

Japanese Italian Comparative Study on Teacher Training (1) : Teaching practice system in Japan from the Perspective of Italian Researchers

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Japanese–Italian Comparative Study on Teacher Training (1) : Teaching practice system in Japan from the Perspective of Italian Researchers

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to understand how teaching practice in Japan is seen from the perspective of Italian researchers. First, it is described an outline of the research project, which is a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) from the 2013 academic year, and is *Japanese–Italian Comparative Study on Teaching Practice under Globalization as the core of the Reform of Teacher Training Systems*. Next, it is explained the teaching practice used in the Faculty of Education at Shiga University, which was visited by the Italian researchers.

Lastly, it is included a report by the Italian researchers on the teaching practice. Direct observation of pupils and student teachers was conducted in two schools of the Shiga prefecture: Moriyama primary and Moriyamaminami secondary school on June 13th, 2014. Interviews with both student teachers and headmasters were held as well. On the 16th a meeting with the professors in charge for students' training in both primary and secondary school was organized at Shiga University and the Japanese school system and training education were presented.

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I. Introduction

Currently, as part of globalization, various Western and East Asian countries have shifted teacher training to the graduate school level in order to respond to the need to form a knowledge-based society and to respond to international economic competition. Especially in Europe, since the 1990s, countries participating in the Bologna Process have actively been restructuring their teacher training systems in order to build a “European Higher Education Area”, and individual universities have been increasing the sophistication of their teaching in order to survive in today’s internationally competitive society.

Under these circumstances, in Japan the Central Council for Education issued the *Report on Comprehensive Plans for Improving Teachers’ Abilities throughout Their Teaching Lives* (2012), and in response to the globalized 21st-century international community, it urgently recommended shifting teacher training to the graduate school level. However, while policy recommendations have been clarified, sufficient academic research has not been conducted in relation to the outcomes and challenges that come with these reforms.

Amongst the authors of this paper, Kawamura has analyzed the functions that teaching practice has played in teacher training up to now in Japan, and has shown that teaching practice in Japan does not stop at being a form of preparatory education in advance of students’ finding employment as teachers, but also is also important in the formation of competence throughout their teaching lives (Kawamura 2013). From this perspective, the reform of teacher training curricula within core teaching practice

programs is not simply to enhance the programs that train students to be educators, but also to create new educators, that is, to change educators, and therefore this reform must be understood more comprehensively.

Aware of the aforementioned challenges, the authors obtained a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) for the 2013 academic year and conducted the *Japanese–Italian Comparative Study on Teaching Practice under Globalization as the core of the Reform of Teacher Training Systems* (Grant No.: 25381282; Research Representative: Akira Kawamura). In this research project, we look at examples of European countries which are ahead of Japan in terms of implementing such reforms, with particular focus on Italy, in order to consider how teaching practice programs can be improved and what challenges lie in implementing such improvements within the context of the increasing globalization of education and the teaching profession. Teaching practice programs in Japan have emphasized practical skills that focus on the experience in school. In December 2015, the Central Council for Education issued a report titled *Improving the Competency of Teachers Carrying out School Education in the Future*, which advocated improved opportunities for students at the training stage who aspire to become teachers to experience actual teaching situations at schools and in teaching jobs. Thus, the teacher training system in Japan is progressing towards emphasizing more practical skills. On the other hand, in Italy, experience and theory through practice teaching and practice teaching reports are emphasized (Kurebayashi and Kawamura 2014), and there are differences in the direction of reform. As such, by investigating the Italian teacher training system,

which is following a different direction of teaching practice program reform under globalization, it is possible to relate these to programs in Japan.

International comparative studies have been conducted in Europe with regards to the state of teacher training systems in each country that is participating in the Bologna Process, including Italy (Ostinelli 2009). However, in Japan, only a small amount of information can be obtained from published research papers about past trends of teacher training in Italy, e.g., Koichiro Maenosono (Maenosono 2000) and Yasumasa Shinohara (Shinohara 2004). Moreover, although European teacher training systems under the Bologna Process are discussed by the Japan Association of Universities of Education (Nihon kyōiku daigaku kyōkai 2012) and Hidenori Miyazaki (Miyazaki 2012) et al., these discussions do not focus on trends in Italy. While the studies by Maenosono and Shinohara focus on the introduction of teacher training in Italy and Japan, teaching practice based on empirical data has not been sufficiently verified. Furthermore, even though they looked at research on teaching practice within Japan, their main focus is on practical skills¹⁾, and they did not thoroughly examine teaching practice from the perspective of globalization.

Therefore, in this present research project, in addition to clarifying the current conditions of and problems in teacher training systems focusing on teaching practice in Italy, we examine in detail what trainees are actually learning, comparing this with the situation in Japan. We also examine the state of teaching practice programs of high-level teacher training systems in the global society, and we investigate what kinds of educators are being trained²⁾. As such, three tasks were established.

① Interviews relating to the reform of teacher training systems and the reform of teaching practice systems.

② Fieldwork relating to actual teaching practice programs.

③ Questionnaires relating to the practical experiences of trainees.

Related to these tasks, we invited three Italian researchers who have collaborated on this research project to Japan. They were Silvana Mosca, coordinator of field survey in Italy for this project, and Elisa Corino and Miranda Mosca, who have supported field surveys.

On June 13th, 2014, they visited Moriyama Minami Junior High School and Moriyama Elementary School in Shiga Prefecture, conducted fieldwork on the state of third-year student trainees in the Faculty of Education at Shiga University, and conducted interviews with people such as school principals. On June 16th, they conducted interviews regarding Shiga University's teaching practice programs with professors in the Faculty of Education at Shiga University.

The Italian researchers' inspection regarding teaching practice in Japan would lead to understanding how teaching practice in Japan, a country dissimilar to their own, is seen from the perspective of these researchers and their background in the Italian system. By understanding how Japanese programs are viewed from the perspective of people from different cultures, we Japanese researchers of education can reevaluate our own positions and can highlight the characteristics of Japanese teaching practice. Part of the research process was the preparation of questionnaires relating to the practical experiences of trainees. These questionnaires are for international comparison surveys that focus on students who have

experienced teaching practice in Japan and in Italy. When jointly creating the items for the questionnaire, it was important not only that Japanese researchers deepen their understanding of Italian teaching practice programs, but that the Italian researchers understand the Japanese programs.

In the next chapter of this paper, I will introduce the teaching practice program at Shiga University. The third chapter is a report by the Italian researchers on teaching practice using Shiga University as an example. It contains some views regarding the introduction of practice programs, observation records regarding trainee classes, introduction of their conclusion focusing on trainees, and survey results.

II. Teaching Practice in the Faculty of Education at Shiga University

In response to the proposals from *The Future of National Teacher-Training Universities and Faculties* (November 2001) by the Advisory Panel on National Teacher-Training Universities and Faculties, teacher training universities and faculties have increased the amount of core field experience centered on teaching practice that trainees undertake.

As a background to this, there are, firstly, theoretical changes in teacher training. In the past, teachers have been considered technical experts who adapt acquired theories and techniques to school situations; but now, teachers are regarded as reflective practitioners who continue to learn throughout their lives.

Thus, teacher training universities and faculties have introduced curricula that emphasize reflecting on one's experiences in order to train teachers who can continue learning. Amidst these reforms, these universities and faculties have increased the amount of field

experience, such as teaching practice, that trainees undertake, and have raised the amount of opportunities that trainees have to integrate practice and theory.

In addition, it is necessary to train teachers to be effective team members capable of responding to problems that arise in complicated school sites. Current schools have various problems, such as class disruptions, bullying, accommodating children with special needs, etc. Therefore, in order to resolve and improve these tasks, it is necessary to train teachers who can be effective team members. As such, each teacher training university and faculty has been enhancing their on-site training programs.

Against this background, the Faculty of Education at Shiga University has been undergoing organizational reform of its teaching practicum since the 2005 academic year, and introduced a new "Educational Participation Curriculum" of teaching practice. The purpose of the program is to train teachers in acquiring practical skills based on the key phrase "educators who continue to practically develop in various situations". The program is structured in four stages: 1) for first-year students, practice related to teaching observation; 2) for second-year students, practice related to communication with pupils; 3) for third-year students, long-term basic practice for four to twelve months, including basic practical training, which is the main teaching practice; preliminary practice, which takes place before basic practical training; voluntary participation experience; and developing practice, which takes place after basic practice; and 4) for fourth-year students, practice for further development.

There are four characteristics of the Educational Participation Curriculum. The first is that it is a cumulative-style curriculum. As mentioned above, there are arrangements for

students to practice at school sites throughout their first to fourth years. The second is that students are required to have diverse educational experiences. Besides the basic practical courses in which they focus on methods of classes and classroom management, trainees participate in the planning of social education and experience voluntary participation in school support activities. The third is that it is a substantial support system. In each practicum, the staff of the teaching practice committee at Shiga University check the portfolios of each student's practicum and supervise them. In addition, the staff have established reflection meetings, consultation days, report meetings, etc., and have established many opportunities for students to reflect on their practicum. The fourth is that it emphasizes mutual exchanges among students through briefing sessions and web bulletin boards for each practice session. It is aimed at allowing students to build and inherit cultures of teaching practice.

The Faculty of Education at Shiga University, for its core Educational Participation Curriculum, has adopted a system to conduct teaching practice at university-affiliated schools, as well as at public elementary and junior high schools in Shiga Prefecture. The latter of these is called "regional practice", and is currently held in public elementary and junior high schools in Rittō city and Moriyama city. In principle, students will experience continuous on-the-job training at the same school from their first through to their fourth years of study and acquire the competence necessary to function as educators.

The length of basic practice for third-year students is four weeks in total, two weeks in June and two weeks in September, and is conducted as divided practice. Students perform various kinds of practical training at their designated schools in

their first and second years of study, and from April of their third year of study practice at the same school around once per week as school supporters, starting their basic practicum in June.

This visit by the Italian researchers corresponds to the start of basic practice in the context of the aforementioned stages of practical training. In the next chapter, they describe the Japanese teacher training system using Shiga University as an example, in addition to describing the form of the teaching practice that they observed.

III. Report on the research visit to Japan

1. Initial teacher training system in Japan: a case study of Shiga University

The training system is divided into two sectors: the discipline and the training.

The curriculum lasts four years (after senior high school); the fourth year is meant to get licenses and at the end – in July – there is an exam to get a job at a school.

Although based on the national system, the curriculum elaborated at Shiga University presents some peculiarities, such as the distribution of training hours in the four years.

The brochure of Shiga University states:

We aim to educate independent teachers by pairing theory and practical competence acquired through experiences outside the classroom. By autonomously participating in various activities, students learn the meaning of education and how to establish human relationships with children. In following this program of training and in realizing the didactic objectives of each project, students can grow as teachers who can actively continue research in any

situation.

In fact, the whole structure of the course develops according to a pyramid that provides for four progressive focuses:

I) feel as a teacher II) think as a teacher III) act as a teacher IV) research as a teacher

• **first year** is devoted to:

- understanding the training program by attending seminars and meetings;
- learning the importance of human rights (June-July);
- starting observative training in the second trimester (September- junior high school and possibly the school for children with special needs; October - kindergarten; November - primary);
- starting contacts with peers, pupils, teachers.

Observative training in the first year is devoted to school observation, with children and teachers, simulating the teachers' perspective. It usually takes place in classes in schools attached to the university.

• **second year** is devoted to:

- acquiring grounding knowledge for training (October-December). Draft a syllabus and lesson plan, materials for lessons, simulations. Verify the materials with teachers of the schools attached to University and discuss observations and advice;
- training: participate with other student teachers in events or activities of the school in order to interact and communicate with children and teachers (30 hours).

The focus theme of the second year is communication skills through interchange

training: the amount of commitment in training can increase with voluntary involvement. In this case it is development training dealing with helping teachers in class and in study activities.

• **third year** is devoted to:

- *Preliminary Training* dealing with grounding knowledge for lesson planning with reference to the knowledge acquired in the university classes. It is also possible to attend classes given by other student teachers. Preliminary training can be done from April to August (kindergarten) and from April to June (primary, junior high, or special needs);
- Training I, compulsory, student teachers actively teach in classes. It lasts four weeks - two in June and two in September for primary and secondary school.

The total amount of training hours in the four-year course is 120 hours, ten are active teaching; these hours can be distributed in different ways, according to the number of students and the host institutions.

It is compulsory to write a *Training report (I)* about the training experience (results and problems to be solved in the future), which should be submitted in November of the third year.

• **fourth year** is devoted to:

- Training II is meant to get a second qualification, besides the primary school license, for example for kindergarten (June - one week) or junior high (2-4 weeks), or special needs children (September - three weeks).

Students always have the chance to add

voluntary training experience:

- a) nursing experience (two days, also for special needs children) at 2nd or 3rd year, compulsory for the primary and junior high qualification;
- b) experience of voluntary participation (1st to 4th year - 30 hours);
- c) developmental training - interchange with peers, teachers, children (3rd year in October- 4th year in April, 30-60 hours).

1.1 Educational purposes of the teacher training program

During the meeting at Shiga University with the faculty member responsible for the training, the educational model was discussed with particular reference to the purposes and methodologies applied by the schools affiliated with the university.

One of the main educational purposes is to teach peace and friendship between nations, so the school has a partnership with a school in Australia.

One important principle to be considered is to avoid making pupils feel uneasy with too severe evaluations: Japanese children usually suffer from the authoritarianism of teachers and possible failures. Evaluation seems to be one of the most problematic questions, being an actual and increasing problem, as pupils who do not succeed tend to get stuck and to avoid contact with teachers.

As the following paragraphs highlight we did not observe any evaluation moment and we could not analyze the topic in depth.

2. Direct observation

We visited both a primary and a junior high school in the Shiga Prefecture.

The primary school also had an affiliated kindergarten, but we did not visit it.

The school year as well as the academic year starts in April and ends in March. Summer holidays are from the end of July to the end of August.

Schools usually open from Monday to Friday, from 8.30 to 15.30; classes last one hour, there is a break every two hours.

Many teachers stay at school long after this time to work and prepare their materials.

2.1 Training activities observed at Moriyama Minami Junior High School in Shiga

The observation took place on the 13th from 9 to 11, in three classes (social studies, English, and Japanese language); and we observed only parts of each class.

The classrooms had glass walls on the corridor side, each pupil had his bag on the floor, some of them had a towel pinched on the back of their seat. In the classroom there were helmets hanging on the wall.

Desks were generally arranged in rows, one separated from the other. The teacher's desk was placed on a stage with a double blackboard behind it.

During the first class – Japanese language – pupils were asked to take notes and sum up pieces of information in an e-mail. The student teacher was teaching alone in the classroom. He went down from the stage and passed through the desks to control and advise pupils, who were allowed to consult among themselves.

The task proposed to the pupils and the explanation seemed clear and they knew what

they had to do. Despite the fact that pupils were allowed to interact, the student teacher was able to keep order and the situation was under his control.

During the second class – English language – the desks were first arranged in groups, suggesting that pupils are used to some group work, but they were soon rearranged in the original position, one separated from the other. The student teacher stood on the stage and never came down. The class teacher was also present in the class, but she did not intervene and stayed in the background helping some pupils. There were some grammar notes on the board, different elements were marked by different colors and each word had its corresponding Japanese translation. The language of communication was Japanese; pupils were asked questions which they translated before answering them. The approach of the student teacher seemed to have the features of a traditional grammar-translation method rather than a communicative one.

During the third class – social studies – the main topic involved ancient Chinese history. The student teacher had a map of the class with the name of each pupil and his/her place. Pupils were asked to fill in the blanks of a cloze exercise. The interaction between the student teacher and the class was lively; the student teacher came down from the stage, he made jokes and used a lot of body language asking questions, pupils were at their ease and they gave answers participating actively. The student teacher passed through the desks controlling the pupils' work but he did not intervene to correct it.

Another student teacher was at the lesson and was taking observation notes.

The attitude of the student teachers was

generally very positive; they were all really committed to their job. Sometimes, especially during the Japanese and the English lessons, pupils might have required some more feedback by the student teacher, as he/she did not really verify comprehension and never asked if pupils had caught the topic or had difficulties with it. But the observation time was very limited, so it is just a partial feeling.

2.1.1 Interviews with student teachers at Moriyama Minami Junior High School in Shiga

The headmaster and his assistant presented the school referring to the school website.

Eight third-year student teachers were present at the interview. They were extremely proud of their role as teachers. One of their recurring motivations for being a teacher was the utility of this job, displaying their enthusiasm and a certain social status the position brings about.

Some of the major issues which emerged during the interview were dealing with discipline and conflict management, especially during the morning pre-school meetings. Students seemed to be rather worried about their competence in handling difficult behaviors and enforcing discipline. For instance, one of them noticed how difficult it was to avoid shouting.

The focus of the students' difficulties, but at the same time of their motivations, was the personal relationship with their pupils. Few of them declared to have problems in writing lesson plans (which they always discuss with the class teacher) and scheduling their work, but all of them mentioned communication and interaction skills.

This is particularly significant as it highlights the possible wants of the students—what they feel to lack. The focus on

personal interaction and the increasing attention devoted to the psychological implications of the educational relationship between teacher and pupil was confirmed by the headmaster in charge of the training: successful pupils are motivated by their teachers and praised for their achievements rather than criticized for their failures and mistakes.

2.2 Training activities observed at Moriyama Elementary School

The visit took place from 12 to 16.30 on June 13th. The assistant headmaster gave us a warm welcome in the hall and brought us to the headmaster. Right from the beginning we felt welcome; the assistant headmaster was communicative and generous in explaining the school's organization.

When we arrived, the headmaster had a series of cups in front of him containing the food pupils were going to eat at the school canteen: according to the rules the headmaster and teachers have to taste food first to prove quality. The menu was presented and we were given information about lunch rules; we ate the same food as the children did. This was much appreciated by us, because we could really know everyday school life.

Children usually have lunch in their classrooms; moving walls are removed to widen the room. In the corridor there are wash basins where children can wash dishes, which are then put on trolleys. After lunch the children usually relax and play (they also danced in a sort of theatre room), then they themselves (if fifth grade or junior high school) tidy up corridors and classrooms with vacuum cleaner and floor clothes. Lessons start after 14.30 again.

The environment was colorful and lively, for some aspects very similar to Italian schools, with

drawings, posters and didactic tables hanging on the walls. There is also a school swimming pool.

We observed five classes: science (sixth grade), arts and crafts, Japanese language, and math.

The first class took place in the science lab, – which was very well equipped, and both the student teacher and the class teacher were present. Unfortunately lab instruments were not used and the lesson was based on the textbook. The student teacher wrote some keywords on the blackboard which pupils copied in their notebooks. He seemed to stick to the book, as he was holding it and asked children to open theirs to the same page. The student teacher was not really communicative and it was the class teacher who passed through the tables and helped pupils to find the right page.

During the arts and crafts class the student teacher was active and communicative and so were the children, but the class teacher intervened in helping to organize the activity, probably because the class was quite large, as there were 38 pupils.

In a second-grade class we observed a morphology lesson of Japanese language, where the student teacher was organizing a game to highlight Japanese compounds (kana + kanji). It was a difficult topic which required some big efforts and some children had comprehension difficulties but the student teacher was patient and respected the children's needs and timing, although she had some trouble in handling the situation, especially with a child with learning disabilities.

We also observed a math class in the first grade, where the student teacher explained how to add numbers. Children had just played a game with balls to understand the process of adding units. The topic was particularly difficult because it concerned addition and subtraction even with

the result equal to 0 (zero).

Since children seemed to have difficulties and the explanations of the student teacher were unsuccessful, the class teacher intervened to mediate comprehension with gestures of fingers.

We again went to a second-grade class. Children were working with dictionaries looking for idioms. It was the last day of the student teacher so pupils gave him a self-made book (consisting of stories and drawings made by each of them) which they had prepared for him as a present. The children hugged the student teacher and took pictures with him, showing their affection.

Lastly we visited the room for children with special needs and we were told how it is used. Children who have behavioral issues can stay in the regular classroom, but they are brought to the “special” room if they need to avoid the confusion of the classroom. Some of them always have lessons in the separate room.

We did not observe any evaluation situation; but, as we understood from the interviews with students, evaluation of special needs pupils by student teachers is not encouraged.

2.2.1 Interviews with student teachers

After the school visit we interviewed student teachers together with teachers and headmasters.

Here some questions and answers are reported.

D1 Why did you choose to become a teacher?

- In my family there are many teachers.
- I like children (my parents are teachers and I can ask them advice).

- I like children and I respect teachers for their important role. The teachers I had as a pupil were nice.
- I was advised by my high school teachers, they were good teachers so I decided to become a teacher myself.
- The same as my colleagues. I like children. It is a difficult job but I can learn from the children.
- For the satisfaction of making children learn something.

D2 Have you had any difficulties in your training and did university help you?

- We practiced at university but not with children. Practicing at university is not the same as being at schools. I was scared of going to classes and I felt uncertain.

D3 Do you have to write a report of the training?

- (teachers) There are guidelines. They write their lesson plan every day and take notes in their note books. After four weeks they write a short report (3 pages).

D4 What have you learned at the end of your training in June?

- How to be a leader.
- We all think the same thing: communication with children.
- To manage a class.

D5 During your training did you need to change your plans?

- Yes, time was not enough to do everything.

3. Conclusions

The visits to schools, the meetings with the professors responsible for the training, and the interviews with the trainees were full of information and really important to understand some essential features of the Japanese teacher training model.

Unlike the Italian system, the Japanese model seems to set fundamental importance to the teaching of communication techniques between trainees and pupils, whereas less importance is given to lesson design practices and the analysis of the teaching experience.

The trainees' class tutor gives them instructions on what and how the trainees should teach. In Italy, student teachers act according to the guidelines of the class teacher, but they are also supported by other experienced teachers who work part-time at a university center (USCOT) especially devised for teacher training purposes. (Currently, the center exists for primary school only.) One of the objectives of the trainees is to bring new ideas and innovations suggested by the educational research of university teachers (for the theoretical part) and their training tutors (for the methodological part and teaching materials).

During our visit, we really appreciated that Japanese trainees have shown a lively conviction of the social value of the teaching profession, which is not the case in Italy.

A topic that would be interesting for further investigation is the evaluation (assessment) of the training referred to the objective assessment, which is a quite popular topic in Italy these days.

As an output of the visit, we commonly drafted a first version of a questionnaire that is to be applied to student teachers in Italy and Japan. An articulated comparison will be possible only after this part of the survey. It will be very interesting to take cues for the improvement of the training system in both countries.

Notes:

1) Among papers relating to the development of practical skills and the use of portfolios of students' practice in teaching practice are the following: Himeno, K. "Dankaiteki kyōiku jissū niyoru kyōshoku shibō gakusei no seichōkan no henyō" *Akita daigaku kyōiku bunka gakubu kyōiku jissen kenkyū kiyō*, 32, 153-165, 2010; Yamazaki, M. "Kyōiku jissū ni okeru gakusei no kyōiku jissenryoku ni tsuiteno ishiki ni kansuru kōsatsu" *Okayama daigaku kyōiku jissen sōgō center kiyō*, 10, 81-86, 2010

Furthermore, several other studies have been conducted since the beginning of this research project. These include: Besso, J., Nagasawa, N. "Shōgakkō kyōin yōsei standard ni motozuku jissū tōtatsu kijyun kara toraeta jissū kōka: Jicchī kyōiku IV (shōgakkō kyōiku jissū) ni okeru tanisū zōka no kōka nitsuite" *Hyogo kyōiku daigaku kenkyū kiyō*, 49, 131-141, 2016

2) The research results of the present research project are in Kawamura, A. "Kaikakuki ni aru itaria no shō/chūgakkō kyōin yōsei" *Kansai kokusai daigaku kyōiku sōgō kenkyū sōsho*, 8, 1-13, 2015

In addition, research results related to this project can be found in Kurebayashi, op.cit.

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Appendix: The members of Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) 2013–16 *Japanese–Italian Comparative Study on Teaching Practice under Globalization as the core of the Reform of Teacher Training Systems* (Grant No.: 25381282; Research Representative: Akira Kawamura) are Nobuyuki Kurebayashi (Professor, Faculty of Education, Tokoha University) and Tetsuya Hasegawa (Associate Professor, Center for