Ministerial Co-operation on Policy Making in Contemporary Japan
-A Case of Career Education

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Introduction

This paper attempts to describe the detail of ministerial co-operation in contemporary Japan, by focusing on a case of career education.

For a long time, it has been said that the structure of educational administration in Japan is a ‘solid top-down’ system, and education policy making is also done by the ‘top-down’ style. Education policy making in Japan has been characterized as ‘solid top-down’.

However, it is said that several changes have occurred in such a system since the end of the 20th century. In the administrative reformation, a ‘solid top-down’ system is said to become out-of-date. In spite of these stories, there are few researches focusing on the ‘new’ system of contemporary education policy making in Japan, especially on the change at ministerial level. So, this paper attempts to describe a detail of such changes by focusing on a case of career education.

Contents of this paper

This paper consists of five sections other than introduction and this section. As a background to the topic, the first section explains the conventional system of Japanese education policy making and its changes brought about by the administrative reformation in 1990s and 2000s. The second section is an explanation of the reason why this paper chooses career education as an example. The third section is an explanation of the research questions and the research methods. The forth section is a detailed analysis of research questions. The fifth

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section—and the last section of this paper, is the summation of this research and the suggestion about ministerial co-operation and ministerial co-ordination—which is a process of building ministerial co-operation.

Conventional system of education policy making in Japan and its changes

For a long time since the end of the Second World War, the structure of educational administration in Japan has been characterized as a ‘solid top-down’ system. Ministry of Education (MOE) has been in the top of the system, and boards of education in each local government have been subordinate to MOE. Such a structure was built as early as 1950s, and it has been kept for about 50 years (Ogiwara1996, Kumagai1994).

However, by virtue of the administrative reformation in 1990s and 2000s, several changes have appeared in such a structure. By the decentralizing reformation, not a little authority is given to local governments. It becomes much easier for them to make their own original policies, but it also forces them to bear more financial burden and accountability. On the other hand, as a result of the deregulating reformation, it is now easier for private sectors to join in the process of decision making on education policy. In addition to these, it is said that the connection between ministries concerning education policy making has changed. For example, Cabinet Office comes to lead education policy making, and the power of the total management ministries, for example Ministry of Finance (MOF) and Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), is increasing (Ogawa and Katsuno2008).

However, compared to the number of researches focusing on the changes caused by the decentralizing reformation or deregulating reformation, the researches that treat the change of the connection between ministries in the process of education policy making in contemporary Japan are scarce. And, researches focusing on such changes are limited to the ones treating brand-new administrative affairs—for example the Information and Communication Technology education. So, based on this background, this paper describes the detail of the change arising in connections between ministries relating to education policy making by focusing on career education.

The reason for selecting career education

To be compared with the conventional education policy making process, a case which is good for analysis of this research should be equipped with the three
conditions below:

1. A similar policy had been implemented for a long time before administrative reformation was brought about.
2. It is clear that more than one ministry joins in the process of policy making.
3. It is clear that Cabinet Office (CO) joins in the process of policy making, because CO was established for helping to improve ministerial co-ordination in the process of policy making.

Considering the conditions above, career education is a good example. The reasons are as follows:

1. As a similar policy to contemporary career education, ‘vocational education’ and ‘course guidance’ have been implemented for a long time in schools in Japan. The meaning of career education today is nurturing the sense of vocation and labour in school education, especially in primary, junior-high and high schools. And compared to that, conventional vocational education and course guidance are surely very similar. The purpose of vocational education is training for acquiring specific vocational skills and knowledge, and that of course guidance is helping students to decide on the life course of them. On the other hand, the policy about vocational education and course guidance was exclusively made by MOE. So, it is good to compare contemporary policy making process in career education with policy making about vocational education and course guidance.

2. In Japan, four ministries show their policy about career education on their website. The four ministries are Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Science Technology (MEXT), Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW), Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF). This fact clearly shows that more than one ministry join in the policy of career education.

3. In the year 2003, the council called ‘The Meeting Making Strategy for Young People to Be Independent and Challenge’ was established in Cabinet Office, and this council presented a policy document called ‘Plan for Young People’s Independence and Challenge’, which constitutes the main part of contemporary career education policy in Japan. So, it is also clear that Cabinet Office has some
connection to making career education policy.

Because of these points, career education is a good case to examine the detail of ministerial cooperation in contemporary Japan.

On the other hand, it is true that the participation of MAFF in career education policy is very limited. MAFF participates only in the part of agricultural experience program. So, this paper does not treat the participation of MAFF and pays attention to the cooperation between MEXT, MHLW and METI.

**Research questions and methods**

In order to examine the detail of ministerial cooperation on career education policy, this paper sets three research questions. The questions are below:

1. At which stage did these ministries co-operate? – that is, to show the stage in which three ministries (MEXT, MHLW and METI) co-operated. Did they co-operate before the council starts so as to sophisticate their plan handing in the council? Did they co-operate during the council to make a plan together? Or, did they co-operate after the council so as to accomplish the plan made at the council efficiently? And, in addition to showing the stage in which they co-operate, it also examines the reason why they could co-operate in the stage and couldn’t in the other stages.

2. How did they co-operate? – that is, to show their position in the co-operation. Did one ministry take a superior position vis-à-vis others? Did two ministries substantially co-operate and the other one support these two leading ministries? Or, did three ministries stand on equal footing?

3. What was the engine of this co-operation? – that is, to show the reason why they could build effective co-operation. The setting up of the council which more than one ministry attends does not mean that ministries attending it build a co-operation. It is often the case that one ministry makes some part of policy by itself and not paying attention to the actions of other ministries even if several ministries attend one council, so the plan making in such a council tends to become a patched-work plan (Morita 2006). However, concerning the career education in contemporary Japan, the plan is made through the co-operation of three ministries mentioned above. So, this attempts to show the engine which can build an effective co-operation.
In order to answer these three questions, this paper mainly uses a qualitative method. As a material of analysis, this mainly uses the outputs of the council three ministries attended and the data of the interviews of policymakers—governmental officials belonging to each ministry.

Since the minutes of the multi-ministerial council meetings are not available, this uses the policy document ‘outputs of the council to make the process of the meeting clear. On the other hand, the report broadcasted from the meeting which is held at each ministry at the same time of the council called ‘The Meeting Making Strategy for Young People to Be Independent and Challenge’ is also used as a tool of analysis. By doing so, this paper attempts to elucidate the detail of the process of the co-operation of these three ministries.

The interviews with the policymakers of each ministry were conducted in October and November 2009. The data is also used as analytical tools. By these two ways of analysis, this paper answers the research questions above.

As an analytical frame, this paper uses the theory of ministerial co-ordination system. This sees ministerial co-ordination as a process of building ministerial co-operation.

Analysis –Answering research questions

The stage three ministries co-operates

In order to answer the question ‘At which stage did these ministries co-operate?’, comments of policymakers belonging to MEXT and MHLW are deeply suggestive. The comments are below:

When making a policy about career education in MEXT, the number of communicating with policymakers in other ministries has much increased. Though such information exchange is informal –there is no conference to have such a communication, and always we promise to meet by telephone a few days before meeting, it is very important. By doing so, we can make our own plan after recognizing other ministries’ ideas. (A policymaker in MEXT said.)

Often, I communicate with a policymaker in MEXT and METI by telephone. We came to make a plan with paying attention to the action of MEXT and METI, in order to avoid both making the same plan independently
or making an empty area where no rule or policy exists. (A policymaker in MHLW said.)

These comments suggest that they communicate before they make their own policy. On the other hand, looking at a policy document, there is no program which more than one ministry make together. So, these show that they co-operate before they attend the council. The stage they co-ordinated and built a co-operation was that before the council took place.

And, in addition to that, it is true that it is much more difficult to co-operate after making a policy document. By the discussion in the council called ‘The Meeting Making Strategy for Young People to Be Independent and Challenge’, ‘career education co-ordinator’ system was established. However, after this co-ordinator started to work, METI claimed that it was needed to make the ‘career education co-ordinator license’, but MHLW objected to the claim of METI. As a result, though about three years have passed since the co-ordinator started to work, the problem of ‘career education co-ordinator license’ has not been solved yet.

By the way, it becomes clear that the stage they co-ordinated was that before attending the council. In order to hand in more effective and wasteless policy document to the council, these three ministries co-ordinated and built co-operation.

The connection between these three ministries

In order to answer the question ‘How did they co-operate?’, it is necessary to think from two viewpoints. One viewpoint is taking career education as a part of policy to assure the employment of young people, and another is taking it as a part of curricula in school education.

When taking career education as a part of policy to assure the employment of young people, the connection between these three ministries is suggested by the comment of a policymaker in METI. The comment is below:

Policymakers in MEXT and MHLW attend the committee we host. We also attend the committee which is taken place in MEXT and MHLW. And policymakers in MEXT also attend the committee held in MHLW with us. In order to build a good connection for supporting each other, we make an effort to exchange and have information in common.
This comment suggests that they stood on equal footing. Neither one ministry lead other two ministries nor one ministry was forced to co-operate with other two ministries. They co-ordinated spontaneously each other, and no ranking existed there. They stood on equal footing.

On the other hand, when taking career education as a part of curricula in school education, the connection between these three was somewhat different from that mentioned above. Policymakers in MHLW said as follows:

It is true that the ministry accounting for school education is MEXT. We must respect the events of daily school education and completeness of a school as one society. Because of the basis of several historical estimations, the school and its education today are formed. So, we must respect to the leadership of MEXT about school education.

This comment suggests that MEXT stands in a superior position about school education even today, when several ministries come to concern in making education policies. Similar comments were said by policymakers in MEXT and METI. So, it can be true that MEXT stands in a superior position when thinking career education as one of the programs of school curricula. Affairs of ministries are prescribed exhaustively and exclusively (Morita 2000), and this fact shows that the curricula of school education is a monopolized affair of MEXT even today.

Although this ‘leadership’ of MEXT is recognized by these three ministries theoretically, the scene MEXT actually shows its leadership is not seen today. This is an important point to research from now.

Generally, the connection between these ministries is equal. They stand on equal footing, and there is no ranking between these three ministries.

The engine of this co-operation

Finally, this paper examines the last research question: what was the engine of this co-operation? Even if the council which more than one ministry attends is established, it is not always the case that ministries attending it co-ordinate and build a co-operation. Rather, it can be a rare case. So, the reason why they could co-operate in career education policy is worth exploring.

In order to answer this research question, it is useful to look at ‘The Meeting about Craftsmanship’. The meeting was held in 1999, and the members of this meeting were from MOE (the predecessor of MEXT), MOL (the predecessor of
MHLW) and METI. As the name of the meeting exhibits, the purpose of the meeting was nurturing craftsmanship of Japanese people, especially young one. And three ministries above attended together, but they didn’t co-ordinate at all, let alone co-operate. About this meeting, a policymaker in MHLW said as follows:

The accomplishment of ‘The Meeting about Craftsmanship’ didn’t lead the ministerial co-operation in career education today. There is no trace that shows continuing and effective co-operation between these three ministries.

On the other hand, as shown above, when the council called ‘The Meeting Making Strategy for Young People to Be Independent and Challenge’ was held, MEXT, MHLW and METI co-ordinated and built co-operation. Then, it is a noticeable question why such difference occurs.

Directly speaking, the reason why such difference occurs is about arising public opinion. The engine improving the co-ordination of MEXT, MHLW and METI in the case of career education –especially in the council called ‘The Meeting Making Strategy for Young People to Be Independent and Challenge’, was public opinion.

During the first half of 2000s, the economic condition in Japan was so bad. And, the people called ‘NEET’² were spotlighted at that time. Problem about the employment of young people appeared on the newspaper day after day, and things concerned with the problem, including ‘NEET’, was widely known to people in Japan. So, these ministries made a strong effort to co-operate in order to struggle for this public issue.

In order to explain this clearly, this paper uses some figures. The figures are below:

Figure1 shows that even if a council more than one ministry attends is established, they do not always come to co-operate with.

² This is an abbreviation of ‘People Not in Education, Employment or Training’, and the meaning of this word in Japan is different from that in England. In Japan, people who are from 15-year-old to 34 and are not educated nor trained to be employed are called ‘NEET’ (Honda et al. 2006).
Figure 2 shows that if public opinion about some specific issue arises, a council more than one ministry attends can become an arena for co-ordination and co-operation.

And figure 3 shows that when the council becomes such an arena, ministries attending it come to co-operate.

This shows that public opinion can become a powerful engine of co-operating ministries. In this case, the engine to make MEXT, MHLW and METI co-operate was public opinion about 'NEET'.

This also shows that Cabinet Office did not play an important role to help these three ministries to co-ordinate and co-operate. This shows that even if a system for promoting co-ordination is established, it does not work automatically. In fact, in this case, the ability of Cabinet Office to make co-ordination between ministries did not work automatically.

**Conclusion and findings**

This paper shows the detail of ministerial co-operation on education policy making in contemporary Japan, by focusing on the case of career education. This research made it clear that the co-operation was done before the stage of council which related ministries attended, and the connection between those ministries were parallel, that is, those ministries stood on equal footing. In addition to those, it also became clear that the engine of this co-operation was public opinion. Public opinion about 'NEET' improved this co-ordination, and Cabinet Office, which has a
role to help co-ordination between ministries in the eyes of the law, did not always work effectively. These are the summation of the findings of this research.

In the end, this paper suggests the meaning of ministerial co-ordination—the process of building ministerial co-operation.

Ministerial co-ordination is generally divided into two. One is integrated co-ordination—co-ordination between three or more ministries, and another is co-ordination between two ministries (Makihara2009). And in this case, the ministries concerned were MEXT, MHLW and METI. So, this co-ordination was integrated co-ordination.

Anyway, such co-ordination is a process of building ministerial co-operation, and ministerial co-operation can be said as a reformation of affairs for which each ministry had accountability exclusively.

About a reformation of ministerial affairs, in Japan the reformation of ministerial map was carried out in the year 2001. When thinking about this fact and the meaning of ministerial co-ordination, it can be said that the co-ordination between ministries is the reformation of administrative structure on a governmental action level. In other words, the detail of ministerial co-ordination is so useful when thinking about the effective reformation of administrative structure, because it can become a basis of reformation of administrative structure. A reformation of administrative structure is not specific to Japan. It has been implemented in other countries, including England. So, when thinking about proper administrative structure reformation, it is useful to examine the detail of ministerial co-operation and ministerial co-ordination, which is a process of building ministerial co-operation. This paper suggests this in the end.

References
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