

# *How Integrated Study Became Expansive Learning in Japanese Elementary Schools: The Three Dimensions of Expansion*

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**Abstract:** *Yoshibee Nomura (1896-1986), an active representative practitioner of the Taisho Liberal Education Movement in Japan, proposed that schools' education be divided into two frameworks: reading and life environment studies. The former refers to children to acquiring knowledge at school, whereas the latter refers to children learning by experience and practice. Nomura also referred to these frameworks as: "education for reading a book" and "education for making a book"; or "handing down the culture of adulthood" and "creating the culture of childhood," respectively. However, both frameworks are equally important and can collectively be referred to as "the subject for life." Given that "education for making a book" is "a subject without a textbook," Nomura stated: "it goes without saying that it is more difficult to teach without textbooks than to teach with one." The Period for Integrated Study in the Japanese elementary and junior high school curriculums can be seen as this kind of "education for making a book." A book can be created because children learn through hands-on experience and practice. Such a mode of learning is not readily available education, but "expansive learning" that means "learning what is not yet there," as proposed by Yrjö Engeström. In other words, integrated study belongs to the realm of a curriculum where expansion of learning is required. Currently, it is not taught in the above-mentioned manner in Japan. Therefore, this study examined a gap in integrated study from the perspective of the three dimensions of expansion.*

**Keywords:** *Period for Integrated Study, expansive learning, three dimensions of expansion, political-ethical dimension, learning what is not yet there*

## **Introduction**

In Japan, the Period for Integrated Study has been developed to help students to: identify issues; agentively think and make decisions; develop the capabilities and skills to resolve issues efficiently; acquire learning and thinking methods; develop a positive and creative attitude toward problem solving and exploratory activities; and think about how they want to live their lives. However, since the details of the integrated study were unclear, the number of hours allocated to integrated study has been reduced to address deteriorating academic performance among students. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, universities, and schools have been exploring the following questions through trial and error: How can learning be visualized while simultaneously increasing the depth of learning in real-world settings?; and how can the meaning of learning be objectively identified? Due to its nature, integrated study does not use textbooks. Guidelines for what and how students learn, are at the discretion of the teacher. Learners are supposed to be responsible for their own learning. Integrated study represents the only opportunity for teachers to flexibly consider and use resources and methods in accordance with the unique characteristics of the local community. Therefore, no other realms of the curriculum can offer more “expansive learning” (Engeström, 1987/2015) than integrated study.

However, it is intriguing to note researchers and practitioners’ claims, that integrated study does not clearly show what students are supposed to learn. By examining the above-mentioned issues, this article draws on the “expansivity” of learning.

Engeström (2016, p.9) described “the acknowledgment of expansivity” as “the possibility that learning gets out of the hands of the instructors and takes a direction of its own.” Further, Engeström proposed three dimensions of expansion: (1) the socio-spatial; (2) temporal; and (3) political-ethical dimension (p.8). He explained these three dimensions as shown below.

In the socio-spatial dimension, learning widens “the circle of people and settings included in the activity” (p.8). The temporal dimension refers to “extending the time perspective of the activity toward the future and toward the past” (p.8). The political-ethical dimension refers to “making visible and questioning the taken-for-granted human and societal consequences of the activity, as well as accepting agentic responsibility for those consequences” (p.8). In the following, I analyze and discuss integrated study from the perspective of the three dimensions of expansion.

Since 2008, the author has been providing support to Grade 4 of an elementary school in Suita City, Osaka Prefecture, Japan, in running integrated study lessons. These lessons are characterized by situations where expansive learning can occur. In order to improve learning experiences in integrated study lessons, this article explores effective approaches to devel-

oping expansive learning in children by summarizing the dimensions of expansivity. In doing so, this article compares the following units for clear analysis: the unit “Suita Kuwai [*arrowhead*],” which is part of the integrated study of Grade 4 of the Suita municipal elementary school; and the unit “You are Dr. Kinkazan,” which is part of the integrated study titled “*Kodo* [the sound of heart]” for Grade 3 of Nagara Elementary School in Gifu City, Gifu Prefecture, Japan.

### **The Unit “Suita Kuwai”: An Analysis of Expansive Learning**

Since 2008, Suita municipal elementary school has been using “Suita Kuwai,” which is a local traditional vegetable, in the integrated study. Suita Kuwai was originally *Omodaka* (the three-leaf arrowhead). Growing and observing Suita Kuwai, as well as examining its evolution, helps understand the local culture and history. Suita Kuwai is a theme that can help Grade 4 students learn about community. Vegetables can, therefore, be used as a resource for cross-curricular learning with social studies and, since it is a plant, it can also be used for science cross-curricular learning. In 2018, the school marked 11 years since Suita Kuwai was included in the integrated study. The unit is for 10 hours and covers the following: 1. Planting; 2. Observation (i.e., creating newspapers and large posters); 3. Harvesting; and 4. Bread making.

In 2018, planting was performed in the 5th period, on May 14. Thereafter, observations were conducted during science, social studies, and integrated study lessons. A lesson on harvesting was given in the 5th period, on December 7 (see Figures 1 and 2).



FIGURE 1 Harvested Suita Kuwai



FIGURE 2 A farm owner instructing children about harvesting Suita Kuwai

The harvested *kuwai* was cooked and used as a bread-topping in the lesson “Suita Kuwai bread making” on January 29, 2019. On January 28, parents and guardians, the owner of a bakery, managers from a flour milling company, homeroom teachers, and the author weighed the ingredients. On the day of the bread-making lesson, volunteers met at 08:30 and worked in their allocated roles until 13:00, which was when bread was baked, so that children could engage in bread making without interruption. The outline is given below:

Number of students and classes: 106 students, 3 classes (as of January 29, 2019)	
Volunteers: The owner of the bakery; people responsible for the primary industry at the city council; workers from the flour milling company; approximately 20 parents and guardians; the farm owner who gave instructions for harvesting Suita Kuwai; and a university professor (the author).	
Schedule:	
January 28	
11:00	The author visited the farm of the farm owner who gave instructions for harvesting Suita Kuwai. The owner donated additional Suita Kuwai to provide sufficient quantity of the vegetable to be used for the lesson.
16:00	The owner of the bakery, the employees of the flour milling company, the university professor (the author), parents and guardians, and the homeroom
18:00	teachers weighed flour, honey, salt, sugar, and yeast. They also washed, cut, and weighed Suita Kuwai.
January 29	
08:30	The owner of the bakery, the employees of the flour milling company, the university professor (the author), parents and guardians, and the homeroom teachers met at the home economics room. They then prepared for the lesson in the home economics room, the art and handcraft room, and the multi-purpose room.
09:00	Students, teachers, and all volunteers met at the multi-purpose room.
Following the team meeting, children listened to briefings on the	

process of bread-making, as well as information on bread and flour. Children in three different classes worked separately (see Figure 3) and returned to their home room while the dough was rising. At the end of the process, children shaped the dough into bread and took it to the home economics room (see Figure 4). Parents and guardians received the bread there and baked it in the oven. When baking was done, parents and guardians delivered the bread to the home rooms. (All the baking process was completed at around 13:00.)



FIGURE 3 The owner of the bakery and children

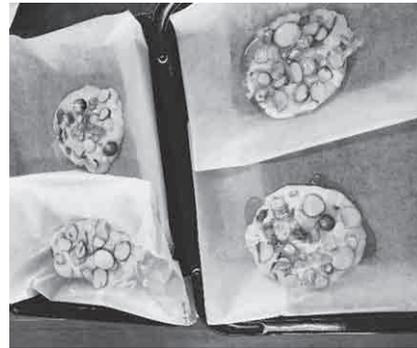


FIGURE 4 Suita Kuwai bread dough ready for baking

To discuss how such an integrated study contributes to expansive learning for children as learners, what follows examines the three dimensions of expansion put forward by Engeström for analyzing such activities.

The children who learned through the integrated study at the elementary school experienced the socio-spatial dimension as they interacted not only with their teachers but also with the farm owner, the bakery owner, people responsible for the primary industry at the city council, employees of the flour milling company, parents and guardians, and the university teacher. It is unlikely that the children would have had the opportunity to interact with adults in these sectors had they not participated in the integrated study. It can, therefore, be said that the impact of social expansion that involved collaboration between these adults prevented the school from being isolated from the real outside world and strongly helped it to become a member of the learning network, which expanded beyond the school.

In addition, the temporal dimension was expanded in discovering the history of Suita Kuwai, a plant that evolved locally into a vegetable, considering how to hand it down to younger generations, and protecting it as a type of learning object.

However, during the bread-making lesson, teachers asked volunteers: “What should we do during the free time (leavening time) in the bread-making schedule?” This illustrates that the learning was controlled by volunteers, and that the teachers had no doubt about the situation. In this light, could the bread-making lesson involve a political-ethical dimension?

In this setting, activities in the integrated study “Suita Kuwai” were provided to teachers as a package. It may be that the lessons were run in accordance with a given procedure, while no questions were raised as to what Suita Kuwai would bring to people and the community. With clearly packaged methods, teachers were worry-free when allocating time for the lessons. It cannot be said that an opportunity for thinking about societal impacts was provided in such a setting. The above analysis suggests that while the socio-spatial dimension and the temporal dimension in the integrated study in the elementary school were expansive, issues with the political-ethical dimension were left unaddressed. Given the proposition that learning can be expanded by questioning *the status quo*, it would be ideal if the children had naturally come up with questions as to why they should participate in the integrated study of Suita Kuwai. Whether children are passive or active participants in an activity has a significant impact on the activity itself. This could be why the political-ethical dimension was not seen in the integrated study at the elementary school.

The subsequent section examines another example of integrated study, namely; the unit “You are Dr. Kinkazan,” which is part of the integrated study entitled “*Kodo* [the sound of heart]” at Gifu Municipal Nagara Elementary School.

### **The Unit “You Are Dr. Kinkazan”: An Analysis of Expansive Learning**

At Gifu Municipal Nagara Elementary School, the integrated study is titled *Kodo*, which means “the sound of heart” (Gifu Municipal Nagara Elementary School, 2018, p. 17). Nagara Elementary School creates a small booklet titled “Education in Nagara,” which is used for their fall public meeting for research on educational practice at the school. According to the booklet, the integrated study *Kodo* aims at “nurturing four key mindsets (physical and mental health),” namely: “engagement,” “enthusiasm,” “persistence,” and “pursuit” mindset.

The booklet further explains the *Kodo* as follows:

The “*Kodo*” is a means of illustrating “health,” which forms the basis of “independence,” “solidarity,” and “creation.” Children develop a solid,

incomparable perception of Nagara as their hometown, while growing physically and improving mentally by immersing themselves in the space of Nagara, and by enjoying their land and sun. In this way, children develop love for their hometown. In either the near or distant future, children will notice that the “*Kodo*,” the sound of the heart of their hometown is certainly within them. (Gifu Municipal Nagara Elementary School, 2018, p.17)

The integrated study *Kodo* has the above-mentioned background and aims. What follows delineates integrated study in more detail by using an example of the practice of “You are Dr. Kinkazan” which was a Grade 3 unit at Nagara Elementary School in 2018.

In “You are Dr. Kinkazan,” children explored the four seasons of Mt. Kinka (Kinkazan) through mountain hikes. During this practice, they aimed to find recommended scenic points along the mountain footpath. The activity started in April, when children shared their existing knowledge. Thereafter, they started a mountain hike taking easy routes, which were part of the following paths: “the Narrow Footpath of Meditation,” “the Seven Curves,” “the Hundred Curves,” and “the Horse’s Back.” Children used their five senses to observe nature while walking on Mt. Kinka. Following two sessions of mountain hikes in Term 1, the author joined the children for the third and fourth sessions, and attended lessons before and after the hikes. The author observed the children in these settings. What follows is a summary of the author’s observations.

Students: 25 students in Class 1, Grade 3; 25 students in Class 2, Grade 3 (as of September 30, 2018)

Homeroom teachers: Kōsuke Shinoda for Class 1, Grade 3; Shinichi Suzuki for Class 2, Grade 3

Mountain hike on September 11:

Itinerary

Departing school at 08:45 — mountain hike (ascending) through the Narrow Path of Meditation; mountain hike (descending) through the Hundred Curves — return to school at 12:30

The Narrow Path of Meditation was a route that had a decent difficulty level, with a number of narrow and rocky paths (see Figures 5 and 6). The Hundred Curves was a path with stairs, an easy route as the path was well-paved. Children were carrying a clipboard using a diagonal shoulder strap and stopped to take notes when necessary. In the lesson after the mountain hike, children reflected on and talked about all their findings. They freely presented and shared their findings.



FIGURE 5 Children hiking up the Narrow Path of Meditation



FIGURE 6 A quote by a famous person (Shinran) at the Narrow Path of Meditation: “It is so difficult to have access to them, and I now have them!” (Shinran, 1224/2012, p. 43)

### Mountain hike on October 16:

#### Itinerary

Departing school at 08:45 — mountain hike (ascending) through the Horse’s Back; mountain hike (descending) through the Seven Curves — return to school at 12:30

Prior to the mountain hike, the author was informed that she would need to bring a pair of work gloves and slip-proof shoes for exercise. As it turned out, it would have been impossible to walk up the Horse’s Back without using the hands. The route clearly showed that Mt. Kinka formed from chert, a type of fine-grained sedimentary rock. Children needed to use both hands while crawling up many parts of the route, full of rocky paths and tree roots (see Figure 7).



FIGURE 7 The rocky route of the Horse’s Back

In the lesson after the mountain hike, children were supposed to primarily discuss what they felt while using their five senses as in the previous lesson. However, this lesson developed in a slightly different manner, as children were given a task where they compared the routes and shared their findings. They were particularly engaged in two topics. The first topic was on “whether the Horse’s Back has

more trees than other routes.” A large number of children felt that the Horse’s Back had more trees than other routes because they remembered that they had difficulty in walking up paths full of the roots of large trees (see Figure 8). On the other hand, a fair number of children felt that the Narrow Path of Meditation, the Hundred Curves, and the Seven Curves had more trees than the Horse’s Back because they remembered how they walked on slippery paths full of leaves. The teacher, Kōsuke Shinoda, presented two opinions while writing children’s findings on the blackboard: “The Horse’s Back has many trees” and “Routes other than the Horse’s Back have many trees.” When the teacher pointed out that the two opinions contradicted each other by stating, “these two opinions are completely opposite from each other,” children noticed the contradiction. In this way, the children were able to recognize that people can perceive the same experience and the same landscape in completely different ways, and such awareness contributed to subsequent observations. Additionally, Mr Shinoda did not further ask the children about which route had more trees, nor did he draw any particular conclusion. The author felt that the teacher’s attitude helped children stay motivated for subsequent observations.



FIGURE 8 The Horse’s Back route full of tree roots

The second topic discussed was in line with the statement: “There may be a new route on the other side of the existing ones.” It was interesting that children pointed out that all the four routes that they had taken so far were close to the school and that some of them shared the same path through to the middle.

The teacher, Shinichi Suzuki, searched for a new route immediately after he heard the children’s comments during the mountain hike. It turned out that, in fact, that there was a new route. Children who had believed that there were only four routes in the mountain would hopefully be freshly motivated to engage in learning after they discover the new route. Indeed, this outcome was not planned by teachers. However, it can be said that the teachers’ attitude of listening to the children led to extremely favorable outcomes.

As previously pointed out, there were significant changes in the quality of discussion between the first and second mountain hikes in Term 1, and after the third and fourth mountain walks. Children held profound discussions after the third and fourth walks.

Following these activities, the author spoke with Mr. Suzuki and Mr. Shinoda. It was found that the integrated study unit, "You are Dr. Kinkazan," also contributed to improving children's physical strength. Considering the initial mountain hike, children were tired after they went up and down the easiest route. However, according to the teachers, the children gradually familiarized themselves with mountain hiking, and started observing their surroundings. Indeed, they were already used to mountain hiking when the author joined them in the third and fourth hike. Therefore, they were able to make various discoveries, record their findings in an observation notebook, and choose more difficult routes. Subsequent mountain hikes were scheduled for November 22 and December 4. In this unit, children would have walked all routes over the course of six mountain hikes in Grade 3.

While 10 hours were spent on the integrated study unit "Suita Kuwai" at the Suita Municipal Elementary School, the unit on Mt. Kinka at Nagara Elementary School took about 35 hours. Nagara Elementary School allocated almost half the total hours of the integrated study to "You are Dr. Kinkazan." As illustrated in the example of "You are Dr. Kinka" for Grade 3 students, the integrated study at Nagara Elementary School focused on providing children with opportunities to spend a considerable amount of time independently, discovering, researching, and examining nature by repeatedly involving themselves in activities.

Analysis that draws on the above-mentioned three dimensions of expansion by Engeström shows that, first, in the socio-spatial dimension, children were learning not only in school settings, but also in outdoor activities by actually walking on a mountain several times. They made various discoveries during such activities. Children also greeted people whom they came across while walking in the mountain. They occasionally exchanged opinions with these individuals. Indeed, children progressed with their learning through different interactions with external parties, not being in a closed environment at school.

In terms of the temporal dimension, children learned first-hand that Mt. Kinka was formed from chert, a type of smooth-grained sedimentary rock. They were able to draw on the history of the mountain by observing what they saw during repeated mountain hikes.

In terms of the political-ethical dimension, children voluntarily raised the question as to whether there would be routes other than the ones they had already known. Each child also identified issues that they would work on before subsequent mountain hikes. In other words, children started questioning whether there are other routes in the mountain; that is, they implemented "making visible and questioning the taken-for-granted human and

societal consequences of the activity” (Engeström, 2016, p.8). In response to such an impact, the teachers and children accepted “agentic responsibility for those consequences” (p.8), that is, they would search again for other routes in the mountain following the fourth mountain hike. Such a process can be viewed as expansivity in the political-ethical dimension.

As shown above, it can be said that expansivity was present in the political-ethical dimension in an integrated study at Nagara Elementary School, whereas it was not seen at the Suita Municipal Elementary School. What follows discusses the impact of expansivity on the entire school learning.

### **Expansivity in the Political-Ethical Dimension**

This paper has compared and examined an integrated study between two schools by drawing on Engeström’s three dimensions of expansive learning. This section discusses the impact of the difference in the political-ethical dimension identified in the comparative examination of the expansivity of learning.

Engeström stated that two challenges exist in the political-ethical dimension of expansion. The first challenge relates to the question: “What is learned and why?” (Engeström, 2016, p.8). “The challenge consists in a transition from a restrictive focus on given curricular contents to the inclusion of questioning and creating novel contents by different actors” (p.8). The second challenge relates to the question: “What is the societal impact of learning?” (p.8). “The challenge consists in a transition from a restrictive focus on learners as acquirers and participants to the inclusion of learners as agents of change” (pp.8–9). In addressing these challenges, it may be necessary to clarify the meaning of politics in the political-ethical dimension.

The term *politics* is derived from the Greek word *polis*. The word did not originally have meanings associated with the distribution of power in the state, reign, or conflicts. Instead, it related to an egalitarian relationship among citizens. The concepts of politics and ethics in the political-ethical dimension are not related to power and dominance, but refer to a situation where agentic people self-reflect and develop egalitarian relationships between collectives of people and rules (order) for such a relationship.

Yoshibee Nomura, who was appointed the principal of Nagara Elementary School immediately after the end of the World War II, served as the director and teacher of the Ikebukuro Children’s Village (*Ikebukuro Jidō no Mura*) Elementary School, where he practiced new educational methods from 1924 to 1936, which was at the end of the new education movement in the Taisho period. In the 1930s, schools in Japan were focused on the *Tsuzurikata kyōiku* (education for creative writing based on lived experiences). Nomura referred to the *Tsuzurikata kyōiku* in northern Japan, where children were depicting poverty in the region, when he discussed a different type of writing by stating

that “children deepen their general knowledge of morality when they are genuinely aware that they are truly living with nature” (Nomura, 1930, p.11). Nomura then stated that children “find the best way of living” by understanding facts objectively and scientifically (p.11).

In an interview published in the journal “*Tsuzurikata Seikatsu (Life with Creative Writing Based on Lived Experiences)*,” Nomura (1978, p.12) was asked how he posited the issue of poverty in *Tsuzurikata* education in northern Japan in the area of education. He answered: While the issue may be resolved by aiming to build a society with no unemployment if it would be tackled from a political perspective, “the issue should be faced by each individual” in the area of education. What Nomura referred to as “politics” was not equivalent to the common definition of politics today; rather, it referred to village life where people gather and harvest trees in communal forests, or where people meet at a temple to discuss local issues and recite sutra. Engeström’s political-ethical dimension may refer to such issues that are related to collaborative self-organization.

The reason why expansivity in the political-ethical dimension was not observed in the integrated study at the Suita municipal elementary school may be because the children failed to realize that they were the agents of activities. As can be seen from the words of teachers at the school, the teachers did not have monopoly in conducting learning activities.

Nagara Elementary School treasures the term “taking ownership of your learning.” Using this term, the school encourages children to become agentive learners. In particular, children are responsible for what they choose to learn in an integrated study. It can be considered that such an approach generates the political-ethical dimension of expansion, which leads to the expansion of learning. In other words, unlike the other two dimensions (the socio-spatial and the temporal dimension), the political-ethical dimension can only be created by learners themselves. Expansivity of learning refers to a situation where “learning gets out of the hands of instructors and takes a direction of its own” (Engeström, 2016, p.8). Therefore, theoretically, learning should not expand on its own by transcending the teacher in an unexpected direction, unless the teacher intends to navigate the learning and the children are agentive learners. In expansive learning, learning expands when it progresses in an unexpected direction, which is different from that originally planned. This can be achieved while children are learning independently.

In his autobiography, *My Approach to True Education*, Nomura (1973) expanded on three systems for school management at the *Ikebukuro Jido no Mura* Elementary School. He proposed the concept of a multifaceted school education structure with the following three components: the nature-friendly, liberal classroom; the classroom with cross-generational interaction; and the classroom for handing down culture and tradition. He considered true education to be a well-balanced mixture of two aspects, namely; one in which

children learn by themselves through play, and the other in which they learn from adults. He described the nature-friendly, liberal classroom, as follows: “If we let children freely play in nature, they will develop their physical strength through play, make discoveries through trials and errors, and develop their imagination through experience. They will surely create authentic works in such an environment” (p.104). Put differently, in the nature-friendly, liberal classroom, children learn in a way they like. According to Nomura, this allows them to make discoveries, stretch their imagination, and engage in creation from a children’s perspective. The *Kodo* at Nagara Elementary School is indeed representative of a nature-friendly, liberal classroom.

Practice at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, which was implemented by American philosopher John Dewey, provides inspiration for liberal education. His works had a significant impact on modern education in Japan. Dewey was a major advocate of progressive education underpinned by pragmatism. In his book titled *The School and Society*, Dewey (1900) provided the following explanation: If a child wants to make a box, “(k)nowledge of tools and processes is inevitable” (p.55). “If the child realizes his instinct and makes the box, there is plenty of opportunity to gain discipline and perseverance, to exercise effort in overcoming obstacle, and to attain as well a great deal of information” (p.55).

Dewey (1900, p.64) stated that if children repeatedly discuss and experiment on what they are interested in by themselves over the course of one year, they can “get indefinitely more acquaintance” with knowledge in their chosen field than they “get where information is the professed end and object, where they are simply set to learning facts in fixed lessons.” Dewey also highlighted that it is important for children to commit to learning what they are intuitively interested in, by stating that “they get more training of attention, more power of interpretation, of drawing inferences, of acute observation and continuous reflection, than if they were put to working out arbitrary problems simply for the sake of discipline” (pp.64–65).

Dewey also pointed to occupations and training at the school. Training refers to having children acquire certain methods of problem solving; for example, children continuously write *kanji* characters to memorize them, and repeatedly complete training tasks. However, Dewey did not deny the importance of acquiring knowledge. What he highlighted was that occupations in school settings “shall not be mere practical devices or modes of routine employment, the gaining of better technical skill as cooks, sempstresses, or carpenters” (Dewey, 1900, p.33). Dewey predicted that school should never be a place for such training. Nevertheless, the ramification of education is still rife when integrated studies are discussed in real-life settings.

Integrated study is frequently viewed as a mere constellation of multiple subjects, as exemplified by the following statement: “A favorable outcome was achieved in the unit XXX in integrated study because children could utilize YYY, which they learned in math.” This is a failed example of an integrated

study. Here, all lessons of the integrated study are dealt with as a constellation of ramified subjects. This may be attributable to teachers who want to gain peace of mind while trying to be responsible for all aspects, or curriculum management required by the government. This can result in the loss of advantages and significance of integrated studies.

In addition, when integrated study is ramified into small subjects, children are expected to give correct answers in each of these subjects. No significance can be found in questions and answers that are designed to lead children to give answers in a way that is expected by the teacher. Integrated studies are not supposed to provide subject-based education, but to cultivate the ability of creation. Otherwise, children will lose their own words because education is not aligned with the following objective that was proposed by Dewey: The child “has a thought to express” (Dewey, 1900, p.66). In a failed environment, finally the high school teacher “has to invent all kinds of devices to assist in getting any spontaneous and full use of speech” (p.66). However, it is obvious that such an approach will lead to consequences that are completely different from the objectives of integrated study.

In his book titled *Imagination and Creativity in Childhood*, Lev Vygotsky (2004) discussed children’s creativity. According to Vygotsky, children’s “creative imagination proves to be very complex” and it takes “different forms in the different stages of childhood” (p.31). He also stated that not every imagination of children leads to abundant creation because children significantly lack experience compared to adults. However, children’s imagination shifts from a subjective level to an objective one through transition. Vygotsky said this is because imagination is “now closely associated with thinking, keeps pace with it” (p.34). In other words, creative activities of imagination during childhood are extremely important for children to develop the ability to think. What is important is not the quality of creation from imagination, but creative activities *per se*. If integrated study is reduced to subject-based education, which is made of split subjects and which is designed to unilaterally teach children knowledge, activities of imagination that children would have naturally engaged in would be disrupted.

As such, the political-ethical dimension is extremely important in that it allows children to immerse themselves in creative activities of imagination. The above analysis shows that expansive learning in the said dimension cannot be achieved unless children are given ownership and responsibility for their learning. This was clearly exemplified in the case of Nagara Elementary School.

## **Conclusion**

Integrated study is not about finding answers that fit the dichotomy of right or wrong. Its value sits in children’s agentic attitude toward finding issues relevant to them in imagination activities, as well as working toward their own

tasks. By repeatedly engaging in such activities, children can encounter what is not yet there, which can lead to creative activities.

This article started with discussing the difficulties that the author faced when providing support to an elementary school in Suita City, Osaka, Japan. The author has been working with the school for over 13 years. The article then expanded on the discussion by drawing on Engeström's three dimensions of expansion. In doing so, the article confirmed that the political-ethical dimension cannot be transformed by any other parties except the protagonists of the activity. The article also verified that the expansion of learning is centered around the dimension.

It is assumed that children at Nagara Elementary School develop an agentive attitude toward integrated study by attending the school with the mindset of "taking ownership of your learning," which they apply not only to integrated study, but also to their entire school experience. The education program of Nagara Elementary School is underpinned by the following four pillars: "independence," "solidarity," "creation," and "health." Within this concept, they engage in the "*Ibuki*" which reflects the pillar of "independence." The *Ibuki* is a homeroom activity implemented in the morning and evening. Children at Nagara Elementary School start and end a day in an independent, structured manner. The *Kodo* cannot serve as a complete curriculum on its own but is complemented by other activities such as the *Ibuki*, which is performed daily, to help children stay agentive. Children "take ownership of their learning" by virtue of such a structure. In the *Ibuki*, children verbally share their learning objectives for the day and express their determination before they start participating in activities in *Kodo*. In this way, children understand what aspects of knowledge and skills they know and what they can carry out. This is what children are expected to achieve in integrated study. They are also expected to reach a high level of achievement by sustainably working on a single task after they remind themselves of their goals in the *Ibuki*. In doing so, they gradually and naturally refine their findings. Moreover, children would not be able to go beyond simply understanding the abilities of thinking, deciding, and expressing themselves if the settings for learning change constantly. In contrast, the *Kodo* primarily focuses on providing opportunities for children to contemplate through continuous same activity. Therefore, children can think deeply and expand their creativity.

As shown above, the planning and practice of the *Kodo* provides support to children at Nagara Elementary School to pursue their goals for the year, whereas the *Ibuki* provides complementary support for children to pursue their goals for the day. In this manner, children absorb learning from hands-on experiences and practices.

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