Japanese educational culture in times of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract
National culture determines educational culture. The educational culture characteristics of each country will be demonstrated through the awareness of education, the way the educational apparatus is organized, and the way that education deals with the crisis in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic on a global scale. The study uses structural functionalism theory to systematize the elements in educational culture and analyzes these elements in symmetrical pairs to outline the Japanese educational culture during the COVID-19 pandemic from the beginning of the year 2020 until now. In addition, from the view of the specific Japanese educational culture, the study also uses Hofstede’s cultural dimension theory to analyze pandemic response policy.

Keywords
Educational culture, Japanese education, Japanese culture

Introduction
Along with the development of Cultural studies, in the first half of the 20th century, educational culture also achieved great attention from researchers as a sub-module in Cultural studies. In Japan, the first work on “educational culture” was published for the first time in 1939, titled “Technology of living and educational culture” by the famous psychologist-educationalist Kido Mantaro. This book emphasizes the material culture of education (e.g., teaching aids, learning materials) and a view of the culture of life. The object of study in his educational culture has created a great influence on several studies relating to educational culture in Japan after World War II (Kido, 1946). From the second half of the 20th century, in the context of the country being defeated in the second world war, the study of educational culture in Japan became an urgent need. Four important cultural and educational research works in Japan in the period from the end of the second world war to the present can be mentioned as: “The system of the history of educational culture” published in 1950 (Ishiyama, 1950), “History of Japanese educational culture” published in 1978 (Takahashi, 1978),
“A thought of educational culture” published in 2002 (Miyazawa, 2002), and “Study of Japanese history of educational culture” published in 2014 (Yamada, 2014).

Besides, in the US and Europe, the study of educational culture tends to orient toward positivism, placing educational research on issues associated with practicability, rather than the theory of educational culture. Project example “Educational culture in the third world: the lingering colonial connection” (Nandi, 1994) discusses the status of educational culture in relation to ethnicity; the work “Globalization and Education: Demonstrating a “common world educational culture” or locating a “globally structured educational agenda”” (Dale, 2000) discusses education in the context of globalization; the work “Past educational culture influences on present perceptions of education” (Segal and Vasilache, 2012) observes the influence of past educational culture on the perception of current educational utility; the work “Culture factors causing differences in quality education” (Paudel, 2013) discusses five components: regional diversity, environment, teachers and teaching methods, ability to school management skills, learning materials, and belonging to the educational culture affect the quality of education; the work “Perception of educational culture and learning styles in language: the Romanian case” by two authors (Buyse and Bañas, 2016) researches the relationship between educational culture and language learning methods in Romania before and after the fall of communism based on Hofstede’s theory and model of cultural dimensions.

According to Miyazawa Yasuto, educational culture is located at a deep level, which cannot be seen on the surface like the educational system or educational ideology. The term “educational culture” itself is not a common word and is hardly defined in professional dictionaries (Miyazawa, 2002: 14). According to Kido, “education is the technique of teaching the nation’s survival skills, and when these techniques are nationally organized, it is educational culture” (Kido, 1946: 14). Identifying educational culture as a general invisible teaching technique has narrowed down the concept of educational culture when only considering educational culture as a teaching method. This statement ignores other elements related to educational culture such as symbols, philosophy, policies, and content (Buyse and Bañas, 2016) defines “pedagogical culture as the beliefs and attitudes about the learning/teaching process, namely values, prejudices and ideas about what should be to do or not to do, what is right or desired, what is expected or not from the learning experience”. This definition is not reasonable on two points. First, values, prejudices, and ideas cannot be the concrete of beliefs and attitudes about the learning/teaching process. Second, the list of “things to do or not to do, what is right or desirable, what is expected or not” belongs to the code of conduct in learning/teaching, which is just a part of educational culture.

Miyazawa (2002: 23) defines “educational culture as a historical way of living related to the upbringing of the next generation to be formed and shared in the community”. This definition has broad coverage. Miyazawa attributes the “educational culture” to the way of life-related to upbringing, besides, he also pointed out that the educational culture includes four functions: human natural function (activities related to the upbringing of the next generation), historical function (formed and shared in historical groups), systematic function (as an element on a system of culture, recognized as a whole), and valuable function (creating educational value).

COVID-19 opens a new era for the global education trend. All parties involved in educational activities have changed their perception of the nature of education after a long time enforcing social distancing and organizing teaching and learning on communication technology platforms (Tesar, 2021). The Western positivism and utilitarian trends in educational research are used as a theoretical tool to illuminate the structure of the education system and each component that makes up the educational system toward connecting and healing “the disturbance of heterogeneity” in the education system due to the impact of COVID-19 (Kato et al., 2020). The two trends of positivism of
the West and ontologism of the East on researching educational culture, typically Japan, combine and complement each other, providing the theoretical basis as well as the practical basis for postmodernism studies.

Indeed, in the context of the global pandemic catastrophe, every culture must shoulder its own difficult experiences relating to its educational system. For example, Western education that pursues the educational philosophy of liberty, multi-culture, and multiethnic has to face a shortage of international students and has to redesign its education system toward individual learners, etc. (Tesar et al., 2021). Japan with an education that pursues the 21st-century educational philosophy of “building a society with a harmonious development of family – school – society and harmonizing modern and traditional values” (Trang, 2020) has to face pressure to regulate society, tighten the link between family–school–society, and perceive the value of learning according to Eastern standards (Kato et al., 2020). Therefore, this study aims to answer the question: in the breakdown of the global education system, how has Japanese educational culture been interpreted through policy to deal with the pandemic?

The connotation of the term educational culture in this research is based on the definition of Miyazawa Yasuto to consider education in four functions: human nature, historical character, systematicity, and value. In addition, the study uses Hofstede’s cultural dimension theory to describe typical Japanese cultural patterns. The structural functionalism theory is also used to analyze Japanese educational culture in the context of dealing with COVID-19 from 2020 until now.

**Structure of educational culture**

To understand Japanese educational culture systematically, this study researches Japanese educational culture according to the structure of classification of cultural activities, including three components: cognitive culture–organizational culture–behavioral culture (Them, 2021). Based on this classification, educational culture is also made up of three dimensions: educational culture on the cognitive level, educational culture on the organizational level, and educational culture on the behavioral level. In each dimension, the study observed the symmetrical pair of education, which would be cover fairly all aspects of educational culture inside and outside the school. Accordingly, the study structures Japanese educational culture to include aspects and dimensions as shown in Figure 1 and analyzes Japanese policies to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic through extensive coverage of the symmetrical pair of dimensions: national education awareness - international education awareness, social educational organization - school educational organization, and school-outside behavior - school-inside behavior.

**Japanese educational culture in the context of COVID-19**

**Japanese educational culture on the cognitive level**

During the complicated development of the COVID-19 epidemic, not only Japan, the education system of all countries in the world must suffer massive fluctuations. Forms of education, policies, learning content, etc., that were shaped before the epidemic spread were almost interrupted. The world has never faced a mass closure of schools and educational institutions on a large scale during a long period of anti-epidemic. Important national examinations, educational ceremonies, academic student exchanges, research, etc., are also suspended. The study routine, students, international students, teachers, etc., are disturbed (Jandrić et al., 2021).
Aware of the global general education crisis, since the discovery of a new virus that is spreading in the community, Japan, a country with leading technology development, has also turned to a new education method. Following the general trend of the world, applying digital technology to make the most of the distance education—training model during the time of social distancing (Hotta, 2021).

However, according to the report published digital learning outcomes SPRIX1 for 1000 children aged 6–15 years and 1000 parents (22,000 children and parents in total) in 11 countries (Japan, USA, China, India, UK, France, Poland, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar) in August and September 2020, Japan’s implementation of “online classroom” ranks is the lowest among 11 countries (SPRIX, 2021).

Depending on Hofstede’s cultural dimension theory, this can be explained that Japan’s low ranking in the application of online classrooms relates to Japan’s “horizontal decision” model (Sawada, 2021). This model comes from the high collectivist mindset in Japanese society, leading to all decision-making must be discussed, debated, through all levels of government. The pressure of “social regulation” in the typical Japanese way of social operation (Sato, 2021) has implemented online learning slower than in other countries, especially the countries which have “vertical culture” such as the United States, Britain, and France (Hofstede, 2010). However, based on some reports about the results of the implementation of the localities published on the websites of the Japan Local Education Council, it is shown that the reform of the educational method in Japan is being
implemented universally, strictly, and clearly (MEXT, 2021). Referring to the experience of Japan, it can be seen that, although the process from awareness to practice may be slow, once the awareness is concretized into the policy and promulgated, the implementation is always conducted thorough action. This was demonstrated in two major educational reforms in Japan in modern times. The first was the reform from class privileged education to the equal education of the whole people during the Meiji Restoration (1868), and the second was the reform from nationalist education to democratic education after the second world war (1945) (OECD, 2012: 180–181). In the period of education globalization, COVID-19 is also considered by Japanese researchers as “a push” to promote Japanese education reform (Kariya, 2020).

Indeed, in 2016, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology has made recommendations on the revised guideline of curriculum to suit the change of society increasingly complicated by the tremendous advancement of modern technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data, Internet of things (IoT), and robotics (MEXT, 2006). The report of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology mentioned that Society 5.0 is a society that changes continuously and suddenly to the point of “discontinuity”. And the “discontinuity” of society has been demonstrated by the global “COVID-19 crisis” from the end of 2019 to the present (MEXT, 2020b). Faced with the general situation of international education and the challenge of national education reform, Japan has reorganized its education system and behavioral framework in a social and educational environment compatible with the times by leveraging the power of information technology available in the country when implementing distance education in both educational administration and educational management aspects (Sato, 2021).

*Japanese educational culture on the organizational level*

As Hofstede’s analysis on the index of “long-term vision” in the comparison of countries in the organizational dimension, Japan has a score of 88/100 showing that Japan is one of the countries with the most long-term orientation (Hofstede, 2010). Indeed, since the beginning of the Reiwa, Japan has launched several school education innovation initiatives such as “comprehensive implementation of the new curriculum,” “reform of working style in schools,” and “GIGA (Global and Innovation Gateway for All) school invention” (Watanabe, 2021).

Regarding the idealization of primary and secondary education in the new era, in December 2019, the Board of Primary and Secondary Education proposed to use information technology and advanced technology to support future learning models. Based on this proposal, the Japanese government has decided to supplement the budget for the fiscal year 2019 including the cost of comprehensive development of a high-speed, high-capacity communication network for students and implement the “GIGA school invention”. When COVID-19 appeared, the Japanese government supplemented the budget to promote the GIGA project. The total amount to build the Society 5.0 compatible learning system is 461 billion Yen (MEXT, 2020b). As a result, the GIGA project completed the equipment implementation in 1 year compared to 5 years according to the initial plan.

The two main pillars of the GIGA project are (1) to establish an internet and Wi-Fi network at all schools nationwide and (2) to provide all primary, secondary school students (at the compulsory education level) with one computer or one tablet as learning tools. For high school students, because there is no plan of estimates, so the government has to implement the regime of BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) to enhance data the contents, programs of learning (Education Futures Research Association, 2021: 115). This project has created a premise for Japanese educational institutions to be unified in providing learning opportunities inside and outside the school, removing the boundary
between the school educational environment and the social educational environment (Sato, 2021). The school and local library systems can inform the data of books and materials to provide to readers. Schools can design educational content, test forms, and automatic grading methods corresponding to each student according to the “equal education and individual education” as outlined in the “Revised basic education law (2006)” (MEXT, 2006). The meaningful nature of the GIGA project reveals a culture of community, long-term vision, and high-mindedness in Japanese educational institutions. Before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, according to the Japanese, schools must be a “zero risk” place, in other words, the Japanese desire there is no risk in the organization and management of schools (Education Development Association, 2021: 141). The reorganization of education delivery through the GIGA project has not only helped Japan to solve the problem of reducing the transmission of the disease but also to overcome some other educational problems such as the state of synchronization rigidly in the educational program. It is utilizing educational reorganization, Japanese educators have pointed out the prospect that Japan can accelerate the transition from the era of “synchronization” of curriculum to the era of “individualization” of learning (Education Development Association, 2021: 44), creating opportunities for individuals to freely develop creatively according to their individuality.

**Japanese educational culture on the behavior level**

Since being well aware of the global epidemic situation and the tremendous risks of a highly infectious disease due to community transmission, on February 27, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe ordered the temporary closure of all elementary, middle, high, and special schools nationwide. As of April 22, 94% of public and private schools across Japan were temporarily closed (MEXT, 2020a). Since the announcement of the temporary closure of schools, the Central Board of Education and the Subcommittee on Secondary Education, the Subcommittee on Lifelong Learning, etc., have discussed and made many decisions to ensure uninterrupted education, training, and reduce learning gaps during student absences. One of the decisions related to education to cope with the disease situation is believed most important from the government at this stage is “the package of comprehensive solutions for learning guaranty” with the motto “guaranteed learning is most effective without leaving any child behind” (MEXT, 2020a). This solution package includes the following main contents: (1) During the temporary break, students will study at home according to the school’s program, under the guidance and monitor of teachers; (2) in addition to taking measures to ensure learning during the period of separation, the school must also consider redistributing the full-year study schedule, modifying the long break time, taking full advantage of Saturday, and find solutions for important ceremonial activities of the school; (3) ensure the optimization of learning at school by measures to improve the information technology environment, revise the learning program with special solutions. The method of implementing this policy package focuses on both the school education environment and the family education environment (Kobayashi, 2020).

One thing that is remarkable in this epidemic response policy package is that the Japanese government has increased the integration of social solutions into schools by increasing strengthening human resources for social activities to support teachers’ activities. This approach has created a unified apparatus in supporting children and students. Because education cannot be separated from social policy to build a society tied to coherence and justice, where a model of social integration is proposed to provide a response education for all students. The placement of social workers in schools is essential for specific prevention and intervention purposes in situations of lack of protection, social disadvantage, and educational inequality (Cifuentes-Faura, 2020).
Based on the report of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, in the school education environment, the government provides aid in two aspects: (1) terms of human and material resources, reducing the burden of external work outside teaching to maintain the school system, ensuring equal learning across the country, and (2) terms of preventing the spread of disease (MEXT, 2020b) in such items as:

1. Terms of human resources and time for teachers to focus on the goal of “ensure learning” include the following support:
   - Increase large-scale reinforcement of supplemental teachers (small groups in the senior grade), support teacher (supporting master teachers at all levels), school support staff (preparing lessons, contacting parents, managing student’s health, etc.), counselors, social support workers, and school counselors (mental health care).
   - Implement “Banking of school-child support workforce” by leveraging retired teachers, education personnel with temporary/special permits, university students, NGOs, and resources of local manpower.
   - Extend the validity period of a teacher’s license.
   - Postpone some of the school investigations and projects assigned to schools by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology.

2. In terms of preventing the spread of disease, the government supports the cost of rapid and flexible deployment of necessary measures such as equipment, mobile phones, infectious disease countermeasures (disinfectant solutions, non-contact thermometers, heat stress countermeasures for school lunch cooks, etc.), and academic assurance (teaching materials, empty classroom activities, etc.) at the discretion of the principal.

In addition, the Japanese government also focuses on the home education environment. The government has adjusted home learning equipment through technology devices and implemented an emergency environment to ensure effective learning with technology equipment, improve skills in using technology in the event of an emergency when schools are temporarily closed due to disasters or infectious diseases through the promotion of the “GIGA school invention” (Fujiwara, 2021). Moreover, for low-income households, special additional budget expenditure through subsidies for children in need of protection, tuition support for high school students, and tuition support for special cases (MEXT, 2020a).

From the content dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and promoting the effectiveness of online education, the policy of the Japanese government has covered all aspects virtually related to education simultaneously. For example, for “distance learning,” the response system from editing training content, equipment, organizing communication between the school and students, assessment system, mental health counseling, etc., helped Japan out of the typical trap of online education. This typical trap is pointed out as an old educational method, which is also known as teacher-oriented when children and students can only watch computers and listen to lectures from pre-recorded videos (Allen et al., 2021). Besides that, the government also takes full of advantage of using potential human resources in society such as retired teachers, university students, and teachers in non-governmental educational institutions. This policy is an initiative to help reduce pressure on teachers when switching from an offline-learning model to an online-learning model. It should also be added that online educational programs for children in Japan have been broadcast since 2002 on the NHK channel. In addition to broadcasting educational programs on television, children and students can also study on NHK’s website with full learning materials divided by grade (Deguchi et al., 2005). Therefore, it can be seen that Japan’s implementation of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has the advantage of not having to spend a lot of effort in creating a television
program from the start point. As per the country comparative index of Hofstede, Japan’s “uncertainty avoidance index” score of 92/100 (Hofstede, 2010) can also demonstrate the way of dealing with uncertainty avoidance in all aspects of Japan’s government during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a push to help Japan speed up the process of modernizing and technologicalizing education in line with the general global trend (Kato et al., 2020).

In addition, according to a survey by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, in 2018, the number of students who do not want to go to school in Japan at all grade levels has the following data: primary school accounted for 84,033 students and secondary school accounted for 156,006 students (Education Development Association, 2021: 15). To overcome this situation of not going to school, Japanese education researchers have come up with a solution of “not going to school positively,” that is, building suitable “homeschool” training programs for children who choose “un-schooling”. The solution project “not going to school positively” has also been accelerated the implementation and evaluation of results in the context of the “breakout” of education due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Education Development Association, 2021: 16).

Conclusions

Through the research of Japan’s educational policy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to the present, from the perspective of educational culture in three dimensions of sub-culture: awareness, organization, and behavior, it can be seen that, based on the 21st-century educational philosophy of “building a society with a harmonious development of family – school – society and harmonizing modern and traditional values” (Trang, 2020) and Japanese typical characteristics of the culture (which is a combination of Apollo and Dionysus models (Benedict, 1954), as evidenced by Hofstede’s specific data), Japan has implemented a series of educational policies to preserve citizens’ right to be educated; social security regime for teachers and educational staff; the medical care and mental health regime for students; and financial support for students to prevent the risk of rich–poor gap affecting children’s opportunities to be educated. In addition, Japan has made good use of its technological strengths in deploying information technology application packages in learning, supporting learners to receive personalized knowledge quickly. From the initial achievements in the policy to deal with the epidemic, Japan has made good use of both personalization experience according to Western standards in the aspect of democracy, applying technology—science and community experience by Oriental standards in terms of taking care of the social life of children and students, student’s family with the motto of “guaranteed learning is most effective without leaving any child behind”.

In the “breakout” of global education, Japanese educational culture has demonstrated four ontological functions through (1) human natural function which is reflected in policies that focus on all components constituting the education system: school–family–society–individual learners; (2) historical function which is reflected through the continuation of technological achievements and experience in responding to natural disasters to accelerate suitable solutions, as well as consolidate public awareness facing to the epidemic; (3) systematic function which is reflected in policies that are deployed and implemented simultaneously across the country; and finally, the results of the implementation of these policies have shown its valuable function, contributing to the unique characteristics of Japanese educational culture.

From the efforts of the government as well as the entire Japanese people in overcoming the consequences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, after the summer vacation of 2021, students across Japan have been able to return to their “new normality”. Japan’s international student exchange programs have been scheduled to resume from the end of November 2021. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has gradually subsided in Japan from September 2021, and educational activities have gradually returned to normal, but the values achieved since 2020 were implemented
continuously and strengthened by the Japanese government, opening a typical Japanese “new normality” period—which named the post-COVID times.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes
1. Basic Academic Achievement Research Institute.
2. A teacher’s license in Japan is valid for 10 years. After 10 years, teachers must attend refresher classes and take exams to be re-licensed.

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