

Special Working Group
“Securing Academic Competences in the Context of Educational Gaps”
Exploring the Factors in the Crisis in Education

Rebuilding “the public” as it should be

As its title indicates, the working group sought to grasp a controversial concept of “academic competences” from wider perspectives, rather than focusing on educational problems.

Mr. Naohiko Jinno (Tokyo University), who chaired the Association to Find Out the Organization of Public Services for a Good Society, pointed out that education is nothing but a social activity, in that it develops membership of a society. He emphasized that the crisis in education, which is often discussed in association with social pathologies, is not something inherent to the field of education but part of the critical situation in the society as a whole that has continued since the 1980s.

He further pointed out that the nature of education and other public social services in Japan has become perverted, being provided “at any time, anywhere, for anyone, but if you have money”. Education should not be a privileging mechanism, which gives more benefits to those who already have them. He stressed the need to promote educational reforms that would lead to the restoration of education as it should be.

Japan is repeating the failure of competitive education

In relation to the PISA 2006, Mr. Seiji Fukuda (Tsuru University), a steering committee member of the JTU Institute for Education and Culture, said, “The outcomes of the PISA, which sought to assess thinking processes, made it clear that the Anglo-American type of competitive education would lead to failure”. Noting the decrease in the proportion of Japanese students among the top-performers, he pointed out, “Ceaseless waves of testing would result in the increase in the number of students who do not like studying, making them impossible to achieve higher performance”.

In Finland, where the education system is free from ceaseless waves of testing, “They are determined to make efforts to fill the gaps through education, trying to prevent each and every child from being pushed out of the boat called education. It may be partly because of their circumstances [as a small state] that a single person cannot be wasted”. On the contrary, “Japan is being dominated by the law of the jungle, strangely, in spite of the fact that we should hold hands with each other in order to survive. There may be misunderstanding that human resources cannot be exhausted”. In this way, he warned against the distortion of the society as a whole where competition is perceived as the end itself.

One of the panelists, Ms. Keiko Higuchi spoke about the realities in the field as a teacher working in an elementary school in Fukuoka Prefecture: “We are working hard, thinking that schools should seek to prevent income gaps and cultural gaps from resulting in lower academic competences. While Mr. Fukuda highlighted the failure of the educational reform in the United Kingdom, it is not shared recognized as such at the local level. But the data of the PISA made it clear that discrepancies and

competition would lead to lower performance in the whole area of education and that wider discretion at the school level would lead to better academic competences. Although teachers working in the field are subject to pressure, partly because of the change in the PISA ranking, we would like to make use of the outcomes of the PISA in our movement as far as they can have positive impact”.

Mr. Nagateru Tokuyama, former Secretary-General of the JTU and now a member of the Central Council for Education (CCE), criticized that, while bearing in mind the outcomes of the PISA, the CCE has stopped short of in-depth deliberations on the improvement of the conditions for education.

Irritated voices were also raised from the audience, such as, “Why don’t they talk more about making the standard class sizes smaller?” One participant reported that those who are struggling at school, including children, are disempowered by the fact that discouraging data are made public without specific response measures, such as on the correlation between school performance in achievement tests and the number of pupils/students who receive financial assistance for going to school.

The concept of what are called the PISA competences itself makes it clear that academic competences should not be seen as the equivalent to testing scores, which can be improved by easy countermeasures. On the basis of the PISA outcomes, the Secretary-General of the OECD stated at a press-conference, organized in Tokyo in December 2007, “In systems that separate children early in secondary school, students’ performance by the age of 15 depends more than average on their socio-economic background. And there is no systematic benefit in terms of the average performance”. The comment highlights the importance of equitable distribution of educational resources at the primary and secondary levels.

In conclusion, Mr. Jinno stressed important roles played by labour unions, stating: “Although we should proceed cautiously and slowly in the time of system fluctuations, speed is seen as the most important thing in Japan. Moreover, policymakers are reluctant to take financial measures for income redistribution, which is conducive to ensuring equity of academic competences. They think that people are more motivated when there are discrepancies. Workers’ rights are seriously violated in the labour market, too, but the problem is that few workers raise their voices. Why has Finland invested so much in education? Because they have strong labour unions”.