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Subject Pedagogy in Japan: An Introduction

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This Special Issue on “Subject Pedagogy in Japan” resulted from the dialogue between the four editors in Japan in March 2024. The goal of the invitation to Japan had been to present findings and experiences from the German side in developing subject didactics as academic disciplines for each individual subject in school, in establishing a network among the different subject didactics and in uniting them under one common organizational roof that was founded in 2001, named “Gesellschaft für Fachdidaktik” (GFD; Association für *Fachdidaktik*).

The professional exchange in Japan revealed both differences and interesting similarities. In Japan - as in Germany or Austria - a joint organizational umbrella was established in 2021, the Japan Consortium of Subject Pedagogy Associations (JCoSPA), in order to continue and expand the principles of the Japanese Curriculum Researches and Development Association (JCRDA), which has been pursuing similar goals to promote subject pedagogy research since the 1970s. Furthermore, we encountered a number of challenges and the need for further explanations which are reflected in the six contributions. These cover the following topics: 1. Terminological issues and differences, 2. Roles and relationships between different academic disciplines in institutions of higher education, 3. Relationship between the General and the Specific, between general pedagogy and subject pedagogy in particular, 4. The role of subject pedagogy in curriculum planning and teacher education, and finally 5. Lesson Study (e.g. influence of the state and other agencies on defining and/or limiting the role of subject pedagogy). Let us look at the different contributions of this Special Issue in detail.

The *first article* introduces three different definitions or meanings of “subject pedagogy”, based on historical developments and on different needs for establishing a functioning nationwide educational system. In particular, the authors point out that these three meanings have been reconstructed over time, influenced by political and academic factors. They have not faded away easily over the three-quarter century history of Japanese subject pedagogy, but instead have persisted as a multi-faceted paradigm that defines it.

In the *second article* we learn about the ambivalent role of subject pedagogy within teacher education in the Japan of today. As one of the authors put it: “...subject pedagogy faces a dual challenge: being seen as *too practical* from an academic perspective and *too academic* from a policy standpoint, positioning it within a challenging dilemma.” After describing how exactly the teacher training programs are organized and requirements are defined at one specific university, that of Hiroshima and its Faculty of Education, a number of perspectives are presented and strategies offered out of this dilemma at the end.

The *third contribution* deals with issues of terminology in particular, based on a survey of linguistic uses within the different individual subject pedagogies that are organized under the

roof of the Japanese Consortium of Subject Pedagogies (JCoSPA). The study focuses on three terms, namely “inquiry”, “criticism” and “understanding”, all of them related to scientific thinking. It compares in detail their actual use in each subject of the Japan National Courses of Study as well as in the glossaries published by each subject-pedagogy-related academic association. After similarities and differences between subject areas have been identified, the article sets out to explain the differences and their characteristics.

The *fourth contribution* addresses the different research designs or methods used in the research practice of the subject pedagogies within JCoSPA over time, with a focus on articles published in academic association journals. To identify these research methods, the data was extracted from articles published by the academic associations under scrutiny. Using a common subject framework to classify research methods, the methodologies were examined through data analysis and a literature review - in a clear comparative layout, accompanied by an elaborate statistical analysis. The impressive results are systematically presented in the remainder of the article. The tables and the figure included demonstrate the complexity of the issues involved.

In the *fifth article*, a group of co-authors including young emergent researchers, offers the results of a reflection on Lesson Study and how it combines or integrates different scientific and practical approaches by analyzing the design of lessons (lesson plan), the actual performance of lessons and the joint evaluation of a particular lesson under different angles and theoretical viewpoints. The authors consider it justified to compare subject pedagogical and general pedagogical considerations with what is named subject didactics and general didactics elsewhere, particularly in Germany. The authors draw on German philosophers of education in trying to illustrate the specific areas of intersection, interaction or even “integration” of different academic approaches of analyzing content-based classroom teaching and learning and ideas for their improvement. In comparison with other goals and dimensions such as group work, collaborative learning or social behavior, the central formation of *subject* knowledge and of *subject-based* transfer abilities and their effects on personality-building treated to a lesser degree, except under the very general concept of “cognitive process”. This elaborate study raises a number of highly interesting and debatable questions.

The *sixth article*, finally, describes and compares to field of two groups of subject pedagogy, namely that of social studies education and of science education. Both areas are multi-faceted in themselves which leads to quite a number of challenges in terms of theory-building and of weight and distribution (perception of importance and influence, number of school hours assigned, attention given to evaluative approaches). The contribution ends with a rather general comparative note stating that “despite similarities, these subjects differ in their research focus. Science education often addresses students’ misconceptions and cognitive development, whereas Social Studies research rarely extends beyond lesson-based studies to explore students’ prior knowledge.” Examining these subjects in parallel helps to clarify the broader positioning of social studies and science education research in Japan.

Overall, this special issue gives interesting new insights into the national discourse within an educational system little known to many scholars outside of Japan. It also allows for comparisons with one’s own country and in particular with the organization and set-up of teacher education in other settings. And it offers opportunities to learn from the Japanese history and experience, especially concerning the practical relevance of all the research efforts

within the contributing disciplines for teacher education, but particularly those of the subject pedagogies, while at the same time strengthening their status as academic disciplines.

We hope that by comparing the Japanese situation with one's own, the readers will become more aware of the similarities and differences in the status and function of subject pedagogy or that of "subject didactics" respectively in the different educational settings. This relates to the level of research orientation, the ability to cooperate with other reference systems as well as to the scientific status as academic discipline. The Japanese case reminds us of the need to balance academic strength and rigor with service to the educational communities and to the society at large. Certainly, this will stimulate further discussions.

Finally, this special issue on "Subject Pedagogy in Japan" shows us how important it is that the different subject-didactic disciplines existing already as well as the different forms and varieties of subject "pedagogy" within one country organize themselves. The forming of an umbrella organization seems to be equally necessary in order to influence the future development of subject didactics/subject pedagogies and secure their fragile status within academia and vis-à-vis the state.

We would like to thank all the authors of this volume of RISTAL for their productive cooperation and their inspiring input in the form of six contributions. We hope to be able to continue publishing this type of "country report" from time to time and thus widen our knowledge about the fascinating and dramatically under-researched field of subject didactics including their relationship among each other in terms of a General Subject Didactics.