

Making Schools as Learning Communities



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Education based on the philosophy of “learning communities”

We are trying to reform our school into a school as Learning Community. It is based on the philosophy expressed by Professor Sato Manabu, who is a professor of Gakushuin University, a professor emeritus of The University of Tokyo. All the elementary and junior high schools in Ushiku City have already introduced the philosophy and are carrying out lesson studies every month.

The philosophy consists of these three principles: the principle of democracy, the principle of public collaborating and the principle of excellence.

The following are “Frequently Asked Questions about Collaborative Learning.

Section 1

About “Developing schools as learning communities”

1. What is meant by “Schools as learning communities”?

The school is not only a place for children to learn, it is also a place for parents and guardians, local residents and teachers to learn and grow together.

2. What targets are there for developing schools as learning communities?

For all children to be having fun learning without anyone being left behind, for all teachers to develop their teaching specialties, and for parents and guardians and community members to keep participating and collaborating with the school while learning.

3. How will the development of these kinds of schools be carried out?

While the development of these kinds of schools continues, children’s learning will be taken seriously and the process will be based around research into lessons. This is because any child wants to improve on their current self and to achieve this they hope to learn about the unknown. “Lessons” are the largest amounts of time dedicated to achieving these goals.

Section 2:

About *manabiai* (collaborative learning)

4. What is *manabiai*?

It is self-directed work with friends and objects (such as textbooks and other materials), connected to learning while making enquiries as a group. As opposed to definitions of “study” which are orientated towards “doing the best you can on your own” without much emphasis on friends or materials, *manabiai* is learning which builds one’s own power while cooperatively tackling learning themes or subjects.

5. Why is *manabiai* necessary?

In society today, work in teams while paying attention to appropriate relationships with people is becoming increasingly important. *Manabiai* is a way of learning which seeks to make individuals able to produce their own, new opinions while continuously considering other peoples’ different ways of thinking.

6. What are the aims of *manabiai*?

It is not waiting for somebody to help in times where there happens to be trouble or distress, it is about raising one’s own power to appeal to others to provide assistance and support through collaborative learning and developing better human relationships. By developing better human relationships children will reach a point where they are able to feel secure when they study (as they are able to say when they do not understand and they feel they have their own place in the classroom). While borrowing their friends’ power, they will be able to continue learning until they reach understanding and they will also attain a definite improvement in their learning ability. Through this good cycle, learners can aim to be uplifted by a feeling a sense of self-utility and by improving their human relationships and learning ability.

7. What tangible results will occur from this approach?

This approach cannot lead to solutions without long-term consideration. Since this approach cannot be realised with the power of a single individual, learners will use and think about textbooks and other materials (including concrete objects and objects related to daily activities). Since the approach cannot be realised alone, while aiming to succeed learners will enquire about their friends’ opinions and express their own opinions in return.

8. Will concentrating on high level issues result in a reliable improvement in learning ability?

It is necessary to build from the foundations of subjects. Nevertheless, there is more than just being taught the basics. Moreover, no child will be limited to studying only the basics in order. Children with a smaller will to study have a stronger opinion that they are weak in a “building on the basics style of learning” and they may have greater will power trying hard to learn about and understand issues in which they are deeply interested. Individuals can also become aware that they lack understandings when explaining a concept to someone and this can result in a chance to return and review the basics. In this way the power to think and present becomes necessary when trying hard to tackle what are considered to be “high level issues” and when acquiring a developing knowledge of the basics.

Section 3

About lesson procedures

9. Won't some children become unable to think for themselves and constantly ask their friends “What should I do here?”

Learning is when one person becomes able to do something that they couldn't do alone. What is done alone cannot be said to be confirmed study or new learning. Instead learning can be said to occur when something that cannot be done by any child working alone is approached. If individuals happen to be unable to do something they shouldn't wait for somebody to help, they should take their own initiative in appealing to others, seeking assistance, seeking opinions and seeking comments about their ideas; they should also acquire the power to develop a wealth of their own understandings. In brief, there is dependence on others, but the children who can't think of ideas and answers alone are able to acquire ways of learning and self-developed ways of thinking leading to them gaining the power of “self-reliance”.

10. Won't the children who are always responding to friends saying “Teach me this.” and constantly explaining things lose the chance to improve themselves?

Even if a person believes they understand something, explaining it so that another person can understand is not a simple matter. When friends appeal for explanation, he or she will find it necessary to convert their understanding into words or images once again. Therefore they will gain a chance to notice occasions when their understandings are mistaken or shallow and gain chances to deepen their understandings.

11. Does *manabiai* mean that teachers won't teach anything?

For students to be able to study deeply in lessons there are various areas of concern. While observing the form of students' learning, teachers urge students to work together, continuously pay attention to textbooks and learning materials, recognise issues which cause activities to stop and encourage learners to listen to the expressed approaches and questions of other children, while stimulating new thinking in return. Teachers won't assertively teach answers and facts, but they will become "people who teach" ways of realising aims and ways of learning as well as being "the coordinators of deep learning".

12. Why do students learn in groups of 4?

Because 4 is the optimum number of people for everyone to learn. If the number of people decreases the diversity of opinions will decrease, but if the number increases some people will become unable to participate. In groups of 4, people will definitely be able to participate in learning, exchange ideas and will not be able to become idle. In the classroom, where possible, groups should be mixed according to gender.

13. Why in the 1st and 2nd grade of elementary school is learning done in pairs not groups?

Up to the 2nd grade of elementary, students want to feel connected to their teachers and they have strong desire for teachers' approval. Even when learning in pairs, children feel more secure if they feel connected to teachers. As the school years continue and learners want to hear the opinions of students other than their partners groups of 4 will be introduced.

14. Why are the students desks arranged in the shape of the Japanese *katakana* character *ko* (コ) or U-shape?*

In *manabiai* lessons, teachers understand that anyone in the classroom can become a speaker or a listener. The best arrangement of desks to promote circumstances for mutual discussion and listening is an arrangement of desks in "the *ko* pattern". When a large space in the middle is not especially practical it becomes "the dense *ko* pattern".

**Translation note: this refers to a U shaped seating arrangement of desks and chairs. In Japanese classrooms each child has their own chair and desk, which can be easily moved to change the seating order of students or to make groups.*

15. Are notebooks not used in *manabiai*?

Of course they are used! However, unlike instruction leading up to this point learners will not simply copy what teachers write on the blackboard without thinking. It is very important activity for students to make a record, in their own words, about things they don't understand and about the kind of understandings

they possess. To promote important processes of consideration, it is useful for students to learn about establishing a pattern of reconstructing points they understand, points they don't understand, things said by their friends and so on in their notebooks. In this way things learnt will certainly become reinforced and will provide guidance for the learning of one's future self.

16. Why do teachers talk quietly?

The more teachers speak in a loud voice, the less children listen to what is being said. Children will be inclined to listen calmly if teachers speak as if they are talking. Listeners will be more inclined to listen carefully if speakers talk at a natural volume.

17. What are teachers' duties when groups are collaboratively learning?

Teachers do not move around as the only source of instruction, their responsibility is to coordinate collaborative learning. By no means are they "not teaching".

Section 4

About parents and guardians' participation in learning*.

**Translation note: this mainly refers to participation in scheduled open lessons held for parents and guardians several times in a school a year.*

18. What aims are there for participation in learning?

Parents and guardians should aim to get a deeper understanding of children and the difficult and interesting aspects of learning through watching children's patterns of learning while simultaneously learning alongside them. It is hoped the parents and guardian's participation will be a topic of conversation at home and be a chance for family discussion about the school's lessons.

19. What positive things can parents and guardians do?

The first recommendation is to enter the classroom and together with your child, from your child's point of view think about the subjects being learnt. As far as the basics go this is all that is required. You don't have to teach them anything in particular. Taking part in the learning cheerfully is enough. It is also said that a focus not only on parent child relations, but also a focus on collaborative participation between parents and guardians contributes to the development of their mutual understandings.