

# Teaching for the possibility of Ignorant Citizen in the Context of Education in Japan

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## Abstract

Inspired by Gert Biesta's insightful category of ignorant citizen and pedagogy of interruption, I will discuss about the possibility of introducing these categories to citizenship education in Japan. The Structure of my paper consists of 4 parts. First, I will discuss about the social structure of education in post-WW2 Japan. Second, I would like to examine the transformation of post-WW2 system in Japan and refer to the shift to the political and refer to the significance of the category of Biesta's ignorant citizen. Third, based in the context mentioned above I would like to make it clarify how Biesta poses the rediscovery of teaching. Fourth, I would like to make some comments to Biesta's presentation (Biesta 2018).

## 1. Social structure of education in post -WW2 Japan

In the first part of this paper I will discuss about the social structure of education in post -WW2 Japan.

Enrollment in upper secondary schools (high school for fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds in Japan) has risen from 50 percent in 1960 to over 80 percent in 1970, and to over 95 percent after the 1990s. Thus as Japan prospered economically, public upper secondary schools accommodated nearly all potential students in Japan. In the post-Cold War era, the social structure of education in Japan attained maturity. I believe the time is now ripe for citizenship education.

As for the structural changes in school curriculums, there are four epochs in post-WWII Japan.

First, the era of progressivism (1945–1958) saw the predominance of problem-

solving curriculums and waning of government regulation. Second, from 1958 to 1992, systematic principles and discipline-centered curriculums were dominant, and government regulation was enforced. Third, during the “pressure-free education” (yutori) period (1992–2008), the Japanese government reintroduced a problem-solving curriculum, and government regulation was partly relaxed. And fourth, the “post-pressure-free education” period, from 2009 to the present, is of particular interest, because citizenship education through curriculum innovation is required to overcome the dichotomy between the discipline-centered curriculums of the development era and the problem-solving curriculums of the current pressure-free education era.

So I think citizenship education in Japan is introduced in the very political context after the cold war era.

## 2. Shift to the political

So the question is that what is the specific structural change in the Post-Cold War era. In the second part of my presentation I will answer to this question.

In 2015 the voting age for national and local government elections was lowered to 18 from 20, starting with the upper house election in the summer of 2016. This means that eighteen years old high school students can cast their own vote for government election. It is a historical change in Japan.

In Japan, students had been sheltered from broader social and political movements and circumstances and, therefore, had not had sufficient opportunity to be active participants in the experiment of democracy. However, followed by the lowering of voting age to 18, Japanese government began to introduce a new type of political education, and many public schools are now trying to implement the education of political literacy focusing on the controversial issues, and mock election. This is a paradigm shift of political education from the sheltered system to the early exposure system.

Gert Biesta emphasizes this early exposure system by introducing the category of ignorant citizen. “The ignorant citizen is the one who is ignorant of a particular definition of what he or she is supposed to be as a “good citizen.” The ignorant citizen is the one who, in a sense, refuses this knowledge and, through this, refuses to be domesticated, refuses to be pinned down in a predetermined civic identity. This does not mean that the ignorant citizen is completely “out of order”.”(Biesta 2011:97)

Biesta challenges the traditional idea that it is possible to have a model for a good

citizen. Rather citizenship education must draw from various sources, especially practical experience, to effectively influence young individuals in becoming active citizens. According to Biesta, the ignorant citizen is a key category to break through the traditional idea of citizenship. “Learning here is not about the acquisition of knowledge, skills, competencies or dispositions but has to do with an ‘exposure’ to and engagement with the experiment of democracy. It is this very engagement that is subjectifying.”(Biesta 2011:97) It seems that Biesta’s “ignorant citizen” is like citizen as cocreator, which Harry Boyte(Boyte 2004:92), citizenship theorist in US, or Hannah Arendt’s natality, that means a beginning that conserves the world as new, and prevents it from being ruined.(Arendt 1958, Kodama 2006)

### **3. The condition of teaching beyond traditional idea of citizenship**

Then I’d like to make it clear that in Biesta’s theoretical framework what is the unique characteristics of rediscovery of teaching different from other two models. According to Biesta there is a kind of binary constructions of options, the first is the authoritarian and traditional forms of teaching, and second is the abolition of teaching and a turn towards learning. Then Biesta tries to pose the third option that focuses on the reconstruction of teaching along progressive line. In this section I will overview the Biesta’s formulation on these three options.(Biesta 2018)

At the first option, the authoritarian and traditional forms of teaching, teacher speaks and control students, then students are supposed to listen and absorb information.

At the second option, teacher only exists as a facilitator of autonomous learning processes. Such a learner-centered approach could be explained as the image of the robot vacuum cleaner. Like robot vacuum cleaner learners adapt to their environment in an intelligent way without any intervention from the outside, without any direct intervention from a teacher. Signification of the world by learner is, as Levinas criticizes, assumed to be an act of accomplishment by pre-existence of the ego-logical self.

A third option focuses on the reconstruction of teaching along progressive lines which is missing in both the first and second option. By introducing Levinas, Biesta redefines the role of the teacher as interlocutor. From this point of view, Signification is not an ego-logical accomplishment, but it derives its sense from the event or an encounter with another being, and Other does not appear as object of signification, but as interlocutor. Here the account of teaching is not aimed at control, at the exercise of power and the establishment of an order in which student can only exist as object, but rather

calls for the subject-ness of student by interrupting its egocentrism.

For example, in September 2018, 6th grade elementary school students from Kijima Daira elementary school in Nagano prefecture came to the University of Tokyo and made presentation of their results of comprehensive learning to University of Tokyo students. This scene could be regarded as a typical example of learner-centered model which is popular among active learning boom. But different from TED, the role of lecturer and listener is not fixed, and every participant was talking, explaining, and questioning with each other, and different from robot vacuum cleaner, students were not existing as an ego-logical self. They are interrupted from the outside of their own community, and exposed to other community and other public world. I think it is this point that Biesta's model of citizenship education as focusing on ignorant citizen encounters his rediscovery of teaching.

#### 4. Some comments

At the last section I will pose some comments to Biesta's presentation.

My first comment is who takes an initiative of interruption. According to Levinas in the moment of interruption consciousness is challenged by the face. So subject-ness as an ignorant citizen is challenged and decentered in response to Other, so initiative is not taken by subject, but by other person. On the other hand as Biesta wrote in other article (Biesta 2015), Hannah Arendt says that initiative is a key category for the beginning and renewing of the public world. So in the Arendtian view point only under the condition of plurality where action is to be understood as a combination of initiatives it is possible for everyone to act as citizens. So there is an issue of who takes an initiative at the pedagogy of interruption.

Inspired by Jacques Rancière, Biesta poses the category of teaching as dissensus. According to Biesta the idea of teaching as dissensus can be said to interrupt a logic of child's development or student growth. If so, teaching as dissensus can be understood as an example of a breakthrough of pedagogy of interruption which has a kind of problem of the subject of taking initiative. In teaching as dissensus, who takes an initiative is no longer a major problem. Rather, the problem is the heterogeneity inherent in each beginning.

Levinas tends to privilege the precedent nature of others. In contrast, Arendt tends to privilege the precedent nature of subject with initiatives. The criticism of "imperialism" of the self, brought up by Biesta, and its decentralization are going to get over these

privileges, and it is at this point that teaching as dissensus and the idea of ignorant citizen encounter with each other.

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