# Ideal Japanese Social Studies Researchers:

# Researcher as a Supporter for Teachers' Aims Talk and their

# Gatekeeping

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What is the aim which social studies researchers have in relation to research the teaching and learning of social studies and develop theories? The answers to this question would be diverse within any individuals. Although it is almost impossible for me to generalize all Japanese social studies researchers' purposes for their own research, a number of Japanese researchers tended to share a similar interest for teacher's aims talk or his/her good gatekeeping. The concepts of "a teacher as a curricula-instructional gatekeeper" and "aims talk" were introduced into Japan in 2012 when the US social studies scholar, Stephen Thornton's book *Teaching Social Studies That Matters* (2005) was translated into Japanese. After translated book was published, many Japanese social studies researchers began to use these terms such as, "gatekeeping (gatekeeper)" in Japan since 2012 (e.g., Horita, 2015; Yasuda, 2014). However, it seems that many Japanese researchers had already had a similar concern without using these terms before 2012. This study's purpose is to review some Japanese essays that are focused on gatekeeping or aims talk, and to discuss why we have been interested in these concepts for decades.

## Two stages of teacher's transformation

In order to identify the Japanese social studies researchers' concern, I would like to focus two essays. One essay was written by the US educational psychologist, Bransford (2000), on how good teachers transform subject matter into their lesson designs and demonstrate their pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). The other was written by a Japanese social studies researcher, Kusahara (2017), on good teachers' curricular-instructional gatekeeping. Transforming and gatekeeping are very similar concepts because both focus on the teacher's creativity in regard to lesson designing based on subject contents or themes.

However, we found some different between Kusahara(2017) and Bransford (2000). Bransford's discussion emphasized how to take appropriate steps to address students' misunderstanding (conceptual barrier) in order to teach the subject matter. On the other hand, Kusahara (2017) focused on teaching practices as creating democratic citizens. He emphasized the importance of social studies practices which could contribute to the social studies educational goal.

Kusahara (2006) also referred the relationship between rationale and practice. He proposed "Four Stage Theory" and the feature of the theory is to divide four process of lesson designing and

distinguish between teachers' "how to teach" talk and their "why we teach" talk. By using Kusahara's stage theory, Bransford's discussion mainly focused on the top two ("practice" and "plan") stages, while Kusahara's discussion focus bottom two ("model" and "theory") stages.
The below is the long quote from Kusahara (2006, 37-42).

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What is "the practice for teaching school subject?" Simply put, it means a group of classified teaching hypotheses that teachers have for practicing (figure1). When teaching a school subject, every teacher possesses his or her own teaching hypotheses which, he or she thinks, will provide the most effective lessons to students. Throughout a series of lesson practice, each teacher tests these hypotheses either deliberately or tacitly. Some teaching hypotheses originate from the teacher's long experience in class and others from secondhand information provided by teacher's manuals or pedagogical textbooks. Some hypotheses are elaborate and systematic, while others are not so. Regardless of these factors, no lesson should proceed without such teaching hypotheses.
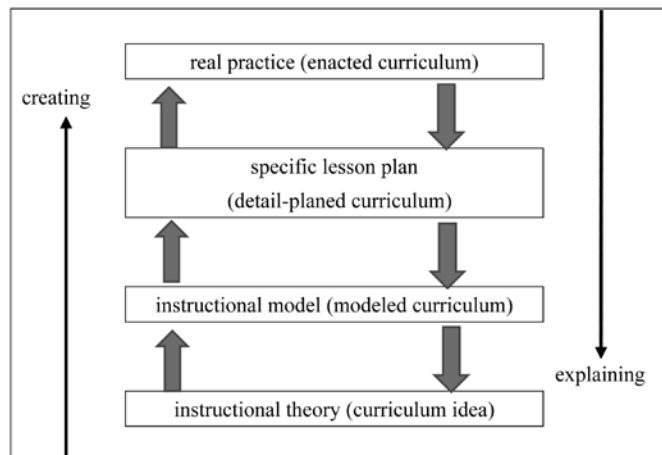


**Figure1: teaching hypotheses that teachers have for practicing**

The final performance which results from these teaching hypothesis may be referred to as "real practice." Positioned before this is most detailed and contextualized hypothesis which may be referred to as "specific lesson plan." It is sometimes document-based (for example, detailed lesson guidelines, teaching memos, and blackboard planning of teachers), but frequently it is simply formed in the mind of the teacher. It focused on not only students' misunderstanding, concerns, and personality, but also time-schedule, regional culture, parents' concern, and educational resources.

This conclusive teaching hypothesis does not originate haphazardly. It depends on a reliable pre-staged teaching hypothesis, "instructional model." Many teachers may learn this "instruction model" in university lectures, in workshops conducted by pedagogical research groups, in discussions with colleagues at school, and from pedagogical textbooks. This is the ideal teaching styles or model type for specific instruction of school subjects. It is not

so contextualized, not so tied up with personalities and characters of each students.

The process of designing the "instruction model" needs to be supported by another clearly defined teaching hypothesis. This hypothesis is called the "instructional theory" which explains the principle of combining educational aims or ideal goal, subject matter and method.

"The practice for teaching school subjects" can be regarded as a series of classified teaching hypotheses. In figure1, the upper stage contains the more specific, concrete, and temporary hypothesis that is only applicable in a limited area and limited period; meanwhile, the lower stage contains the more general, abstract, and universal hypothesis that is widely applicable. The intellectual process of transforming a more general and abstract hypothesis into a more specific and concrete hypothesis is commonly called "creating" while the analytical process of extracting a more general and abstract hypothesis from a more specific and concrete hypothesis may be referred to as "explaining."

First, as in the lower two boxes, the instructional "theory" and "model" are the explanatory framework in an ideal circumstance. This circumstance excludes the emotion of persons concerned and the extenuating conditions in the particular classroom. This theory and model can be described as a general design of the implemented "practice" as well as an intentional "plan." In other words, they could be regarded as a conceptual system that explains the following: (1) the theoretical purposes of the school subject; (2) a reasonable method for realizing them; (3) the reasonable teaching-learning process that is modeled by that method; and (4) the effect that process will have on the learners.

However, the teachers' knowledge of the instructional "theory" and "model" is one thing; their ability to apply the "theory" and "model" in their own classrooms is an entirely different matter.

In the second box, the "specific lesson plan" is a detailed teaching plot transformed from the instructional "theory" and "model" on the supposition of specific instructional situations. Classroom practices for teaching school subjects are conditioned not only by the purposefulness of the educational aim, but also by the teacher's and learner's surroundings, for example, the readiness of the learners, needs of the learners or their parents, governmental educational policies, governmental curriculum guidelines, and so on. All teachers design their lesson plan and implement the "practice" while considering these conditions simultaneously.

Moreover, although teachers can design a useful "plan;" whether they can put this plan into practice or not is a different question. Even if teachers design a rational and realistic "plan," not all teachers can improvise and implement it into classroom practice.

In the top box, "real practice" is the teacher's embodied performance of the curriculum and instruction plan. This takes place while communicating freely with learners as if they were co-workers.

(Kusahara, 2006: 37-42)

## Why Japanese social studies researchers emphasize "aims talk"

### Reason (1): "learnification" of education

Bransford, and the first PCK advocate Shulman (1987, 2004) tended to lack the consciousness that their educational discussion does not include any humanities goals. This is to say, their educational goal is to understand subject matters itself. Their education is called "education for understanding." Understanding is not the same as comprehension. Understanding in this sense is used to describe deep-learning through academic professional inquiry, or problem-solving. "Education for understanding" means deep, higher order, and disciplined learning for all students. Many learning psychologists advocate this conception, yet some educational philosophers, especially citizenship education supporters, criticize this conception. One of the most famous active leaders of these critics could be Gert Biesta. Biesta (2015) criticized how recent learning psychologists' discussions are prone to focus only on "how to teach" talk (learning talk) but avoid "why we teach" talk (teaching talk). He said some learning psychologists regard thinking as to why we teach as an un-academic question since this is not an empirical theme (like Bransfords called "speculative talk.") Biesta called this phycologists' trend the "learnification" of education.

Thornton (2005) focuses on "why we teach" talk, namely "aims talk." When Kusahara and I met him in the 2009 National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) conference, he pointed out that the "learnification" trend appeared in recent US social studies research. Moreover, he told us that there are many works that had a little concern for conventional social studies and the history of social studies. It seems that similar situation was happened in Japan. Nowadays, US learning psychologists' articles and books, including Bransford (Ed.) (2000). *How People Learn*, were translated into Japanese. These translations brought into Japan not only a learning-psychology-centered academic trend but also the "learnification" of education from the US. The most dangerous problem could be that the researchers have developed a de-politicized mind, or in other words, an insensitivity to (or mindlessness of) ideology or the latent value that each academic disciplines has. Many leaning psychologists must be unable to select which academic disciplines or contents are valid for making a good democratic citizen because they think that all academic disciplines are equally valid for all human life and society. They have no idea that some discipline contribute to democratic society while others do not (for example, geographic education based on de-politicized static topography usually falls into environmentalism, which has little affordance to a democratic society). Perhaps, it is only because it is "academic discipline" that they welcome, rather than criticize, a de-politicized geographic curriculum covered with static topographic learning activities or a history curriculum occupied by "history for its own" learning (only if this type of curriculum gives students deep-understanding of the nature of the disciplines).

### Reason (2): discipline- centered national curriculum

In Japan, the national curriculum has had considerable power over subject teachers since 1955

when conservative politicians entered the administration. The national curriculum tends to reflect conservative values and perspectives, and many Japanese educational researchers and political scientists have criticized this tendency. For example, Moriwake (1996) pointed out the conservative nature of Japan's elementary social studies curriculum by comparing 3rd grade social studies state curricula and textbooks in the US with those in Japan. During the 1970's, US environmental expanding curriculum, especially that of 3rd grade, were changed from one-area study to multi-area-comparative study. This change came about from the US social studies theorist, Paul Hanna's curriculum theory. Kusahara (1997) also analyzed curriculum materials developed by Hanna, and explained the rationale for the curriculum structure designed to promote more democratic environment for students. The purposes of their essays were not only to criticize the conservative nature of the social studies national curriculum but also to suggest a new approach toward curriculum organization, thereby promoting a more progressive structure. Many other Japanese social studies researchers also became interested in US social studies curriculum materials, especially for the new social studies era. Of interest were MACOS, Harvard Social Studies, HSGP, and so on. The number of analyzed US social studies curriculum materials is at least 100 in Japan.

Many researchers got interest in these curriculum materials because Japanese teachers have little chance of changing the national curriculum structure radically, though the Japanese government has not invaded academia freely. Among Japanese colleges and universities, college educators and researchers retain the right to say "no" to the government. Some sensible school teachers have supported this researchers' culture because it is difficult for them to say "no." And another reason is that many US curricula seemed more radical and purposeful for cultivating democratic citizenship to Japanese researchers.

Since 1998, the Japanese government has pushed for deregulation of the national curriculum. Without some exceptions (e.g. territorial problems), compelling force of the national social studies curriculum over teachers has weakened. Naturally this change has allowed teachers to have greater control over the design of their lessons than they had previously. Accordingly, it has placed a burden on teachers. On the other hand, during this decade, the Japanese government has begun to promote collaboration between university, high school and junior high school, emphasizing discipline-and-competency centered curricula in all subject areas. If these changes meet with teachers' discontent as they design their lessons, many teachers and —considering that Japanese learning psychologists are indifference to aims talk (say, their all-discipline-welcome tendency) — many educational researchers may welcome this curriculum change uncritically. Thus, they will be more indifferent to aims talk than they were before, and they will not be able to recognize the latent values of the national curriculum because its academic and de-politicized face seems "objective" or "value-free." If the Japanese government changes the social studies national curriculum to be more de-politicized (e.g., develops discipline-centered curriculum based on personal ethics or micro-economic problems, historical topics not relevant to our life, or static topographical topics), many researchers who are indifferent to aims talk will be supporters, not critics, of this conservative curriculum change.

## Reason (3): lesson study cannot fill a gap between teachers and researchers

If teachers regard themselves as good curricular-instructional gatekeepers, the recent deregulation of the national curriculum will give them a huge chance to make their enacted curriculum more democratic and meaningful for their students. Aims talk will aid them in being good gatekeepers. Barton and Levstik (2004) also claim that "aims talk" plays a large role than PCK in making good gatekeepers. In their book *Teaching History for the Common Good,* they introduce the example of one experienced history teacher they had taught in university. She had a doctor's degree in history, had good PCK and other knowledge for teaching, and understood the nature of history. She was a good performer when she was in their university. However, when she returned to high school, her teaching changed to fit more conventional teaching style. Barton and Levstik argues that PCK did not give her the motivation to change her teaching style. However, they claims that aims talk would give her more motivation to change her style because commitment to an education goal is a strong incentive to change teaching style, and aims talk provides this commitment. If we agree with their argument, we are left with one big problem: how should we teach aims talk to teachers?

One potential choice is holding "lesson study" for teachers. Lesson study is a concept that originates in Japanese teachers' culture, in recent times, many US educational researchers, for example James Stigler (1999), have shown much interest in, and they introduced Japanese lesson study all over the world. However, some Japanese researchers have reported that lesson study may not be a valid method for teaching aims talk to teachers. For example, Nakao (2013) observed a social studies focused lesson study held by some Japanese junior high teachers and concluded that their discussions focused only on "how to teach" talk, and not "why we teach" talk.

Watanabe (2016) also did the similar experience as Nakao's. In 2015, A DVD which is recorded from a veteran famous Japanese social studies teacher's practice was sent to seven people by a publisher. Within the seven people, four of them were teacher educators (including me), and the other three were veteran teachers. After watching the DVD, we analysed and evaluated the practice without any discussion with others and send the final reports. Actually, this process was quite similar to the approaches employed in a general lesson study. The DVD and the all of the report was published in 2016. After publishing, I found a big gap between the reports of the 3 veteran teachers and those of the 4 teacher educators. The veteran teachers' reports tended to show various viewpoints, but they did not mention about "why do we teach this content using this method?" On the other hands, 3 of the 4 teacher educators did ask this questions. Although most of Japanese veteran teachers certainly had a number of lesson study, these findings would suggest that lesson study does not cultivate teachers' aims talk. This is not a surprising result because lesson study tends to lure our attention toward detailed teacher-student interactions. Lesson study may be valid for microscopic analysis, but it does not seem to be appropriate for macroscopic analysis. Lesson study among teachers may strengthen them "how to teach" talk, but it may fail to produce radical viewpoints.

## Difficulty of classification of teaching practices

Another effective alternative for teaching aims talk, which Barton and Levstik (2004) recommend, is (1) introducing many repertoires of social studies teaching practice to teachers, (2) asking them to discuss which repertoire is more valid (or invalid) for making democratic citizens, and (3) asking them to discuss when and for whom this repertoire is the most valid. This procedure is somewhat similar to Japanese social studies conventional curriculum study approach. Comparing many, sometimes unknown, teaching practices or theories will evoke teacher's radical questions such as "why we teach." These questioning will be the first step for teachers to identify themselves as curricula-instructional gatekeepers.

Here is one big problem: how can we rationally and effectively classify various kinds of teaching practice? According to Kusahara (2015), the answer could be different between the US and Japan. He explained that Japanese scholar tend to use top-down approach and the US scholar seem to use bottom up approach. To Kusahara (2015) explained many Japanese social studies researchers set the possible purpose of subject teaching at the beginning. Then they develop the exemplar practice by using "the purpose-rational instructional theory" (described as Figure 2). On the other hand, the US scholar set the purpose after collecting and analyzing the practices (described Figure3). He named this approach, bottom-up approach.

The US bottom-up approach may be able to suggest more practicable teaching strategies than Japanese top-down approach. On the other hands, Japanese conventional approach (e.g., Kusahara, 2004) may be able to suggest more radical teaching strategies than the US approach. It may be impossible to decide one-side. Talk about aims talk all over the world will contribute not only to progress of global educational research field but also to teachers' autonomy much more.
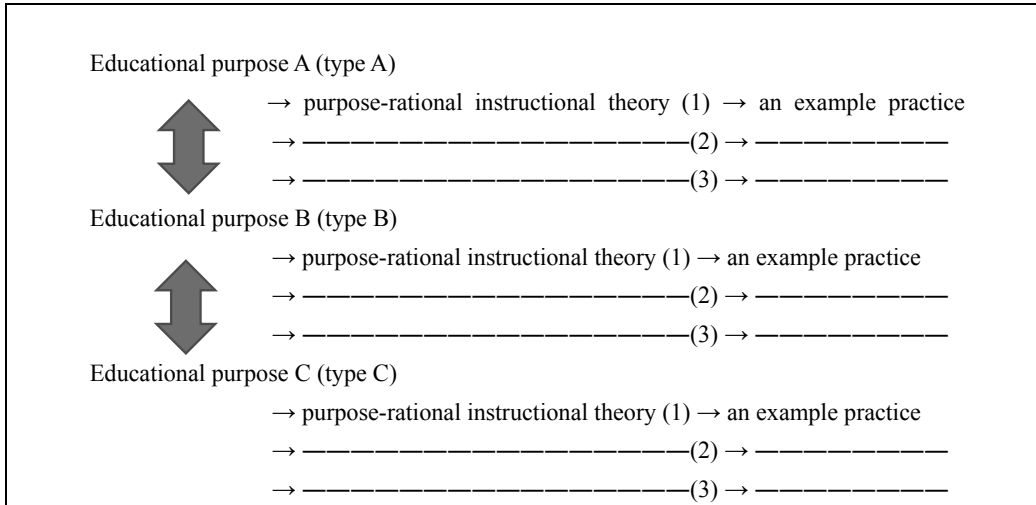
Educational purpose A (type A)

→ purpose-rational instructional theory (1) → an example practice
→ ——————————————(2) → ——————
→ ——————————————(3) → ——————

Educational purpose B (type B)

→ purpose-rational instructional theory (1) → an example practice
→ ——————————————(2) → ——————
→ ——————————————(3) → ——————

Educational purpose C (type C)

→ purpose-rational instructional theory (1) → an example practice
→ ——————————————(2) → ——————
→ ——————————————(3) → ——————

**Figure 2: Japanese approach of classification of the practices**

Teaching Practice (stance A)

→ feasible purpose (1)
→ —————— (2)
→ —————— (3)

Teaching Practice (stance B)

→ feasible purpose (1)
→ —————— (2)
→ —————— (3)

Teaching Practice (stance C)

→ feasible purpose (1)
→ —————— (2)
→ —————— (3)

Socio-cultural conditions
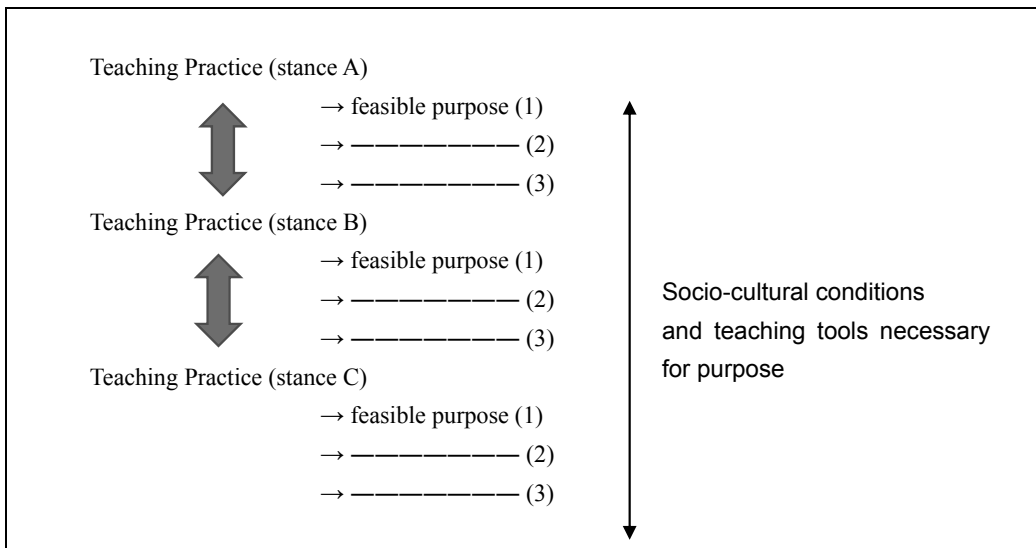and teaching tools necessary
for purpose

**Figure 3: US approach of classification of the practices**

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