

School Improvement and Roles of Local Community: Japan's Past Experience and Future Outlook

Noriaki Mizumoto
Associate Professor, College of Education,
School of Human Sciences, University of Tsukuba



1. Japanese schools: historically accumulated practices of school-community collaboration

1) Approaches of schools to local communities and families

Japanese schools have a long history of building ties with local communities and families. In many cases, these efforts continue on a routine or regular basis. We must not overlook these day-to-day efforts when considering the school-community relationship in Japan.

First, schools provide information to communities and families, using various newsletters on the school, grade and class levels and on different topics such as health and school lunches. In some communities, school newsletters are distributed to or circulated among all households in the community. Second, in order to have a better understanding of the students' homes and communities, teachers visit their homes periodically (usually once a year) or on an as-needed basis, for example, when students have problematic behaviors or when they are not attending school. When students are caught shoplifting or involved in other crimes, teachers sometimes get involved. Third, in order to deepen people's understanding of schools and to facilitate communication between teachers and parents, schools have open house days when they invite parents and local people to observe classrooms and educational activities, and homeroom teachers meet with parents. Fourth, schools try to promote regular and periodic exchanges of information through "communication notebooks," report cards and meetings with individual students and parents, discussing how students are doing at school and how they are growing. Fifth, by organizing PTAs, schools promote mutual understanding between teachers and parents through meetings, seminars and study trips. PTAs support school activities such as cleaning and improving school grounds. In some cases, not only parents but also local people become PTA members. Other activities include inviting local elderly people to school on sports days, brass-band performances at community events, and other school-community exchanges at various events. Gymnasiums, school grounds and other school facilities are also offered for community activities. These undertakings have allowed local people to become more familiar with schools.

2) Communities' support of children's growth and collaboration with schools

Communities have also created various organizations to carry out activities to support children's growth.

Children are given roles at traditional festivals and other events, and they play an important part in community activities. Children's associations and sports clubs have served as venues where children are brought up together in their communities through recreational events, volunteer activities and sports. Welfare and social education facilities, such as nursery schools, schools offering after-school childcare, community centers and libraries, have also contributed to bringing up children in the communities, providing places for children to go to and feel secure.

Communities have also contributed to students' educational activities in many ways such as offering farm land and other resources for educational activities and supporting students' cultivation of crops. Historically, schools were established and maintained by communities with local resources. Therefore, schools are regarded as common community assets.

2. Today's situation: increasingly complicated educational challenges at schools and changing communities

As Japanese society has become economically affluent and now faces environmental issues and social changes such as globalization, the situation surrounding schools and communities has also changed drastically.

In order to survive in this uncertain and complex age, schools are required to foster PISA-type academic skills, which emphasize students' ability to think and communicate effectively by applying their knowledge. As the society has become more multicultural, and the economic disparity has widened, parents' expectations have become more diversified. Due to population mobility in urban areas and the decreasing and graying population in rural areas, maintaining communities as they were has become more difficult, and their educational functions are weakening.

At the same time, decentralization of education has been promoted. Therefore, schools have to deal with complicated educational issues on their own initiatives. In order to improve the quality of education, schools must constantly pursue various ideas and endeavors and put them into action. For this purpose, schools must strengthen their organizing powers. Both schools and communities need to be revitalized by redefining their roles and rebuilding their relationship.

3. Roles of communities in improving schools

1) Providing learning resources and opportunities

Recently, communities are offering more diverse resources to schools: first, human resources to support activities within schools. Some local governments have hired more temporary full-time and part-time teachers than the national standard in order to increase the number of homeroom teachers and subject teachers and to facilitate team teaching and small-group teaching. Some schools have hired local people as special part-time teachers to teach subjects or other areas of their expertise. Recently, there has been a notable increase in "school volunteers," whose functions are extremely diverse, including supporting integrated-study classes, helping students with special needs, promoting international understanding, supporting library activities and reading books to children. In some cases, these volunteers allow teachers to devote more time and energy to each student, but in other cases, teachers have become even busier in order to collaborate with the volunteers.

Second, communities are providing students with learning resources and opportunities outside schools. They accept visits from students, providing hands-on activities and helping teach students in the field in such subjects as life-environment studies, integrated studies and social studies. Work experience programs are offered by some companies to support career education.

Third, welfare and social education facilities are being combined with schools. In these complex facilities, students can have hands-on learning experiences at welfare facilities and use libraries to study.

Fourth, communities provide resources to ensure children's safety and for risk management. Local people's homes and business establishments such as convenience stores post signs stating that they will provide refuge to children in emergencies. Local people carry out safety patrols in their communities to protect students on their way to and from school. There are also people who carry flags or put up stickers to indicate "safety patrols" when they take a walk or drive their cars. An elementary-school principal asked elderly citizens who enjoy walking in the community to come to the school a few times a week and walk through the halls when they take a walk. As a result, the atmosphere at the school became more relaxed, and the children became kinder to older people.

2) Creativity and emotional support through collaboration

Fostering creativity and mutual understanding, and providing emotional support underlie the collaboration between schools and communities.

First of all, future visions of the school and children and of the community must be identified through collaboration between local people and school staff. In fact, some of the “community schools” have already clarified their visions through community participation. Local people’s participation has the benefit of broadening the perspectives of the whole school. Different perspectives within the school lead to many good ideas for school management, educational activities and school events.

Through these interactions, mutual understanding is fostered between schools and communities. Parents and people in the community do not really know about school or about teachers’ work other than teaching. They rarely know that in addition to teaching, teachers are assigned many duties for school management and paperwork and engaged in many research activities, as well. In this regard too, it is important for communities to understand the actual situations at schools. Schools, too, must have a better understanding of people’s lives in the community and what parents and local people expect of them. Emotional understanding and support are also important. Teaching is an emotional job. In recent years, an increasing number of teachers are suffering from mental illnesses. It is important for communities to understand the emotionally difficult jobs of teachers and support them.

In any case, collaboration enables teachers and local people to learn, change and be renewed. We must understand that schools and communities are not interacting as fixed entities but emerging together out of their collaboration. Communities supporting children’s growth means the socialization of education, a shift from just leaving education in the hands of schools or mothers.

4. Management of venues and coordination of school-community collaboration

In order to bring about collaboration as such, we must create venues for school-community collaboration and coordinate the various people and activities involved.

In order to do this, we must first learn from our society’s accumulated experience of building day-to-day relationships between schools and communities and revitalize it. Constant communication between schools and parents/local people using various media provides the foundation for school-community collaboration.

This alone, however, is not enough to promote school-community collaboration today. Depending on the actual situations in communities and schools, we must also utilize school management councils, school counselors, school support regional headquarters and other institutions. The establishment of school administrative councils and school councilors is considered for school governance, but parents and local people may not always be interested in school governance or administration. In fact, many of them are more interested in the community activities to support bringing up children and in educational activities at school. Therefore, these bodies must not be too focused on school governance but recognize the importance of educational collaboration centered on children’s growth. In order to promote collaboration, we must make use of human-resource data banks at school support regional headquarters and at boards of education and ensure coordination of various resources and activities.

In order to promote collaboration in this way, we must redefine the leadership at schools. Leadership here does not mean that one person or a few in management present visions and goals to lead people. It is the ability to design the venues for collaboration, facilitate active communication, organize discussion and make democratic decisions. In other words, management of venues and facilitation will be needed to improve schools in the future.

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Noriaki Mizumoto

(nmizumot@human.tsukuba.ac.jp)

Historically Accumulated Practices 1: Approaches of schools to local communities and families

- ▶ **Newsletters** on the school, grade, class, health, school lunches, etc.
In some cases, newsletters are distributed to or circulated among all households in the community.
- ▶ **Home visits**
Periodically (usually once a year) or on an as-needed basis
For better communication with parents and better understanding of the community
When students commit crimes in the community, teachers sometimes get involved.
- ▶ **Class observation, open house days, homeroom teachers meet with parents**
To deepen people's understanding of schools and to facilitate teacher-parent communication
- ▶ **"Communication notebooks," report cards, meetings with individual students and parents**
Day-to-day and periodic exchanges of information for better communication
- ▶ **PTAs**
PTAs promote mutual understanding between teachers and parents through meetings, seminars and study trips. They also support improving school grounds, etc.
In some communities, not only parents but also local people become PTA members.
- ▶ **Invitation of local people to school events and their collaboration**
e.g. Elderly people are invited on sports days and to school plays
- ▶ **Participation of students and teachers in community events**
Collaboration of schools in cultural festivals, sports events and events to show respect for elderly citizens
School facilities open to local people for public use

Historically Accumulated Practices 2:

Communities' support of children's growth and collaboration with schools

- ▶ **Bringing up children through community activities**
Children play important parts in local festivals and other events.
- ▶ **Children's associations, sports clubs**
Children are brought up together in the community through recreational events, volunteer activities, sports, etc.
- ▶ **Nursery schools, after-school childcare, community centers and libraries**
Bringing up children at welfare facilities and social education facilities, providing places for children to go to and feel secure
- ▶ **Offering resources for schools' educational activities**
Offering farm land, collaborating in educational activities
- ▶ **Concept of schools as "common community assets"**

Today's Situation: Increasingly complicated educational challenges at schools and changing communities

- ▶ Mature society of Japan
Achieving economic affluence, facing environmental issues, globalization
- ▶ Changing concept of academic skills—PISA-type skills
- ▶ Changing expectations of parents on education and expanding disparities
- ▶ Population mobility in urban areas
- ▶ Decreasing and graying population in rural areas
- ▶ Decentralization reforms being implemented
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- ▶ Diversity within schools, need strong organizing powers
- ▶ Need redefinition of communities and schools and rebuilding of their relationship

Roles of Communities 1: Providing learning resources and opportunities

- ▶ **Resources for activities within schools**
Temporary full-time and part-time teachers who serve as homeroom teachers and subject teachers
Special part-time teachers for team-teaching and for teaching subjects and other areas of their expertise
School volunteers who support integrated-study classes, help students with special needs, read books to students, etc.
- ▶ **Resources for activities outside schools**
Venues and teaching materials for life-environment studies, integrated studies, etc.
Provision of knowledge
Provision of opportunities for career education, collaboration in work experience
- ▶ **Complex facilities:** integration of schools and welfare facilities, social facilities, etc.
- ▶ **Resources to ensure children's safety and for risk management**
Local homes and business establishments to provide refuge to children in emergencies
Protection of children on their way to and from school, safety patrols while taking a walk or driving
Elderly citizens taking a walk through school halls

Roles of Communities 2: Creativity and emotional support through collaboration

- ▶ **Identification of visions**
Identification of visions for the schools, children and for the community through collaboration between local people and school staff
- ▶ **Producing ideas**
Broad perspectives and different viewpoints within schools lead to many ideas on school management, educational activities and school events
- ▶ **Mutual understanding**
Communities understanding schools—school issues, teachers' jobs other than teaching
Schools understanding communities—people's lives in the communities and expectations of parents and local people
- ▶ **Emotional support**
Understanding emotionally difficult jobs of teachers (an increasing number of teachers are suffering from mental illnesses), and giving emotional support
- ▶ **Emergence of both schools and communities**
School-communities collaborations enable both schools and communities to learn, change and be renewed.
- ▶ **Socialization of education**—a shift from leaving education in the hands of schools and mothers

For School-Community Collaboration: Management of venues and coordination

- ▶ **Importance of day-to-day relationship**
 - Learn from the historic accumulation of experience and revitalize it
- ▶ **Utilization of institutions such as school management councils, school councilors, school support regional headquarters, etc.**
 - Not too focused on governance functions
 - Collaboration centered on children's growth
 - Coordination of various resources and activities
- ▶ **Redefinition of leadership:** Management of venues and facilitation
 - Leadership means the ability to design venues, facilitate active communication, organize discussions and make democratic decisions.