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We need educational reform for future generations

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In the year 2020, the year of COVID-19, Japan, fortunately, saw fewer typhoons. However, throughout the Anthropocene, excessive precipitation and resulting floods or landslides may occur anytime in the future. Or we may encounter new types of highly infectious diseases. We will need to be prepared for those crises and redesign our ways of life/work. In other words, we have to revisit the roles of society, politics, and the economy, aiming to achieve "green recovery" from the COVID-19 and build a sustainable society.

Among numerous points to be reviewed, I would like to focus on education because educated sound citizen forms a decent society. (By the way, I have been wondering why Japanese people pay little attention to social issues like climate change issues. Is it because of the Japanese school education where philosophy and politics are not part of the curriculum, and children do not learn how to become a good citizen? Many Japanese are only concerned about their short-term happiness <I am OK if I can earn money now, and I don't care what other people are doing>. Is it the education they received that has led them to think that way?)

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed a substantial disparity in our society, not only in employment but also in the level of school education. We even witnessed a fearful movement of government controlling academia (Prime Minister Suga did not nominate some of the candidates for the Science Council of Japan without clarifying the reason for his rejection). All pieces of evidence indicate that we are facing a kind of disruption of our educational system.

Education, a basis of a sound national, should be designed carefully with a long-term perspective. However, our governments in the past decades used it just for their short-term merits. It is time to drastically review our education for the future of society with a sense of ethics.

The education during the Edo-period focused on basic requirements as a member of the community. At community classes, children learned to behave ethically based on Confucianism and Buddhism. They also practiced such practical skills in reading/writing/arithmetics. However, the education introduced in the Meiji-era was primarily for becoming a wealthy and militarily strong country, which continued for a long time. Even today, leaders do not doubt the need to control education to generate human resources useful for national development (or business needs).

Such controlled school education might have created observant Japanese nationals who prefer harmony/conformity rather than debate/argument. Facing the COVID-19 pandemic, these people wear surgical masks without much struggle as requested by the government. It is a positive aspect of the obedient Japanese people. However, these people rarely express themselves and somewhat reactive in their social life. They tend to take group behavior rather than acting as an individual. Many will not openly discuss various social issues nor take any specific action to improve the situation. I must say that these attitudes never bring about any change in society. When the world is becoming more uncertain with various risks like climate changes, we need people who can learn, think, and act themselves. For this reason, I think it is time to revisit our education system and its contents.

We can find an example of school education in Finland, ranking the happiest nation in the past three years. There, school education is flexible in terms of the graduation year and schedule. Each school follows the same curriculum, but teachers can decide what to learn. They read a lot. During the years of compulsory education, about 20-30 students form one class. Finland spends 10% of the budget of national and local governments on education. Students can learn without tuition. Moreover, the government decided to provide school lunch free of charge. This way, Finland invests its nationals, compensating for the scarcity of its resources.

In contrast, the Japanese government strictly controls school education. The standard number of students is 40 in one classroom. Teachers, with little discretion, follow the national guideline of school education using government-inspected textbooks. Japan provides the least funds to educational institutions, the lowest amount among the 34 OECD countries. According to the UNICEF report issued in September 2020, Japanese children enjoy the best physical

health while their spiritual welfare falls behind 36 countries out of 38 surveyed countries. We cannot compare those countries under different conditions straightforwardly. However, we can say that the Japanese government today does not place much value on education.

In Japan, the Basic Act on Education aims to groom matured personality and cultivate people qualified as members of a democratic and peaceful state. In this regard, education and personal learning should take place not only at schools but at home and in each community or workplace. However, parents are too busy to teach their children at home, so they put their responsibility to schools. Then, at schools, teachers are too busy to spare enough time for teaching. At workplaces, employees under shorter-term contracts have little opportunity of receiving vocational training or any other chance of learning.

Facing the COVID-19 pandemic today, we should think of better ways to cultivate people at various levels and timing, an essential to building a sustainable society.