory democracy theory ⁽⁸⁾. To analyze the educational effects of participation, it is necessary to grasp the real relationship between education and politics, and for this purpose, research methods that can comprehend the interrelationship between legal provisions and their operational dynamics are essential. Moreover, such research cannot be limited to merely analyzing power relations among various political entities. It would require research methods that can analyze the entire social system, including the process of participation, such as participant observation, in addition to surveys when it comes to “sociology of educational administration” research methods.

4. Issues concerning the form of educational politics that support the autonomy of educational practice

4.1. Issues concerning boards of education that lack “fair public opinion”

The Board of Education system, which is supposed to support educational institutions such as schools and community centres with a certain degree of independence from the chief executive’s department, has also been changed by the 2014 system revision. In other words, the chief executive directly appoints the director of education, and the director, who is supposed to be an educational civil servant, is now more likely to follow the wishes of the chief executive than to look after the education frontline. As a result, the voices of

frontline education staff are now less likely to be heard by residents. Many in the education sector have had to face the Covid-19 crisis under these circumstances.

Amid the ongoing situation where the education commission system, which should be involved in the management and operation of educational institutions, has not fully fulfilled its role, conflicts have persisted due to interference in educational practices by mayors, ruling party members, or education commissions reflecting their intentions. However, the COVID-19 crisis appears to have further silenced the voices of many educational institutions, exacerbating the situation ⁽⁹⁾.

4.2. Reclaim the voice of the frontline and create a multi-layered system where decisions can be made on grassroots level

We must not cede both the protection of life and the protection of freedom. This was pointed out by Yuval Noah Harari shortly after the current pandemic was declared by WHO on 11 March 2020 ⁽¹⁰⁾.

If we take Harari's proposition to education, we can understand that preserving life and the right to learn, especially the learning that monitors power, are not matters of choice; both are necessary. In particular, during a state of emergency, if monitoring by the sovereign over its implementation becomes difficult, there is a risk that only the aspect of legitimizing restrictions on fundamental human rights will be magnified.

By the way, Shinichiro Kumagai introduces the UN's May 2020 Policy Recommendations ⁽¹¹⁾, which called for the Covid-19 crisis to be addressed by building a society that is inclusive of people with disabilities, as follows.

"Even before the start of the pandemic, people were incredibly diverse, with some having disabilities and others not, some being male and others female, and there are also members of the LGBT community. Each individual faces unique challenges that others may not be aware of. Perhaps no one knows the complete picture. Having one authoritative leader and expecting everything to work smoothly under their command is not realistic. In such a highly diverse and decentralized situation with a wide range of challenges, the concept of "agile" means moving the decision-making power to the field. It is not a top-down approach but a bottom-up one. It involves gathering input from the field, continuously learning as an organization, and implementing appropriate and responsive actions. This is what the term "agile" implies, in my opinion." ⁽¹²⁾

Kumagai introduces the realization of an agile society as the creation of a society in which diverse people, including people with disabilities, can live, even during the Covid-19 crisis, through autonomous decisions at each site. Kumagai's point is also highly suggestive for education policy research.

4.3. Research questions and methods to investigate the forms of educational politics that support educational autonomy through research

The current crisis is caused by the spread of a new virus, but what makes this crisis more serious seems to be the fact that each and every resident, who is supposed to be sovereign, has been deprived of free learning opportunities that would enable them to acquire the ability to make autonomous decisions about their options.

The unique task of educational policy research lies in defining collective decision-making related to education, often accompanied by conflicts, as "educational politics." By investigating the decision-making processes, it aims to reveal the forms of educational politics that can support the autonomy of educational practices. With such research in educational politics, the dynamics between regulations and their implementation can be reevaluated, potentially creating a legal framework and operational environment that better ensures the autonomy demanded in educational practices.

The pursuit of a democracy that can support educational autonomy through research should be set as a task unique to educational political research ⁽¹³⁾.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Endnote

- (1) The content of the report on the day of the conference was based on the article “Guaranteeing the Right to Learn and the Role of School Boards in the Corona Disaster,” published in the Quarterly Journal of Education Law, No. 206 (September 2020), with some additions.
- (2) “Rhythm collapses, no progress in learning (Tetsuo Domon),” Tokyo Shimbun, 1 May 2020.
- (3) Tamura T, 2002, Klaus Offe’s Political Theory: From ‘Impossibility of Control’ to ‘Possibility of Control’. Annual Review of Political Science, 53.
- (4) Fumiaki Arai, 1995, School Choice and Educational Participation in Decentralization: Trends in Educational Reform in New Zealand, Jinbun Gakuho, 259.
- (5) Tamura, 2002, above-mentioned paper, p. 203.
- (6) Tamura T, 2018, Scope of the Article ‘Educational Political Science’ – Through the Introduction of Distinctions between ‘Politics/Political Entities’ and ‘Education/Educational Entities’, Nagoya University Law and Policy Review, 280: 89.
- (7) Tamura T, 2002, State, Politics and Civil Society: the Political Theory of Kouras Offe, Aoki Shoten, 215.
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- (9) Japan Association for Educational Policy Studies, 2019, ‘Unjust Rule’ and ‘Fair Popular Will’, Annual Report No. 26, Gakuji Publishing.
- (10) Harari YN, 2020, The World After Coronavirus, Financial Times HP.
- (11) United Nations, 2020, Policy Brief: A Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19.
- (12) Kumagai S, 2020, Beyond Corona (1) – What We Saw as Everyone Being Disabled, NHK Heartnet, viewed September 14, 2021, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/heart-net/article/364/>
- (13) The term “autonomy of education” is used in this paper as a mechanism that enables us to critically rethink the existing social division of labor and to conduct educational practices that are responsive to the voice of each individual learner. For more information on the specific challenges of educational politics research and this autonomy of education, see Arai F, 2021, Educational Autonomy and Educational Politics: The Form of Democracy that Supports Learning, Otsuki Shoten.

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