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Academic Discipline or Professional Training? Examining the Role of Subject Pedagogy in Japanese Teacher Education

Hiromi Kawaguchi & Kazuhiro Kusahara

Abstract

This study examines the evolving role of subject pedagogy within Japan's teacher education system, emphasising its dual function as both an academic discipline and a component of teacher preparation. Established after World War II, subject pedagogy has been central to training teachers in Japan, defined by its practical orientation and alignment with state-mandated educational policies. However, it faces a dichotomy: criticized as overly practical by academics while perceived as excessively academic by policymakers. Through a case study of Hiroshima University's School of Education, this paper explores how subject pedagogy navigates these tensions by balancing academic research and practical teacher training.

The analysis highlights three strategies employed to achieve this balance: aligning the university's dual mission of training researchers and teachers with historical and institutional contexts, structuring programs to emphasize subject-specific pedagogy as a distinct academic field, and fostering a globally oriented teacher identity. The findings suggest that while subject pedagogy is shaped by external reforms, it has also actively contributed to the evolution of Japan's teacher preparation framework. This research provides insights into how subject pedagogy can simultaneously support academic autonomy and meet professional training demands, with implications for comparative education and teacher education systems globally.

Keywords

teacher education, teacher preparation, subject pedagogy, institutionalization, Japan

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1 Introduction

Japan's teacher education system reflects the complex interplay between *Kyouka-kyouiku-gaku* (subject pedagogy) and teacher preparation. Established as an academic discipline after the Second World War, subject pedagogy emerged from reforms that shifted teacher preparation from specialised training schools to university-based programmes. This transition was intended to relocate teacher education and redefine the teacher's role (Voisin & Dumay, 2020)—from a content-transmitter to a reflective professional capable of critically examining and researching objectives and frameworks of school subjects (Tanahashi & Kimura, 2021).

Subject pedagogy has subsequently become the foundation for the preparation of subject teachers. It is defined as 'academic research focusing on the practice of subject teaching in schools and addressing various related phenomena' (Moriwake, 1986, p. 173), emphasising a practitioner-oriented approach. Unlike other educational fields, it prioritises practical classroom applications over theories, with many being articles authored by practising teachers (Kusahara et al., 2014). This focus on real-world applications combined with the institutional course approval system within Japan's teacher-preparation framework has strengthened the role of subject pedagogy in teacher education.

However, subject pedagogy faces both academic and policy criticism. From an academic perspective, its alignment with state-mandated teacher preparation frameworks is viewed as limiting the autonomy necessary for rigorous academic enquiry. Critics label it a 'semi-academic' field that struggles to establish independent theoretical contributions (Miyamoto, 2020). This perception fundamentally influences the professional status of university scholars specialising in subject pedagogy. When it comes to the quality of teachers Japan's Collaborative Council for the Implementation of Improvement Measures has in recent years criticised the current subject-oriented teacher training system for overemphasising content knowledge at the expense of general pedagogical competencies. Although the Council did not explicitly reject a subject-oriented pedagogical approach, it proposed alternatives, including extended teaching internships and broader exposure to contemporary educational issues. Miyamoto (2020) interpreted this position as an implicit critique of subject pedagogy, which forms the backbone of Japan's subject-focused teacher training model. Consequently, subject pedagogy faces a fundamental tension: being perceived as 'too practical' from an academic perspective while simultaneously being considered 'too academic' from a policy standpoint, thus creating an inherent pedagogy tension.

The evolution of subject pedagogy in Japan reflects its entrenched role in teacher education and the dynamic tensions between the academic and professional domains. Ecker (2018) describes the teacher education system as an 'intersectoral system' between universities and schools rather than a purely academic or professional institution (2018, p. 1567). Within Japan's university-based model, this dual structure requires balancing academic rigour with practice-oriented training and the professional qualifications emphasised by schools. These structural contexts act as a 'context of action' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 964), shaping expectations of how subject pedagogy should facilitate teacher education. Consequently, subject pedagogy in Japan has been moulded by both university policies and national mandates.

This study clarifies in more detail the role of subject pedagogy in Japan’s teacher-preparation system. It investigates this dynamic taking a closer look at a case study involving Hiroshima University’s School of Education, an institution of particular significance, given its rich tradition of teacher training and educational research. Through an analysis of the institutional ‘logic’ (Ecker, 2018, p. 1567) at Hiroshima University, this study explores how subject pedagogy navigates the complex requirements of teacher preparation, aiming to meet both professional and academic expectations.

2 Teacher Preparation System and Subject Pedagogy in Japan: An Overview

This section examines the structural features of Japanese teacher education from both legislative and institutional paradigms, followed by an analysis of the distinctive features of subject pedagogy. These structural perspectives not only provide contextual insights into subject pedagogy but are also critical for understanding how subject pedagogy has been socially constructed in response to the structural requirements.

2.1 Fundamental Structure of Teacher Preparation in Japan

Japan’s current teacher preparation system, established by the 1949 Educational Personnel Certificate Act, is predicated upon two longstanding principles: (1) university-based teacher education and (2) an open teacher certificate system for licensure (Isozaki, 2018; Kaur & Sharma, 2019).

2.1.1 University-Based Teacher Education

The following table (Table 1) will show the minimum number of credits for teaching subject specialities and for professional studies for a teacher certificate.

Year	Certificate of essential qualification: Bachelor's degree	Teaching subject specialities	Professional studies	Teaching subject specialities or professional studies
1949-	Lower secondary school	30	20	-
	Upper secondary school	30	20	-
1954-	Lower secondary school	40	14	-
	Upper secondary school	40	14	-
1988-	Lower secondary school	40	19	-
	Upper secondary school	40	19	-
1998-	Lower secondary school	20	31	8
	Upper secondary school	20	21	16
2019-	Lower secondary school	59		
	Upper secondary school	59		

Tab. 1: The minimum number of credits for teaching subject specialities and professional study for a teacher certificate

To obtain a teaching licence for kindergarten through secondary schools in Japan, candidates must complete a four-year university program accredited by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) as an institution of teacher preparation and obtain a bachelor's degree. In this program, students are required to complete a specified number of credits in teacher preparation courses. Upon completion, students submit documentation of their academic credits to the regional board of education at their university, after which they are granted a teaching licence alongside their bachelor's degree.

Regional boards of education issue teaching licences. These licences however are not region-specific and accepted nationwide. While kindergarten and elementary licences cover general teaching responsibilities, secondary-level licences are subject-specific (e.g., 'Junior High School English', 'High School Mathematics').

For secondary education, as shown in Table 1, candidates must complete a minimum of 59 credits in areas such as liberal arts, professional studies (general pedagogy), and teaching subject specialisations (subject discipline and subject pedagogy). A total of 45 hours of study is required per credit, including out-of-class studies. These credits were categorised as follows: A) school subjects, subject contents, and teaching; B) basic theory of education; C) methods for moral and integrated learning, guidance, and educational counselling; and D) teaching practicums. University scholars specialising in subject pedagogy often oversee 'Methods of subject teaching' under category A)-b (in Table 2).

Subject	Contents of subjects	Lower second- ary	Upper second- ary
A) School subject, subject contents, and its teaching	a. Subject speciality affairs of school subject b. Methods of subject teaching (including the application of ICT and material)	28 (a: 20) (b: 8)	24 (a: 20) (b: 4)
B) Basic theory of education	a. Ideas of education, history and thought of education b. Significance of the teaching profession and the role job specifications of teacher (including the establishment of school management as a team) c. Social, institutional, and managerial affairs of education (including the collaboration between school and local and the establishment of school safety) d. Mental and physical development and learning process of children e. Understanding of children needed special assistance f. Significance of curriculum and methods of its organising (including curriculum management)	10	10
C) Methods of moral and integrated learning, guidance, and educational counselling	a. Theories and methods of moral education b. Methods of integrated learning c. Methods of special activity d. Methods of education and technique (including application of ICT and material) e. Theories and methods of student guidance f. Theories and methods of educational counselling (including basic understanding of counselling) g. Theories and methods of career guidance and education	10	8
D) Subjects related to the teaching practice	a. Teaching practice (school experience activities can be included up to 2 credits) b. seminar in the teaching profession	7 (a: 5) (b: 2)	5
Subjects set independently by the university		4	12

Tab. 1: The minimum requirement of professional studies since 2019 (Source: Ministry of Education, n.d.)

While most prospective teachers obtain licensure by completing these university programs, a small minority take the teacher qualification examination as an alternative. For instance, in 2023, of the 138,241 individuals who obtained a first class teaching certificate after earning a bachelor's degree, over 95% did so through university programs, whereas only six individuals did so by passing the exam. Graduates with a first class licence are eligible for graduate studies, in which they may pursue an 'advanced licence' by earning prescribed credits. Recent reforms have aimed to encourage more students to attend graduate school for advanced licences, but their impact has been limited (Iwata, 2015).

2.1.2 Open Teacher Certification for Licensure

The open teacher certification system allows broad participation in teacher certification, meaning that students in various university departments, whether in state or private institutions, can participate in teacher preparation if their institution is MEXT-accredited (Iwata, 2007). While this system is seen in other East Asian countries, such as China and South Korea, Japan's implementation is notable for its scale. For example, in 2010, China issued approximately six times as many teaching licences as Japan (158,799 in China and 27,470 in Japan). However, Japan has 855 institutions offering teacher preparation programmes — around 80% of its higher education institutions—compared to 699 institutions in China, which account for only about 30% (Iwata, 2015).

Another unique aspect of Japan's system is that the government does not strictly control the number of candidate teachers who enter teacher preparation programs; instead, it allows each university to set enrolment targets. This flexibility has led some institutions to use teacher preparation courses simply as a means to attract students (Isozaki, 2018). Consequently, there is an oversupply of teaching licence holders relative to the number of available teaching positions. In Japan, only 10% of new teacher licence holders from teacher preparation institutions are employed in elementary and junior high schools, reflecting the substantial gap between licensure and employment opportunities (Iwata, 2015).

2.2 *The Course Approval System in Japan*

Japan's approach to teacher training has evolved significantly since the post-World War II era, shifting from a state-controlled system to a university-based model emphasising academic autonomy. However, government influence persists, mainly through the '*Katei-Nintei Seido*' (Course Approval System) established in 1953. Under this system, credits earned in MEXT-approved courses count toward mandatory licensure credits. While this system has been criticised as a form of substantial state intervention in teacher preparation (Katsuno, 2019), it has significant authority over Japan's teacher education system.

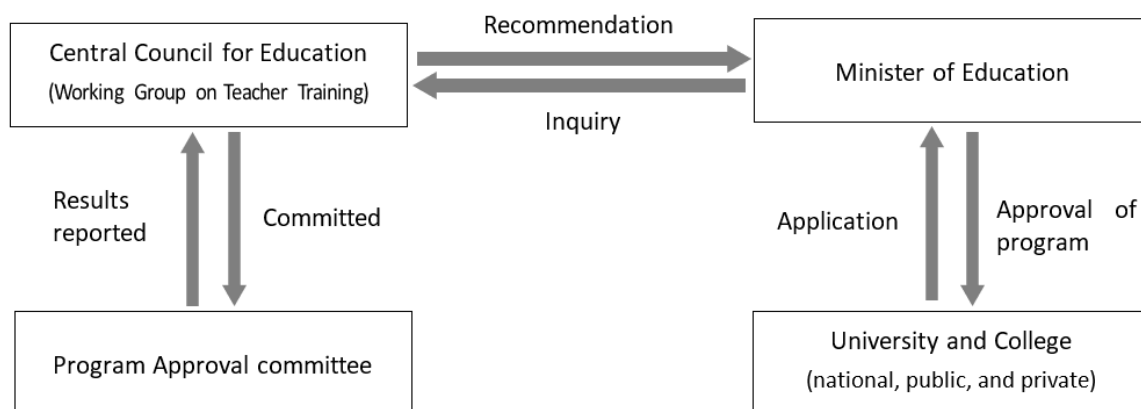


Fig. 1: Approval system of a teacher certificate program offered by university and college

The approval process for teacher-education programs is rigorous and involves multiple reviews, assessments, and reporting stages. Figure 1 outlines this procedure, emphasising quality assurance and compliance with national educational acts. The approval process included the following steps:

- 1) **University and College Submission:** Institutions develop teacher certification programs and submit them for approval.
- 2) **Application Review:** The Program Approval Committee assesses these submissions and checks their adherence to established standards.
- 3) **Ministerial Enquiry and Recommendations:** The Central Council for Education’s Working Group on Teacher Training reviews the committee’s findings and makes recommendations for the Minister of Education.
- 4) **Ministerial Approval:** The Minister of Education is informed of these recommendations and grants or denies approval.
- 5) **Reporting Results:** The approval status is communicated to the submitting institutions and stakeholders.

To maintain the quality of the approved programs, the Ministry of Education occasionally conducts onsite inspections (MEXT, 2024). These inspections, performed by members of the Working Group on Teacher Training, assess compliance with the regulations and program standards. The inspection team compiles a report that is published after receiving approval from the Working Group on Teacher Training.

The program approval and inspection criteria include alignment with licensure requirements, curriculum comprehensiveness, faculty standards, facilities, resources, and access to practice schools. This system ensures the high standards of Japan’s teacher education programs and equips educators with the competencies needed for diverse educational settings nationwide (MEXT, 2024).

Faculty qualifications play a crucial role in subject pedagogy. To teach subject methods, MEXT mandates that faculty members demonstrate research achievements in relevant fields (Kiuchi, 2013). Following the revision of the Educational Personnel Certificate Act, the 2018 reaccreditation process for all university-based teacher preparation programs further strengthened these requirements, highlighting the importance of research in subject pedagogy. Consequently, universities must ensure that faculty with such qualifications are

part of every licensure-oriented programme (Iwata et al., 2019). While this faculty qualification requirement secures a role for subject pedagogy scholars within universities, it has also increased state regulation, creating what some describe as a ‘dilemma’ of academic autonomy versus state oversight (Tanahashi & Kimura, 2021).

2.3 *Distinctions in Teacher Preparation Institutions*

Isozaki (2018) identified two main types of teacher preparation institutions in Japan, each offering a distinct approach to professional learning. The first type, Type 1 universities, evolved from pre-World War II specialised training schools and were later incorporated into national universities as Schools of Education, now present in every prefecture in Japan. Most Type 1 institutions offer teaching licences for all educational stages, from kindergarten to secondary school and allow candidates to obtain multiple subject licences at the secondary level. These institutions provide a broad range of educational subjects, often tailored to meet regional needs, and the core courses required for a teacher licence. Type 1 universities are typically well equipped with facilities such as attached schools for teaching practice and maintain strong partnerships with local education boards, particularly in their regions.

Type 2 institutions, on the other hand, are not part of dedicated education departments but offer teacher licensure as an optional course within non-educational bachelor’s degree programs. Teacher licences in Type 2 universities are usually limited to a small selection of school types and subjects, often covering only the minimal requirements listed in Tables 1 and 2. Additionally, most Type 2 institutions lack attached schools which could provide opportunities to gain practical teaching experience.

While the number of primary school teachers trained in Type 2 institutions has recently increased, Type 1 institutions traditionally produce the highest number of primary school teachers. Conversely, for high school teachers, Type 2 institutions — particularly those within specialised faculties such as Literature or Science, which prepare candidates for subject-specific teaching licences (e.g. the Japanese language or science) — make up the majority (Isozaki, 2018; Iwata, 2015). These differences in institutional structure influence the development of subject teachers. Graduates from Type 1 universities tend to adopt a ‘schoolteacher’ perspective as subject teachers, while those from Type 2 institutions often have a ‘subject specialist’ orientation.

The distinction between these two types also correlates with the nature of the awarded bachelor’s degree. Type 1 programs, often a part of Schools of Education, offer courses spanning elementary and secondary education levels, where students aspire to become primary or secondary teachers who study together. These courses are separated according to the subject area throughout the primary through secondary classes, and there is a solid subject framework. Graduates from Type 1 programs may complete theses under supervisors specialising in subject pedagogy and disciplinary studies (e.g. physics, geography, linguistics). In contrast, Type 2 institutions award degrees based on specialised courses, resulting in fewer students completing theses in subject pedagogy.

Therefore, Type 1 universities, with faculty specialised in subject pedagogy, emphasise the development of subject teachers who approach their roles with a research-focused mindset. Type 2 institutions focus more on practical teacher preparation and less on research. This

division of teacher education reflects the differing priorities and outcomes of Japan's teacher preparation system.

2.4 *Subject Pedagogy and the Influence of Teacher Preparation Systems*

Subject pedagogy emerged as an academic field in Japan during teacher preparation reforms following World War II, primarily within Type 1 universities. These teacher preparation systems have significantly shaped the organisational structure of subject pedagogy in Japan.

In a teacher preparation course textbook at Hiroshima University, Moriwake (1986) outlines three primary classifications of subject pedagogy:

- a) **Subject Pedagogy in the Narrowest Sense:** This field addresses issues common across multiple subjects, distinct from each subject's specific pedagogy (e.g. Japanese language, social studies, and mathematics education).
- b) **Narrow subject pedagogy:** This approach encompasses each subject's pedagogy under the umbrella term 'subject pedagogy,' focusing on the pedagogy specific to each subject.
- c) **Broadly Defined Subject Pedagogy:** Includes narrowly defined subject pedagogy and related subject disciplines (e.g. science education with physics, biology, and earth science), representing a collective view of each subject's pedagogy.

Moriwake (1986) explained that type (a) emphasises academic autonomy and researcher preparation, whereas type (c) presents 'significant theoretical and practical challenges' (p.175) due to 'confusion between the logic of teacher preparation and the logic of academic research'. While subject discipline and pedagogy are crucial for enhancing teaching, Moriwake (1986) argued that they should remain distinct in terms of research.

These types are closely tied to the organisational structure of Type 1 universities, where teacher preparation includes subject-specific courses. These universities offer teacher licences for teaching from kindergarten to secondary school, creating a structure in which educational scholars and subject-specific researchers collaborate within specialised classes. This system efficiently combines subject discipline with pedagogy to facilitate streamlined teacher preparation.

Although subject pedagogy and teacher preparation are intertwined, teacher preparation alone does not guarantee academic autonomy in subject pedagogy as a research field (Tanahashi & Kimura, 2021). Based on institutional missions, universities position themselves along a continuum from (a) to (c), balancing teacher preparation with the advancement of research.

Moriwake (1986) also introduces the German term 'Fachdidaktik' as a parallel to Japanese subject pedagogy, where subject-specific pedagogy is embedded within academic disciplines. However, in Japan, research on subject pedagogy has concentrated on Type 1 universities where schools of education hold prominence. 'Fachdidaktik' is treated as an exception, underscoring how Japanese subject pedagogy has evolved within its teacher preparation system and integration into Japan's broader educational structure.

3 The Case Study: Subject Pedagogy and Teacher Preparation at the School of Education, Hiroshima University

This section explores how Hiroshima University's School of Education balances teacher preparation and research within the subject pedagogy program. It focuses on two areas. The first area is the university's mission and organisational structure, which influence the orientation of research and education in subject pedagogy. The second part focuses on the curriculum and analyses the placement of subject pedagogy courses, their objectives, content, and methods to reveal the integration of research and education.

(1) Brief History

The School of Education at Hiroshima University was established in 1949, the same year the university was founded, as a merger of five institutions: Hiroshima Higher Normal School, Hiroshima University of Literature and Science, Hiroshima Normal School, Hiroshima Youth Normal School, and Hiroshima Women's Higher Normal School.

Each predecessor institution contributed its unique expertise and historical significance, building a solid foundation for the faculty's mission. Hiroshima Higher Normal School, founded in 1902, was a leading institution for secondary school educator training and became a centre for general teacher education. Hiroshima University of Literature and Science, established in 1929, is the primary research centre in education and psychology. Tapping its roots in Hakushima School in 1874, Hiroshima Normal School became a significant training ground for primary school educators. Hiroshima Youth Normal School, established in 1944, continued this legacy of vocational and youth education and stemmed from the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Supplementary School Teacher Training Institute, founded in 1922. Hiroshima Women's Higher Normal School, established in 1945, is essential for training female educators.

Another major reorganisation occurred in 2000 with the move to the Higashi Hiroshima Campus, merging the Department of Education and the Department of School Education into a single school. This unique background positioned Hiroshima University as a significant contributor to educational research, teacher preparation, and academic excellence.

In 2012, in response to a directive from the MEXT, Hiroshima University issued a mission statement affirming its dual objectives of teacher and researcher training. The statement reads: 'In addition to training teachers as professionals, we will train researchers in general education, psychology, and subject pedagogy to enhance research capacities that directly address various educational challenges and the training of university faculty involved in teacher education' (Hiroshima University, 2012). This statement underscores the university's commitment to advancing research and education in subject pedagogy while fostering future researchers.

(2) Organisational Structure

The School of Education at Hiroshima University, formed by integrating five schools, consists of five departments. Each department is historically grounded in a distinct educational and research field and offers undergraduate programs at the doctoral level, staffed by specialised faculty members:

1. Primary Education and Special Needs Education
2. Secondary Education in Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and Technology
3. Secondary Education in Japanese, English, and Japanese as a Second Language
4. Secondary Education in Physical Education, Life Science, Art, and Music
5. Foundations of General Educational Studies and Psychology

Department 1, which evolved from Hiroshima Normal School, specialises in primary school teacher education. It mirrors Japan's traditional 'Type 1' university model, offering various teacher certification programs for kindergarten through secondary education. Graduates must obtain a teaching licence that reflects the department's strong emphasis on teacher preparation, which includes an extended teaching practicum.

Departments 2 through 4 primarily focused on secondary teacher education and were built upon the legacy of Hiroshima Higher Normal School. Although each department encompasses multiple subjects (e.g. Department 2 includes Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and Technology), the organisation remains subject-specific with independent courses. Instruction and research in these departments are led by faculty specialising in subject pedagogy and their respective subject disciplines, positioning these departments as central to research in subject pedagogy. Unlike Department 1, Departments 2–4 did not require licensure for graduation, and some students opted not to pursue licensure. These departments prioritise academic research, yet most graduates still enter teaching, necessitating a balance between research and teacher preparation.

Department 5, founded at the former Hiroshima University of Literature and Science, focuses on general education and psychology. The faculty specialises in these fields by providing instructions and research supervision. Like Departments 2 through 4, a teaching license is not required for graduation, and many students do not pursue careers as educators. The Department 5 emphasises education and psychology research over teacher preparation.

This organisational structure reflects Hiroshima University's approach to integrating its historical legacy with modern teacher education and educational research. Each department maintains specialised approaches to pedagogy and research, aligning the policy of subject-specific education. Within this structure, subject pedagogy at Hiroshima University is recognised as a critical component of teacher training and research with an explicit commitment to developing future researchers in subject pedagogy.

4 Connection between Subject Pedagogy and Teacher Preparation in the Program

This section focuses on the secondary social studies education program in Department 2 of the School of Education to further illustrate how the program connects subject pedagogy to teacher preparation. As noted above, Departments 2-4 programs focus primarily on subject pedagogy. Because these programs are required to balance teacher education and research, they are expected to serve as good examples.

Visions and Structure

The program's mission is 'to prepare secondary social studies teachers while equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to pursue careers as researchers or educational professionals in organisations such as companies, local governments, and other institutions (from Program Description). To earn a degree, students are expected to demonstrate the 'knowledge, skills, and professionalism required of secondary school teachers, along with the ability to apply scientific reasoning and practical skills to work in educational settings both within Japan and internationally'. Specifically, the program aims for students to 'acquire a solid grounding in subject pedagogy for social studies, along with the skills needed to conduct educational research' (from Program Description).

Each year, 20–25 students are admitted to the program, supported by faculty members with expertise in subject disciplines such as economics, politics, philosophy, geography, history, and subject pedagogy. Four full-time faculty members specialise in subject pedagogy within the program, exceeding the minimum Japanese requirement of one full-time faculty member per secondary social studies teacher education program. In their compulsory graduation thesis, students receive supervision from specialists in subject pedagogy or experts in specific subject disciplines.

Curriculum and Modules

The curriculum provided in the program is designed specifically for students majoring in secondary social studies education. It includes 32 credits for general education and 96 credits for specialised courses (in 2024). These specialised courses cover topics such as subject matter, subject pedagogy for social studies, moral and integrated education, career counselling, and student guidance. Most subjects were related to those required to obtain a teaching licence (see Table 2). The number of specialised courses is notably higher than the 59 credits typically required for teacher certification in Japan (see Table 1), offering students a comprehensive set of courses that go beyond the minimum requirements for certification.

14 credits are offered for subject pedagogy (methods of subject teaching), which exceed the minimum number of 8 credits stipulated by the government and two credits for introductory courses (Introduction to Social Studies Education) that cannot be used towards teacher certification, making a total of 20 credits.

The four teachers in charge of subject pedagogy meet at the beginning of each school year and aim to achieve the following three goals through subject pedagogy classes for four years: The first is to design lessons autonomously and explain their validity to others. The second goal is to become a long-term curriculum contributor. The third is the ability to conduct research lessons as teachers.

Figure 2 presents an overview of the curriculum of the Secondary Social Studies education program, emphasising the integration of subject pedagogy and student teaching experiences. The following is a summary of the content covered by each grade. Hiroshima University also equates one academic credit to 45 hours of learning.

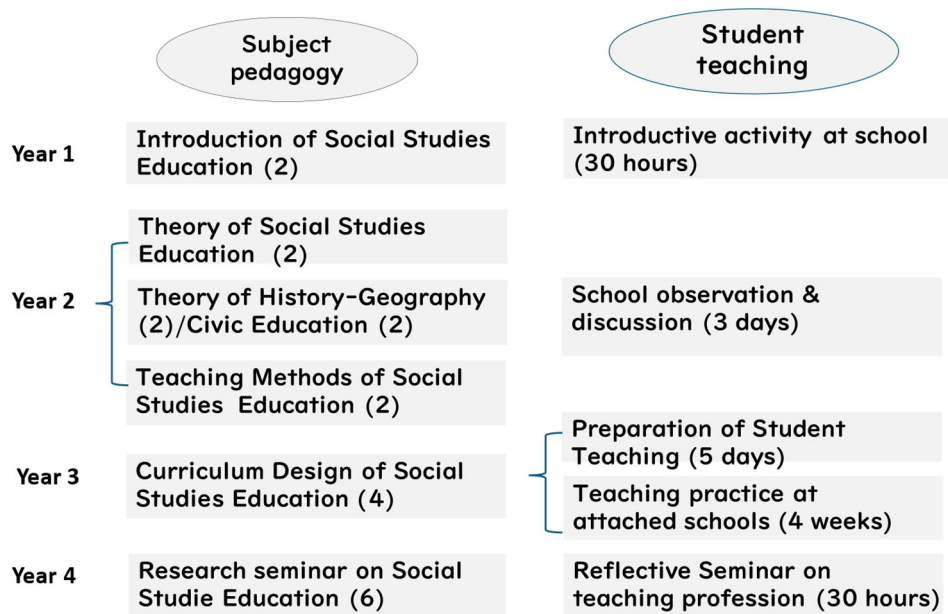


Fig. 2: Curriculum Map of Subject pedagogy for Secondary SS program

Year 1:

In the first year, students engage in an Introductory Activity at School (30 hours), which offers initial exposure to the school environment and the dynamics of classroom teaching. This activity provides a practical introduction to teaching, setting the stage for more intensive field experience in later years. This activity aims to shift the perspective of education from that of a student to that of secondary school students to that of a teacher.

In addition to teaching practice, students are introduced to the fundamentals of social studies education through social studies education courses (two credits). In the introductory course, students begin by reflecting on their learning experiences from K-12, exploring how this influences their philosophy as future social studies teachers. This introductory course emphasises the necessity of social studies education in democratic societies.

Year 2:

The second year deepens students' understanding of social studies through theoretical and methodological courses. Students enrol in the courses of Theory of Social Studies Education (two credits) and the Theory of History–Geography/Civic education (two credits per each). These courses emphasise theoretical approaches such as citizenship education and students' perceptions of historical and geographic knowledge. Discussions encourage students to link past societies to contemporary contexts guided by theory-mapping methods that foster skills in disciplinary enquiry, reflective thinking, and social participation.

In Teaching Methods for Social Studies Education (two credits), students explored various teaching approaches by analysing video lesson records. They compared instructional methods for similar topics and studied lesson planning based on enquiry and argumentation theories. The programme's 'lesson study' model offers a practical approach for students to refine their methods and improve the effectiveness of their lessons as teachers.

During this phase, students observe lessons in class and engage in reflective discussions on observed practices, helping them connect theory with real-world applications in the classroom.

Year 3:

In the third year, students focus on curriculum development and practical teaching methods through Curriculum Design for Social Studies Education. This class introduces students to the C3 (College, Career, and Civic Life) and IDM (Inquiry Design Model (IDM) frameworks, which are widely implemented in the U.S. school system (Grant, Swan & Lee, 2022). Students create unit plans that bridge historical and civic content with current topics.

The practical component involves Preparation for Student Teaching (five days) and Teaching Practice at Attached Schools (four weeks). This hands-on experience allowed students to apply their knowledge to supervisors in a natural classroom setting and develop their instructional skills through active teaching in the two affiliated schools.

Year 4:

In the final year, students refine their research abilities and engage in advanced pedagogical studies through a Research Seminar on Social Studies Education (six credits). This seminar provides a platform for students to conduct independent research on topics related to subject pedagogy in social studies, fostering critical analyses and scholarly enquiries.

The program culminates in a Reflective Seminar on the Teaching Profession (30 hours), where students reflect on their teaching experiences and professional growth. This seminar encourages students to consider their roles within the broader teaching profession and prepare for the complexities of a career in education.

The secondary social studies curriculum combines rigorous academic studies and progressive practical teaching experiences. Through the well-structured integration of subject pedagogy and student teaching, this program ensures that graduates are equipped with the theoretical knowledge, pedagogical skills, and reflective capabilities necessary for effective teaching in secondary social studies.

5 ‘Logic’ for the Balancing Act between Academic Autonomy and Teacher Preparation

This study examined the underlying rationale linking teacher training to the academic autonomy of subject pedagogy. As previously discussed, teacher training in Japan is heavily influenced by national policies. Although this system provides a stable foundation, it risks compromising academic autonomy. How does Hiroshima University’s Faculty of Education, particularly its secondary social studies program, address this issue? The following three strategies exemplify the logic underlying the programme’s organisational structure and curriculum:

First, the dual mission of ‘training both researchers and teachers’ is articulated by connecting it to the faculty’s historical background and mission. Due to its historical context, Hiroshima University’s Faculty of Education has long been committed to preparing both researchers and educators. This mission justifies a balanced approach, avoiding biases towards either teacher or researcher training. Subject pedagogy has emerged as an essential discipline that maintains this balance, underscoring its value as a field that addresses both practical and scholarly needs.

Second, the faculty’s organisational structure correlates positively with academic discipline, underscoring the distinct role of subject pedagogy. Hiroshima University’s Faculty of Education has established a specialised course that differs from general education by combining subject-based academic disciplines with subject pedagogy. This unique course design justifies subject pedagogy as a field distinct from general education, broadly addressing educational phenomena. By focusing on subject-specific issues, this structure establishes the need for researchers to advance subject pedagogy as an academic discipline in its own right.

Third, the program articulates a clear vision for the type of teacher it aims to create: a ‘teacher’s teacher,’ a ‘teacher leader,’ and an ‘educator with a global perspective.’ As Ecker (2018) points out, teacher preparation in public education is often shaped by national policies. In Hiroshima University’s secondary social studies education program, the first- and second-year modules focus primarily on teacher training in Japan, covering diverse approaches to subject pedagogy. However, in the third-year module, ‘Curriculum Design for Social Studies Education’, students designed social studies units using international frameworks (such as those from the U.S.) and applied them in a teaching practicum. Through this experience, the students researched the theoretical implications and challenges of teaching in different cultural contexts. The programme encourages students to transcend Japan’s teacher-training framework by incorporating international perspectives. Furthermore, by envisioning teachers as ‘teacher’s teachers’ and ‘teacher leaders’, the program emphasises the importance of teachers as practitioners and researchers capable of objectively analysing educational phenomena.

These three strategies exemplify how Hiroshima University’s Faculty of Education upholds the academic autonomy of subject pedagogy while navigating teacher training demands. The program reinforces subject pedagogy as essential to educational practice and scholarly enquiry through a balanced mission, a discipline-focused organisational structure, and a globally minded approach to teacher identity.

6 Conclusion

This study examined the development of subject pedagogy within Japan’s teacher-training system, focusing on the interplay between academic autonomy and teacher education structures. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of subject pedagogy in two ways.

First, subject pedagogy is fundamentally shaped by teacher preparation structures. This study elucidates how national policies, teacher preparation systems, university missions, and institutional structures have influenced the evolution of subject pedagogy. Initially introduced as part of postwar reforms to establish university-based teacher education, subject pedagogy has since been institutionalised through mechanisms such as MEXT’s course approval system,

which formally recognises the role of researchers specialising in this field. Additionally, Japanese universities' missions and organisational structures have further refined and solidified the discipline of subject pedagogy.

Second, the subject pedagogy influenced the structure of teacher preparation. While socially constructed, subject pedagogy has not passively adapted to external reforms and organisational shifts. Instead, various logical strategies were used to ensure academic autonomy. Hiroshima University's School of Education has strategically positioned subject pedagogy as central to its mission, explicitly stating its role in training researchers in general education, psychology, and subject pedagogy in official statements. Moreover, in the 2018 reaccreditation process, the national government used research on subject pedagogy as a benchmark for evaluating faculty qualifications in university-based teacher-preparation programs. Thus, subject pedagogy is both an essential actor in its development and a key component of the broader teacher preparation system.

As already pointed out in the Introduction, teacher education reform in Japan is an ongoing developmental process. Future research should explore how Japanese subject pedagogy continues to adapt and evolve. Additionally, the approach used in this study could be applied to other countries and contexts to analyse the formation and evolution of subject pedagogy in diverse educational systems.

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