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‘Social Movements’ in Japan’s Citizenship Education: How to Conceptualize ‘Participation in Democracy’ in Junior High School Education?

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ABSTRACT

Given the more frequent and more active social movements in today’s democratic countries, this paper explores how to conceptualize social movements in citizenship education so that citizens can successfully overcome social conflicts through democratic participation. Particular focus is placed on social studies education in Japan’s junior high schools. Analyzing Japan’s educational curricula through an investigation of textbooks and curriculum guidelines, as well as findings from interviews with teachers working in junior high schools, this paper emphasizes the concepts of counter-socialization and social movement oriented citizenship (SMOC) to improve citizenship education. It is proposed that closer attention should be paid to various aspects of social movements and their relevance to democracy, and that the areas of Japan’s social studies education should collaborate more closely. This paper concludes by reflecting on the limitations of the analysis and suggesting a possible avenue for future improvement.

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1. Social Movements as a Form of Democratic Participation

Although a variety of social movements have occurred in various regions, more active ones are now emerging in democratic countries. Social movements are defined as “actors and organizations seeking to alter power deficits and to effect social transformations through the state by mobilizing regular citizens for sustained political actions” and contain any kinds of political collective action not only extra-institutional actions (e.g., protest marches and civil disobedience) but also lobbying, lawsuits and press conferences (Amenta et al. 2010: 288). However, closer attention has recently been given to the former to reconsider how democracy works today; this form of social movement is the focus of this paper.

Such contemporary social movements are often termed “counter-democracy,” in which civic demonstrations and activism abound within and across levels, from local to global (Rosanvallón 2008). Counter-democracy, according to Rosanvallón (2008: 9), is “a democratic form of political distrust.” This distrust derives from the inherent limitation of representative democracy in fully reflecting public opinion (Urbiniati 2011). Social movements such as counter-democracy have been carried out by people who feel underrepresented under existing institutionalized forms of democracy and distrust the current political system. Thus, far from being anti-democracy, counter-democracy is expected to complement representative democracy so that different views can be reflected in policy processes through different forms of democracy (Rosanvallón 2008; Matsuda 2019).

In addition to a way to allow underrepresented voices to be expressed, counter-democratic movements have been found to have significant influence on the policymaking process. The consequences of social movements have received close attention from a variety of disciplines such as sociology and political science (Amenta et al. 2010; Barrie 2021), some of which, for instance, reveal that social movements significantly affect policy outcomes and elected officials’ beliefs (Gibson 2017; Wouters and Walgrave 2017).

Social movements, as a form of democratic participation, should be seen as a key domain of citizenship education; learning about social movements in democracy helps citizens critically consider democracy in general and representative democracy in particular. More active and frequent social movements in democratic countries today imply that there are more diverse views on policy issues and consequently more serious policy conflicts in society (Matsuda 2019). Moreover, social movements have long been observed around the world; their long history reveals their causes,

effects, and significance in stabilizing democracy. Citizens familiar with various aspects of social movements in democracy, hence, are expected to contribute to overcoming social conflicts. It is implied here that understanding social movements should be a critical component in citizenship education.

This paper examines how social movements can be conceptualized in citizenship education, based on an investigation of Japan's citizenship education in junior high schools. The second section explains this paper's approach to social movements and education, comparing it with major categories of previous research in this field. The third section focuses on Japan's junior high school education and demonstrates how the history and contemporary relevance of social movements are addressed in social studies curricula; this is done by closely examining textbooks and the curriculum guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and by referring to findings from interviews with teachers working in junior high schools. The fourth section draws implications for improving Japan's citizenship education; building on the concepts of counter-socialization and social movement oriented citizenship, the section scrutinizes how to teach social movements and democracy in junior high schools. The concluding section summarizes the findings of this paper's analysis and discusses its limitations as well as a possible way to address them.

2. Social Movements as a Focus of Educational Research

This section refers to major research questions that previous studies in the field of social movements and education have explored, and outlines this paper's approach to the field. Social movements, when challenging powerful actors, structures, ideas and norms, both require and promote education; they "provide education to further their goals, seek to change formal education, are themselves shaped by formal education and its actors, and foster learning through movement participation and observation" (Niesz 2022: 68). In the words of Niesz (2022: 68), "education is tactic, target, context, and outcome of social movements."

Due to this complicated relationship between social movements and education, the research field of social movements and education spans a variety of academic areas such as sociology and political science, while Niesz et al. (2018) classify existing studies in this field into two major categories (Figure 1). The first category ((A) in Figure 1) discusses education and learning in social movements. Regarding learning as taking place in social activity, studies belonging to the category address,

for instance, how social movements educate not only their participants but also the public, and how knowledge is generated in social movements. The second category of research ((B) in Figure 1), on the other hand, focuses on the influence of social movements on formal education and reveals that social movements aiming at affecting formal education are likely to take direct actions with targets such as laws, policies, institutional organizations, professional development, curricula and pedagogies. The questions explored in this research category include how the ideas promoted by social movements are taken up in the identity work of students and educators, how educators, students and parents have been engaged in social movement activism, and what relationships exist among social movement participants, educators and the government (Niesz 2018: 28-29).

While these two categories of research have produced important insights into social movements and education, this paper takes a distinct approach to the field by focusing on social movements in citizenship education ((C) in Figure 1). Social movements, as stated above, deserve close attention to discuss how to educate active citizens in democracy. Why and how did a particular social movement take place at a specific time and place? What consequences resulted from the movement? Considering these questions is expected to help people understand the limitations of representative democracy, the unavoidable existence of social conflicts and the

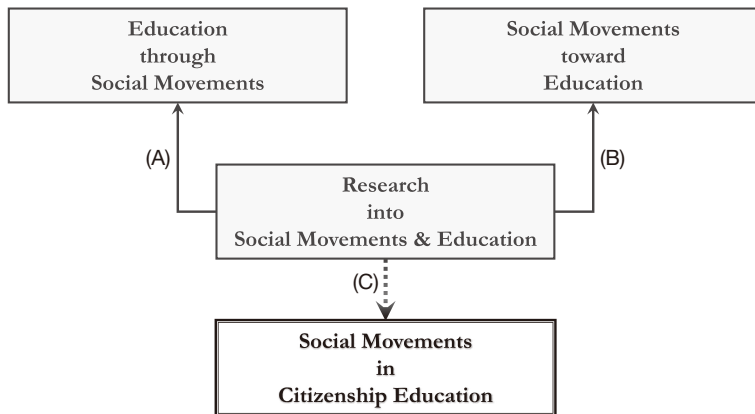


Figure 1. Research Approaches in the Study of Social Movements and Education

Notes: (A) and (B) represent dominant approaches in the existing literature, while (C) indicates the analytical approach adopted in this study.

Source: Created by the Author.

political impacts of social movements, and to encourage efforts to democratically overcome such conflicts. Given the contribution of learning social movements to citizenship education, this paper explores how social movements are/should be taught in school education and how they can be conceptualized in citizenship education.

When analyzing social movements in citizenship education, this paper pays particular attention to social studies education in Japan's junior high schools. Japan has experienced two educational policy changes and two serious social upheavals over the past decade (Matsuda 2022). First, the electoral reform was carried out in 2015 to lower the voting age. This reform has encouraged many schools (elementary, junior and senior high schools) to conduct citizenship education so that young people can acquire the necessary competencies to participate in voting. The government and many municipalities have supported these schools in a variety of ways. The second important change related to school education was the introduction of moral education as a special subject at elementary and junior high schools from 2018 and 2019 respectively, aiming to stimulate "thinking and discussing" by students. The competence of focusing on morality and thinking critically about social issues is seen as critical to active citizenship in democracy.

As for recent serious social upheavals, first, the past decade in Japan has been characterized by counter-democratic social movements, including those opposing the government's stance on post-earthquake nuclear energy policy, security and defense policy, and the right to collective self-defense. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan, as in other countries, was accompanied by social conflicts over how to respond to the pandemic. These social movements and pandemic have contributed to reconsidering conflict resolution, various forms of political participation and citizenship education. Given the current surge of interest in citizenship education, along with the recent social upheavals and the social conflicts that accompanied them, hence, Japan's citizenship education deserves to be analyzed with a view to its improvement.

Moreover, this paper examines social movements in Japan's citizenship education by focusing on social studies in junior high schools. Social studies is usually seen as central in citizenship education (Karaki 2017). The "compelling reason for the existence of social studies curricula is," Ochoa-Becker (1999: 338) avers, "to foster values and public practices that are consistent with democratic values." This contribution is especially significant for junior high school students. Junior high school education is expected to encourage students to "examine their values that they

acquired nonreflectively, early in their lives” (Ochoa-Becker 1999: 339). Turning to social studies curricula in Japan, those in elementary schools emphasize the relationship between students and their local communities while those in senior high schools focus on concrete national and social contexts (Okano and Kimura 2019). Thus, social studies curricula in junior high schools, positioned between elementary and senior high schools, are expected to serve as a bridge between local communities and national and social contexts (Okano and Kimura 2019). Moreover, since junior high school is part of Japan’s compulsory education system, all children are required to receive such social studies education. This ensures that all students at this age have opportunities to become familiar with knowledge of society and democracy and to think critically about their values and society. Since these learning opportunities are crucial for developing active citizens, and given that social movements constitute an important form of political participation, focusing on social studies education in junior high schools is relevant to the analysis of social movements in citizenship education.

3. Social Movements as a Component in Japan’s Education

The preceding section explains that social studies education in Japan’s junior high schools contributes to conceptualizing social movements in citizenship education. This section proceeds to examine the social studies curricula in Japan’s junior high schools and reveals how social movements are taught and learned through the curricula. The analysis here is based on an investigation into junior high school textbooks and official curriculum guidelines,¹⁾ as well as interviews with social studies teachers in Japan’s junior high schools.²⁾

Social studies education in Japan’s junior high schools is divided into three areas: geography, history, and civics. The curriculum is designed so that students study geography and history first, followed by civics. Social movements appear in several places in the history and civics textbooks. The history textbooks refer to social

1) The history section textbooks investigated are published by Nihon Bunkyo Shuppan (approved in 2024) and Kyoiku Shuppan (approved in 2020), while the civics textbooks investigated are published by Kyoiku Shuppan (approved in 2024) and Tokyo Shoseki (approved in 2020). The curriculum guidelines for junior high schools examined in this paper are for social studies, issued in 2017.

2) The interviews were conducted online with two teachers in July 2025. One has taught in Kitakyushu for about twenty years and now works as a manager in the School Personnel Division of the Kitakyushu City Board of Education. The other has worked in junior high schools in both Tokyo and Kitakyushu for about ten years.

movements when addressing issues such as economic disparities and discrimination against women and *Buraku* (historically marginalized communities in Japan); social movements are described as movements advocating the elimination of economic disparities and the liberation from these discriminations.

According to the official curriculum guidelines for social studies, social studies education in junior high schools aims at enabling students to acquire fundamental knowledge and basic skills, and fostering thinking skills, decision-making abilities and expressive skills for deeper learning. The treatment of social movements in the history section is seen to focus on the former aim of social studies education. Thus, a particular social movement in the history education is likely to be accompanied with the explanation of specific social conditions that are widely regarded, almost beyond doubt, as the underlying factors behind the social movement.

The other aim of social studies education in junior high schools, hence, is expected to be accomplished in the civics education. The civics education mentions social movements in case studies sections of textbooks, in which students are encouraged to think critically about particular issues in contemporary society. Social movements appear, for instance, when issues such as the LGBT discrimination and the refugee crisis are raised as a topic for study and discussion. In such treatment of social movements in the textbooks, emphasis is likely to be placed on the contents of these issues, rather than social movements as a form of political participation. Moreover, which issue is picked up as a case studied in a classroom depends on each teacher's interest, knowledge and skills; different teachers mention different issues, according to their interests, knowledge and skills. It is implied here that there are cases where social movements are scarcely addressed.

Despite the significance of social movements in citizenship education, to sum up, no direct references to their relevance to democracy are found in social studies education in Japan's junior high schools. Social movements are often emphasized merely as historical facts or mentioned only in passing as part of explanations of specific social issues. Moreover, how social issues are addressed is heavily influenced by the interests, knowledge, and skills of individual teachers. As a result, it becomes extremely difficult to critically examine social movements as a form of political participation in their own right.

4. Social Movements as a Concept in Citizenship Education

Given the difficulty in linking social movements to democracy in Japan's junior high

school education, this section explores ways to improve this linkage. Specifically, it scrutinizes how social movements can be conceptualized within the framework of citizenship education.

According to Rapoport (2010: 187), teachers often encounter difficulties in incorporating social movements into citizenship education curricula: they lack the confidence needed to translate their generally positive attitude toward education for contemporary citizenship into classroom practices; and they need more rigorous methodological, content, and curricular assistance to teach emerging types of citizenship. Thus, this section highlights two key concepts for designing citizenship education curricula that explicitly incorporate the relevance of social movements to democracy: “counter-socialization” and “social movement oriented citizenship” (SMOC).

Thinking critically about democracy entails reexamining the values students have acquired and shaped through socialization processes. A concept that deserves close attention in the process of value deconstruction is that of counter-socialization (Ochoa-Becker 1999; 2007). Counter-socialization “emphasizes questioning the validity of claims to truth” (Ochoa-Becker 2007: 23); since “there can be no justification for the continuation of socialization during the adolescent years,” students need to reassess their values acquired in earlier stages so that they can be expected to “contribute effectively to the issues of their day and to live a meaningful and active democratic life” (Ochoa-Becker 2007: 70, 67). School education, hence, has to balance socialization and counter-socialization.

“To counter-socialize,” Ochoa-Becker (1999: 339) stresses, “social studies teachers need to know their students well, focus on controversial issues, and make critical thinking and decision making a regular part of their teaching.” Such counter-socialization can be promoted by involving students in direct decision-making experiences.³⁾

Then, how can counter-socialization be incorporated into citizenship education curricula, particularly in Japan? Citizenship education in Japan tends to place much emphasis on voting in elections; many schools conduct mock elections and engage students in comparing candidates and parties to decide their voting behavior (Matsuda 2022). Given the variety of forms of democratic participation beyond voting,

3) Moreover, counter-socialization, which entails students reassessing their values, is crucial for innovation in a democratic society (Yoshida 2017). Through this process, students are encouraged to be open to new ideas and actions, which could help improve a society that might otherwise remain unchanged.

social movements should be regarded as a crucial component for promoting counter-socialization in citizenship education.

A way of conceptualization of social movements in citizenship education is described by focusing on the concept of SMOC (Edwards 2012), which is based on Westheimer and Kahne (2004)'s examination of citizenship. SMOC "not only encourages students to question a system's origins and whose voices are heard, but also to move to various forms of action"; particularly, it "centers on peaceful protest, proactive community involvement, participation in activities to support human rights, and support for protection of the environment" (Edwards 2012: 118). This concept of citizenship contributes to counter-socialization in school education, through involving students in reconsidering the forms of democratic participation and in deciding how to work for the betterment of society and the environment in democracy.

The empirical analysis by Edwards (2012) reveals that there is a positive and significant relationship between the development in students of SMOC and the extent to which teachers encourage discussion, promote an open classroom climate, and implement a social movement-oriented curriculum (see also Torney-Purta et al. 2008). What this research suggests is that, if classroom atmosphere, educational methods, and curriculum design are carefully considered, students' citizenship can be transformed, ultimately encouraging them to engage with social movements aimed at improving society and the environment (Edwards 2012).

How can such an educational approach be implemented? A possible answer is suggested in a study by Catalano (2013). This study, based on interviews with participants in the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, highlights their perceptions of economic disparities, collective action, social justice, and the possibility of social change. According to Catalano (2013), these perspectives could help students understand key elements of democratic participation and conflict resolution.

Such a focus on the perceptions of participants in social movements, however, is just one approach to social movements in citizenship education. The question of how to link social movements to democracy can also be discussed in terms of, for instance, the representations of social movements (Dunlop et al. 2021) and the roles of social movements in different institutional settings (Cornell and Grimes 2015). Moreover, Sakamoto et al. (2024) empirically reveal that negative evaluations of past social movements discourage citizens from engaging in various forms of political participation other than voting. This suggests that the framing of past social movements has a significant influence on citizens' willingness to participate in

democracy, not only through voting but also through participation in social movements, and that history education plays a key role in citizenship education since it inevitably deals with such framing.

Social studies education in Japan's junior high schools, as stated above, is divided into the three areas of geography, history, and civics, while insightful analyses have addressed how to connect these areas to develop citizenship education. Takemoto (2017) stresses, for instance, that the ultimate goal of history education is to illuminate the historical trajectories that have led to democracy, and demonstrates that learning about the process and impact of a particular past social movement that took place in an area near the students deepens their understanding of the movement's relevance to contemporary democracy and its connection to local history. Such knowledge acquired in history classes is expected to be deepened and expanded in the civics education that follows (Okano and Kimura 2019).⁴⁾

The question of how to conceptualize social movements in citizenship education, in sum, can be discussed by focusing on the concepts of counter-socialization and SMOC. Learning about social movements contributes to students' reexamining their values and deepening their understanding of democracy. A critical key in such a learning process is to focus on various aspects of social movements and their relevance to democracy. This implies that collaboration among different areas of social studies education in Japan's junior high schools warrants close attention for improving the citizenship education.

5. Social Movements as a Key to Citizenship Education Development

Given the more frequent and more active social movements in today's democratic countries, this paper explores how to conceptualize social movements in citizenship education so that citizens can successfully overcome social conflicts through democratic participation. Particular focus is placed on social studies education in Japan's junior high schools. Analyzing Japan's educational curricula, this paper emphasizes the concepts of counter-socialization and SMOC to improve citizenship education. It is proposed that closer attention should be paid to various aspects of social movements and their relevance to democracy, and that the areas of Japan's social studies education should collaborate more closely. This paper concludes by reflecting on the limitations of the analysis and suggesting a possible avenue for future im-

4) Social studies education in Japan's junior high schools is structured so that students first study geography and history, followed by civics.

provement.

One limitation of this paper's analysis is related to the technical difficulty of social studies curriculum design. This paper sees, for instance, linking the history section to civics section as useful to citizenship education development. In Japan's junior high school social studies curricula, however, students typically study geography and history in the first and second grades, and civics in the third grade. It is by no means easy to ensure collaboration between subject areas taught at different grade levels (Okano and Kimura 2019), and, hence, a great deal of effort is required to flexibly revise the curricula of social studies.

Another limitation is that no attention is given to the collaboration between social studies and other subjects (Matsuda 2022). Social movements, for instance, can be examined in moral education. In moral education, students are encouraged to think critically about the complexity of social issues, the inevitability of social conflicts, and the various forms of democratic participation in resolving such conflicts. *Tokkatsu* (Special Activities), which is peculiar to Japan's school education, is also seen as useful for helping students learn about the relevance of social movements to democracy. *Tokkatsu* provides various educational group activities intended to cultivate students' independent and practical attitudes, while enabling them to build effective groups and develop as individuals.⁵⁾ Through these activities, students are expected to experience the limitations of majority rule, explore the variety of methods of social choice, and learn the difficulty of consensus building. Such collaboration among multiple subjects contributes to the development of citizenship education; however, revising the curricula of different subjects is much more difficult than designing the collaboration among the different areas in the social studies curricula.⁶⁾

As a way to overcome these difficulties, emphasis here is placed on philosophical examination of democracy. Social movements in democracies, as stated above, usually result from the underrepresentation of particular voices, which implies the

5) MEXT (2018) "Basic Education in Japan" (https://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/brochure/title01/detail01/_jcsFiles/afiedfile/2018/10/09/1409899-01.pdf).

6) In addition to these difficulties in curriculum design, much attention needs to be paid to the actors involved in the process of citizenship education (Matsuda 2022). For instance, the working environments matter; teachers are now too busy to engage in new educational initiatives. The needs of students and their parents also affect the feasibility of curriculum revision for better citizenship education; as long as they prefer preparing for a senior high school entrance examination over the development of citizenship education, it is particularly difficult to implement any curriculum revision aimed at improving citizenship education. This implies that the development of citizenship education requires broad social support; for example, teachers, students, and their parents need to work together to achieve it.

limitation of representative democracy. Social movements can thus be seen as a key component of citizenship education, since learning about them helps students recognize the variety of forms of democratic participation and deepen their understanding of democracy. When designing citizenship education curricula, however, social movements need to be examined on the basis of the philosophy of democracy; unless each form of political participation, including social movements, is thoroughly scrutinized in terms of its relevance to democracy, it is impossible to logically incorporate the variety of democratic participation forms into citizenship education curricula. In this sense, social movements contribute to the development of citizenship education because they stimulate both pedagogical research into citizenship education curricula and philosophical inquiry into democracy. Recently, there have been many calls for active learning in citizenship education, which has encouraged educators to develop new teaching methods. At the same time, however, what should be kept in mind is the importance of a philosophical perspective on democracy and citizenship education.

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