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On the Political Nature of Political Education: The Characteristics of the German Approach from a Japanese Perspective

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Abstract

In the field of Japanese educational studies, there are two somewhat vague and opposing perceptions of German political education. While some researchers see these educational initiatives as an effort by educational institutions to maintain a democratic system, others point out the danger of government control over political thought. There is also the view that it is undesirable for education to become involved in politics. This diversity of opinion on political education is not limited to Japan.

It is important to note that these conflicting understandings also exist in Germany. Political education is an idea that is extremely broad in scope and not limited to school education. Even when the focus is narrowed down to schools, the relationship to a new type of activity called democracy pedagogy, which is sometimes included in the broader concept of political education, is complex. Within the narrow definition of political education, there has been and continue to be a variety of approaches associated with different political ideas, such as conservative and progressive, and different educational theories. Moreover, the recent spread of right-wing extremism has highlighted differences in approaches to political education.

It is therefore inaccurate to assume that the existence of a political and pedagogical consensus in Germany on the nature of political education makes such activities possible. This misunderstanding stems from the assumption that the political neutrality of education must be protected at all costs, regardless of the lack of clear criteria for judging it. The German example shows that political education does not depend on a consensus about its content, but rather on the recognition that it is essential for the maintenance of a democratic system. Consequently, political education for democracy is always open to political controversy.

Key words: Beutelsbacher Konsens, critical political education, Demokratiepädagogik, political

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neutrality, right-wing extremism

Introduction

The present study focuses on political education (*politische Bildung*) in Germany with the objective of deliberating on the role of education, particularly school education, in sustaining a democratic system[1]. It is important to note that the intention of the author is not merely to emulate the German model. Rather, the study seeks to illuminate the nexus between democracy and education by analyzing the distinctive features of political education in Germany, and to underscore issues that frequently elude Japanese educational researchers.

The findings of this paper are likely to be of significance to the studies of education in countries other than Japan. Regarding political education, which developed in Germany after the war, it is probably not well known in the field of education in other countries, apart from neighboring countries such as Austria. The number of English-language publications on this topic is relatively small, and many of the existing papers have been written by researchers in fields other than education, such as history, politics, and linguistics[2].

It is evident that articles written in languages other than English and German may also present challenges for the author in terms of accessibility. In light of this understanding, the present paper does not aspire to offer immediately applicable insights derived from German political education. Rather, its objective is to establish a reference model for analogous research endeavors in other nations. To this end, the paper presents the views of the author, who has been conducting research within the Japanese academic

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[1] In this paper, the term "democracy" is used to refer to liberal democracy. The difference between democracy and liberal democracy is important in today's world, where right-wing populism is attracting support by advocating (non-liberal) democracy, but in the context of Japanese educational studies, liberal democracy has effectively been referred to as democracy, so in this paper, the term "democracy" is used in accordance with academic conventions.

[2] For example, see Roberts, Geoffrey, K. (2002), *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 55, Issue 3, pp. 556-568; Cavalli, Alessandro (2019), Political Education in Germany, *The Federalist Debate*, [https://www.federalist-debate.org/archive/year-xxxii-number-3-november-2019/comments/political-education-in-germany]; Zagelmeyer, Stefan (2022), Varieties of political education: A taxonomy of political education approaches in higher education based on a journey through time in Germany (1701-2021), *IHRMI Discussion Paper,* 2022/02, pp. 1-24; Yu, Junyi (2022), The Enlightenment of the Development of Citizenship Education in Germany to the Promotion of Ideological and Political Education in China, *International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics*, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 317-323. There is also a publication in Japanese, edited by specialists in applied linguistics, as follows. Najima, Yoshinao & Yasuko Kanda eds. (2020), *Uyokupopyurizumuni kosuru shiminseikyoiku: Doitsuno seijikyoikuni manabu* (*Citizenship education to resist right-wing populism: Learning from German political education*), Akashi Shoten.

community.

The Distance to German Political Education

The initial observation to be made is the recognition that there is a paucity of Japanese-language research on political education in Germany.

To begin with, while many educational researchers and teachers in Japan recognize the value of democracy, they have not been actively committed to it. Engagement in education for democracy can easily lead to involvement in real political conflicts. This kind of anxiety has also had a discouraging effect on research on educational efforts for democracy in other countries.

On the other hand, there has been a remarkable interest in German education in Japan since before World War I, and there are many examples of the translation and introduction of the works of prominent educational scholars, including many that contain content related to political education. There are also a few studies that use the term "political education" in their titles[3].

However, following the 1960s, despite the establishment of chairs of political education at universities across Germany (Sander 2014: 19), this trend did not attract much attention in Japan. A few researchers who have studied education with an awareness of the importance of democracy have focused on schools and educational thought in the United States. Conversely, Germany, with its negative image of Nazism, anticommunism in the West and communism in the East, remained outside their purview[4].

This is not the sole rationale. Despite the facts that German history education, which is recognized for the considerable effort it has made to overcome the past, has attracted attention in Japan, and that political education in a broad sense, including modern and contemporary history education, has attracted the attention of historians and political scientists, educational researchers have been reluctant to pursue it. German political education is particularly challenging for educational researchers to handle, and this can

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[3] For example, Fujisawa, Hoei (1978), *Gendaidoitsu seijikyoikushi* (*A History of Political Education in Modern Germany*), Shinhyoron; Miyano, Yasuharu (2014), *Seijikyoiku to minshushugi (Political Education and Democracy*), Chisenshobo, etc.

[4] In a book published in 2024, Ian Bremmer commented to a Japanese interviewer that in today's world, some people want to create a democracy like Japan or Germany, but no one wants to become like the United States. This suggests that the understanding and evaluation of the United States and democracy in the Japanese field of educational studies is facing a significant challenge. (Bremmer, Ian (2024), Daisanjisekaitaisen eno kiki (The threat of World War III), in Ohno, Kazumto et al. eds., *Minshushugino kiki* (*Crisis of democracy*), Asahishimbunshuppan, p. 36.)

be seen from the following two points.

Firstly, the German term "politische Bildung" refers to a wide range of educational activities. When trying to translate this term into English, several possibilities come to mind, such as political education, civic education, and even citizenship education.

In fact, it includes a wide variety of adult education, while also emphasizing the teaching of subjects such as social studies and political science in schools. When we look at school education, there are individual programs for each type of school in each state. When taking a broader view, there is also a national organization such as the Federal Agency for Civic Education. This complicated structure poses difficulties for Japanese educational researchers, who are used to developing research by focusing on specific objects.

The complexity of political education in Germany is also noted by researchers in that country. In the *Lexikon der politischen Bildung,* published in 1999, Peter Massing already wrote that "there is no generally accepted definition of political education" (Massing 1999: 185). Ten years later, Wolfgang Sander stated that political education is "a term commonly used in German-speaking countries and refers to learning opportunities provided with the educational aim of developing political skills and knowledge" (Sander 2009). According to this definition, processes in which political skills and knowledge are learned in an environment without the intention of educators are excluded from political education. However, when deciding how to teach in school, for example, it is necessary to understand the situation of the students, and this is nothing other than the result of unintentional learning. Sander's definition suggests not only the activities included in the concept of political education, but in fact a variety of related phenomena that go beyond it.

A further issue arises from the characteristics of German education research in Japan, where there is a prevailing practice of interpreting the German terms "*Bildung*" and "*Erziehung*" as discrete activities. Specifically, Bildung is frequently translated as "*toya*" (which translates to "cultivation" or "formation"). However, the various activities classified as "politische Bildung" encompass some that are more aptly designated as Erziehung. This descrepancy poses a significant challenge to education researchers, a problem that is not faced by historians or political scientists.

As mentioned below, the author acknowledges the importance of using the term "toya", but has also suggested translating "politische Bildung" as political "*kyoiku*" (education). This proposal is based on two factors. Firstly, the term "toya" is used infrequently in contemporary discourse. Secondly, there is a necessity to revise our conceptualization of the term "political education."

It is first essential to ascertain the existence of the expression "*politische Erziehung*." Prior to and following the war, the term was frequently utilized, as evidenced by a paper authored by W. Flitner in 1955, where the terms are used together in the form of "*politische Erziehung und Bildung*" (Flitner 1955). At the same time, he differentiates between the terms Erziehung and Bildung, using the former to refer to educational initiatives within the school system and the latter to refer to the process by which individual learners achieve political knowledge and character formation. Moreover, the title of the paper exclusively utilizes "politische Erziehung," thereby implying that Erziehung held a more predominant status in comparison to Bildung at the time.

However, the entry for "politische Erziehung" is not included in the *Lexikon der politischen Bildung* published in 1999[5]. Notably, Peter Massing, the author of the entry for "politische Bildung," asserts that in democratic countries, these two concepts form a continuum (Massing 1999: 186). This comment suggests an understanding that, although these two activities are certainly different, there is no need to emphasize the differences between them. The difference between Flitner's use of the term "Erziehung" in the title of his paper and the use of "Bildung" in the entry in the *Lexikon der politischen Bildung* suggests that, over the course of half a century, the former's image of the exercise of vertical authority was rejected. Instead, the importance of supporting the political maturation of learners while also considering learning outside of school was recognized. As stated above, the author believes that there is sufficient validity in referring to both Bildung and Erziehung as "kyoiku" without distinguishing between them. However, there is also validity in using the word "toya," and it cannot be denied that this has caused some confusion for Japanese researchers observing German education.

The delicate relationship to democratic education

In this section, the relationship to so-called democratic education will be examined to clarify the outline of political education. In Japan, the term "political education" has a negative connotation of political indoctrination, and it was not used for a long time. In contrast, the term "democratic education" has a somewhat innovative ring to it, and it has been commonly used. In Germany, it could be argued that political education emerged first with democratic education following suit to complement it. While the Deutsche Vereinigung für Politische Bildung (DVPB) has been active since 1965, the Deutsche

[5] To be precise, the entry "Politische Erziehung in der DDR (Political Education in GDR)" does exist.

Gesellschaft für Demokratiepädagogik was established in 2005[6]. Despite the common goal of promoting education for democracy, the following differences in awareness of issues can be observed[7].

Firstly, the objective of political education is to preserve a democratic system, or more precisely, a liberal-democratic system. It fosters comprehension of actual politics among citizens, equipping them with the capacity to act in accordance with their understanding. In contrast, democratic education underscores the cultivation of a democratic culture through the experience of life within a democratic community. In the context of school education, the former places significant emphasis on subjects related to politics, while the latter places value on extracurricular activities such as student councils. This discrepancy in educational approaches suggests that democratic education may be founded on the belief that political education places excessive emphasis on social science-based knowledge, potentially overlooking the significance of experiential learning for students.

The latter approach is readily comprehensible to numerous Japanese pedagogues, who are influenced by empiricism. There is also no doubt that political education has historically pursued the acquisition of accurate knowledge rather than experience. For example, DVPB's declaration in 2020 underscores the significance of competencies to observe, judge, and act (Deutsche Vereinigung für Politische Bildung 2020).

The most important point to consider is that this pedagogical approach is firmly grounded in academic theory. There has long been a distinction between political learning and social learning.

According to the above-mentioned lexicon, the latter "aims at promoting the recognition and understanding of various emotions and social relationships, and at acquiring social competence" (Hoppe 1999: 235f.). Sibylle Reinhardt offers examples of this competence, including "helping others," "treating everyone equally," and "caring about others" (Reinhardt 2009: 121).

In contrast, political learning is defined as "a process in which individuals or groups actively transform their knowledge, ideas, and possibilities for action regarding public affairs through various repeated experiences." (von Olberg 1999: 203) The important thing is that what is being asked are knowledge and ways of thinking about "public

[6] From 2002 to 2007, before the activities of this association began, the federal government and 13 state governments worked together to promote the BLK-Programm - Demokratie lernen & leben.

[7] The following description of the difference between political education and democracy education is based on a handbook for schools in Hamburg. Landesinstitut für Lehrerbildung und Schulentwicklung (2020), *Positioniert euch! Was politische Bildung darf*, Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg, pp. 15-16.

matters". Private matters are not included in the category of political learning unless they are interpreted as public matters.

In this regard, Sibylle Reinhardt states that "private space, where many experiences are shared, and differences can be easily tolerated" and "public space of democratic politics" are different things. According to her, what characterizes the public space of democratic politics is the struggles over decisions, and it is important to recognize that "struggles are neither avoidable nor harmful but are appropriate in terms of the equal respect of diverse members" (Reinhardt 2009: 122).

Furthermore, based on the results of a large-scale survey conducted in Saxony-Anhalt in 2000, she points out the problem that many students have acquired social competence, but this has not led to political learning (Reinhardt 2009: 121). While many students recognize the value of helping others and treating everyone fairly, they perceive conflicts of interest as a threat to the common good. According to Reinhardt, this suggests a lack of understanding of democratic principles.

The findings of such empirical research must be carefully considered in terms of their generalizability. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that social learning may not inherently lead to political learning. It could be argued that the basis of political education is predicated on the understanding that there are limits to what can be learned from experience in a life of democracy.

Contemporary Issues

So far, two key characteristics of political education in Germany have been identified. Specifically, they are its comprehensive nature and its emphasis on recognizing political issues. These elements are not currently part of the Japanese education system, and they have the potential to attract attention.

However, political education in Germany is also facing various challenges. Even if the focus is limited to school lessons, it cannot be said that sufficient time is allocated[8]. A more pressing issue is the need to respond to the rise of right-wing extremism that has

[8] According to a survey by Norbert Sendzik and others at the Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsverläufe, the number of hours spent on political education-related subjects increased nationwide from the 1970s, peaked in the 1990s or 2000s, and has since been on a slight downward trend. The recent decrease is likely to be due to the reduction in the length of the gymnasium course and the increase in economics-related subjects. It has also been observed that the number of hours of such classes is higher under governments led by the SPD and lower under governments led by the CDU/CSU. Sendzik, Nobert, Ulrike Mehnert and Marcel Helbig (2024), *Feuerwehr der Demokratie? Politische Bildung als Unterrichtsfach an allgemeinbildenden Schulen der Sekundarstufe I in der Bundesrepublik Deutschalnd von 1949 bis 2019*, LifBi Working Paper, No. 114, pp. 42-45.

been apparent since German unification. The latter has notably elevated expectations for political education, while also attracting criticism regarding its current approach. The concept of democracy education, as discussed in the previous section, has garnered attention in the context of the ongoing challenge of right-wing extremism, despite continuous political education initiatives.

Consequently, as more effective political education is called for, critical political education has emerged as a movement for renewal. In 2015, 23 political education researchers drafted the "Frankfurter Erklärung. Für eine kritisch-emanzipatorische Politische Bildung."

The fundamental idea is based on the recognition that we live in a society where inequality is structured. The aim of political education has been set as encouraging learners to act towards a more just society by making visible issues of power that we are usually unaware of. In addition, the inequality that is assumed includes not only socio-economic problems, but also problems caused by environmental destruction, and it is intended to respond to changes in people's consciousness (Eis 2015).

The background to the popularity of this political education theory is the situation where right-wing extremism is promoting political messages from the perspective of the socially disadvantaged, critiquing EU bureaucracy and the Euro. In response to this populism, appealing to the legitimacy of today's democracy is likely ineffective. Instead, addressing the social inequality experienced by the populace is crucial to address their anxiety and dissatisfaction. This approach is essential for providing them with a comprehensive understanding of society. By doing so, a more rational revitalization of democracy can be fostered.

This critical political education is a valuable approach, but there are at least two problems associated with it. One is that by recognizing that there are structural problems in today's democratic society, we are partially affirming the current perceptions of right-wing extremism.

Secondly, this social perception is not universally shared among those involved in political education. It is not only in conflict with the understanding of political education held by conservatives, but also among political education experts who believe that political education should be critical, there is diversity of opinion. The approach mentioned above is just one of the critical opinions. In addressing this issue, it is crucial to examine the limitations of the "Beutelsbacher Konsens," which serves as the foundation for political education in Germany.

This German consensus, which consists of three principles: "Teachers must not overwhelm their students;" "what is controversial in academic and political debates must

also appear controversial in the classroom;" and "students must be able to understand a political situation and think about what is in their own interests" (Wehling 1977: 179f.) is widely known in Japan today. Notably, the so-called controversiality principle is regarded as a commendable alternative to the requirement of political neutrality when promoting educational activities that address real political issues in Japanese schools.

However, this consensus also indicates that during the 1970s, there were divergent views regarding the nature of political education in Germany, and a common understanding could not be reached between them.

It is undeniable that the emphasis on students forming their own views freely has led to the development of diverse political education initiatives. However, it is important to remember that political education experts were also politicized by the opposition between conservatives and progressives in the world of politics. Namely, while conservatives sought to preserve the existing democratic society, progressives believed further democratization was necessary. The attempt in Beutelsbach to rescue political education from escalating conflict led to the consensus, but it merely confirmed the mutual tolerance of both conservative and progressive positions.

Advocating critical political education means challenging the political compromise surrounding political education. Its educational theory shares many similarities with the ideas of 1970s progressives. According to Kerstin Pohl, the ideas presented there are diverse, but it is common for them to be critical of globalization and neoliberalism, and to emphasize the importance of citizens' participation in democracy (Pohl 2015).

Critical political education seeks to step into the ambiguous terrain that has sustained the Beutelsbacher Konsens. This means that the expansion of right-wing extremism has shed light on the cracks that existed within the liberal political consensus.

It is quite difficult to determine which side is correct in the reactivated debate about the form that political education should take.

In fact, the resolution "Demokratie als Ziel, Gegenstand und Praxis historisch-politischer Bildung und Erziehung in der Schule (Democracy as a Goal, Subject, and Practice of Historical and Political Education in Schools)" revised and announced by the Kultusministerkonferenz (Standing Conference of Ministers of Education of the States) in 2018 acknowledges both approaches. However, although it refers to the significance of empowering the socially disadvantaged within the context of an unequal society, as articulated in the Frankfurt Declaration, the underlying tone emphasizes the transmission of politically correct values and associated competencies, such as human rights, human dignity, the rule of law, and tolerance, which are foundational to contemporary society.

Conclusion

From the standpoint of the Japanese educational context, the distinctive features of political education in Germany can be summarized as follows.

Firstly, it is important to note the breadth and narrowness of the initiative. In terms of breadth, the initiative encompasses both school and extra-school education. Additionally, it encompasses both Bildung and Erziehung. A variety of ideas have existed since the past, from those that emphasize the maintenance of existing democratic societies to those that aim to democratize them more actively. Conversely, in terms of narrowness, although so-called social learning is also included in the scope of view, the focus is on political learning based on the premise of public space. This breadth and narrowness suggest that a wide range of resources have been concentrated on political learning to maintain and develop a liberal-democratic system.

In this way, political education has been given a high priority, and as a result, it has become quite political, which is the second characteristic. The Beutelsbacher Konsens is symbolic of the coexistence of opposing political education theories. In this respect, it is notable that right-wing extreme political parties, which are often positioned as a threat to liberal democracy, have repeatedly demanded the neutrality of political education[9]. Furthermore, while educational theories with highly political stances, such as critical political pedagogy, have made a comeback in the face of their growth, it is also interesting that educational theories with weaker political stances, such as democratic education theory, have appeared, which seek to protect democracy through culture rather than through political insight. Where there is a highly political theory of education, the fact that it is weak can also be seen as a form of political character.

In Japan, the Fundamental Law of Education confirms the importance of the cultivation of political literacy, and since the end of the war, schools have consistently provided social studies instruction on the legal framework and political systems that underpin the democratic system. However, there have been attempts to maintain the neutrality of education by avoiding the introduction of real political conflicts into the classroom. Both the left and right camps hoped to use education for their own political gain, but they also kept a close eye on each other. As a result, schools have become a

[9] The AfD's pamphlet for the 2023 state elections (AfD Fraktion Sachsen 2023) claimed that, based on the perception that one's own independent thinking is discouraged by political and democratic education, the party advocated the removal of political influence from schools, in particular by reducing the hours of political education and increasing the hours of teaching economic knowledge necessary for life, and that since 2019 the party has submitted several motions to pursue this goal in the budget deliberations.

political vacuum.

It is often pointed out that the absence of a consensus among different political parties when dealing with political content presents an obstacle to initiatives such as political education in Germany. However, this perception is not accurate. There are a variety of political education theories in Germany, and the Beutelsbacher Konsens merely rejects political indoctrination. The distinction between Japan and Germany is not whether there is a consensus on the ways in which political education should be conducted, but whether it is required to be neutral. In other words, this is a difference between whether we consider political education to be essential for sustaining democratic systems, or we think it would be better to have it.

Finally, it is evident that possessing the elements deemed essential for maintaining democracy does not ensure its sustainability. There is no such thing as perpetual democracy. Additionally, in a country following the collapse of democracy, there may be political education to justify the system. Political education is an integral component of politics.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that political education should not take place. It has an intrinsic educational value that goes beyond fighting right-wing extremism by forming free and critical individuals. Even if we think in a pragmatic way, if there is a democratic nation and we want it to continue to exist, then such efforts are still worthwhile. As the demand for political neutrality by right-wing extremists symbolizes, it has at least the significance of a canary in the coal mine of democracy.

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