
Introduction

Current Study on Career Education in Japan

This compilation deals with career education, which has become a particular focus of attention since the beginning of the 21st century, and related issues. We took up this topic in this Journal which deals with labor issues, because we recognize that the link between the education system and Japan's system for fostering human resources, which seemed to be functioning so effectively until this point, has become unstable, and that we are now in a realignment phase. The abundance of career education can be understood as a product of the changes in both the school education system and the labor market.

In Japan's post-war education system, junior and senior high schools began to take on career guidance based on Japanese labor practices, which will be mentioned later. This career guidance faced a variety of criticisms, the most representative of which was that rather than respecting students' interests and wishes, it leaned more toward working to allocate human resources. Be that as it may, although a variety of issues filled the first half of the 1990s, career guidance up until that point had contributed to making young people's transitions from school to work go more smoothly.

However, as Japan moved into the 1990s, the link between the education system and the labor market began to grow unstable. The papers compiled here are closely tied to this instability, which can be outlined as follows.

(1) The spread of individualization and diversification into the educational policies

The education policies began to move forward under the banner of individualization and diversification, and in career guidance, as well, individuals' wishes began to be prioritized over placing every student into any higher-level school available.

(2) Transformations in higher education policies and easier university entrance due to the declining birthrate

Transformations in higher education policies and the declining birthrate broadened opportunities for young people to continue on to university, a chance which until that point had been competitive. The prevalence of students entering university without a clear goal and postponing the decision of their future career until a later time increased, and universities were also put under pressure by this change.

(3) Changes in Japanese employment practices that had been the basis for career guidance

Starting in the mid 1990s, symptoms of a change started to materialize in Japanese employment practices, which until then had offered employees long-term, stable employment within the same company. At the head of this change, companies began to ease up on hiring new graduates. In Japan, however, where the mainstream practice is for companies to hire

new graduates all in one block, the inability to secure employment immediately after graduation leads to career instability thereafter. The result was an increase in the number of young people who were unable to find work in a stable job, even after graduation. The unemployment rate rose among young people, and there was an increase in the numbers of those who were jobless or who worked with the unstable employment status of “freeter.”

There was a call for measures to respond to these changes in the education system and the labor market, and career education can be seen as one of such response measures. So far, sufficient information on career education in Japan has not been provided to the international community. To this end, we have taken care in this compilation to present a concrete picture of Japan’s career education system.

Suwa’s paper examines the changes in Japanese employment practices upon which career education is based from a legal standpoint. Because the entity that has decided people’s careers has been the organization they belong to, an individual’s guarantee of a professional career and personal fulfillment through a professional career have not been sufficiently considered either in legal or pragmatic terms. Today, with the dramatic changes that are occurring in the employment environment, a call is being made for legal support to be extended to the various individuals who face difficulties in career development within a single organization. The “right to a career” is a valid legal concept but has little basis in positive law, and legal precedent is as yet undeveloped. However, the seeds of this concept can be seen to have sprouted in recent years’ revisions of the Human Resources Development Promotion Act, which is a move in the direction of securing career formation based on an individual’s professional career.

Fujita’s paper looks at the flow of career education, which was cited as a policy matter for the first time in the Central Education Council’s 1999 report, and related issues. Initial career education was not concerned with the transition from school to work alone, but also with resolving educational issues in the transition from compulsory education to high school and from high school to university, such as articulation between levels of schooling and mitigating the competition of entrance exams. However, along with the worsening employment conditions for young people, career education became keenly aware of the transition from school to work, and its character started to change into guidance that influenced young people’s perceptions of jobs. Moreover, the success of the Career Start Week campaign (a five-day work experience program implemented by junior high schools) from 2005 to 2008 led the schools to the misunderstanding that the true essence of career education was to implement such programs. Following this, in undertaking the policy of enhancing career education under the 2008 Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education, the Central Education Council’s Task Force on Career Education and Vocational Education stressed the importance of the ways of fostering “the basic and versatile competencies required for students from elementary and secondary schools through higher education in order to make a smooth transition into society and work,” and there has been a visible change in career edu-

cation from the formation of desirable job consciousness to the creation of job abilities.

Terasaki's paper is a case study on Toyama Prefecture's vanguard program "The Learning through Work Experience Program: The 14-Year-Old's Challenge," a program for junior high school students to experience life in the workplace (see also Fujita's paper for Career Start Week). The "14-Year-Old's Challenge" program began in 1999, and is a program for 14-year-old students in their second year of junior high school to go out into society and participate in five days of activities in local workplaces or to do social services or volunteer activities. The original purpose of these activities was not to make it easier for the students to choose a future job, but to allow them to experience different interpersonal relationships outside their schools. However, Terasaki's paper points out the issue that from the vantage point of this experience preparing students for their future jobs, there is a limit to what junior high schoolers can do, and as a result of this, all that the students are experiencing is unskilled labor or simple "helper" type activities. As can be seen in Fujita's paper, this paper also shows us the degree to which an aspect of career education, which originally began as an educational activity, has changed into an activity for getting students to form strong perceptions about jobs in their futures.

Mochizuki's paper looks at "guidance in ways of being and ways of living," a concept in career guidance that emerged in the 1990s and that is linked with career education in high schools with general education curriculums, which account for more than 70% of all high schools in Japan. "Guidance in ways of being and ways of living" aims to switch away from 1990s career guidance, which stressed feasibility, to guidance that emphasized individuality. According to surveys, "guidance in ways of being and ways of living" results in a more developed awareness of career paths in students who wish to continue on to college, ignites their aspirations to get into more selective universities, and allows them to be satisfied with their choices. However, Mochizuki also points out the issue that if they are only able to get into universities that are different than the ones they had chosen for themselves, they can easily become reluctant entrants, and this does not necessarily lead to their sufficient understanding of the self.

Uenishi's paper asserts that increasing proportion of students continuing on to university, decreasing graduate employment rates, and changes to the graduate recruitment process in corporations have given rise to the importance of university career education. Because of the increase in university advancement rate, university students have come to have many different levels of academic ability and graduates have lost their edge in the job search after graduation. The previously existing link between designated universities and specific companies has disappeared, and the Internet has become the focus of students' job search activities in the application and hiring processes. Companies do not seek students with specialized skills, but proactive and positive people with high levels of communication skills. However, as the selection criteria are ambiguous, students become confused and are at the mercy of their employment activities. In response to this situation, universities have begun to implement career education beginning from the first year of entrance. The greater variety

among the students has also given rise to students who do not study autonomously. Because of this, Uenishi describes, many universities have put their efforts into learning assistance, and the influence of career education has started to extend over a longer period of time, impacting even on the ordinary curriculum.

Career education has only just begun in Japan and it is not easy to evaluate it at the present time. Broadly speaking, in the midst of the worsening employment conditions for young people, career education which used to be a purely educational activity became regarded as a tool to smooth the transition from school to work. But presently, we may be seeing this swinging back toward an emphasis on original educational activities such as the formation of academic abilities. Whatever the case may be, we anticipate that career education in Japan will continue to develop from this point on.

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