

Training and Developing the Teaching Staff to Meet The Requirements of the 2018 General Education Program: Experiences from Japan

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ABSTRACT

The training and development of the general education teachers constitute a fundamental determinant of the quality and efficacy of a national education system. Japan represents a typical country in building and developing a high professional teaching force, closely linking initial training, regular fostering, and continuous professional development. Vietnam's 2018 General Education Program signifies a paradigm shift from a content-based to a competency-based and character-building pedagogical approach, for success, the role of educators is identified as the decisive factor. This study analyzes the Japanese model of professional development for general education teachers and contextualizes these findings within the current Vietnamese educational landscape, particularly in the implementation of Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW and the 2018 General Education Program. Consequently, the paper proposes strategic policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the quality of teacher training and development to meet contemporary educational demands.

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INTRODUCTION

In the digital era of globalization and the explosion of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, education no longer merely serves to impart knowledge; rather, it has become a key driver determining the competitiveness and sustainable development of every nation (World Bank, 2020).

Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW of the Party Central Committee affirmed that developing the workforce of teachers and educational administrators is a "pivotal factor"—a decisive element for the success of the comprehensive and fundamental reform of education and training (Party Central Committee, 2013). The 2018 General Education Program, designed with a focus on developing students' qualities and competencies, imposes new requirements on teachers regarding their ability to design lesson plans, organize learning activities, conduct assessments that foster student progress, and apply information technology in teaching (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). The implementation of the 2018 General Education Program marks a significant shift from a content-based approach to a model centered on developing students' qualities and competencies. However, this transition also presents unprecedented challenges for teachers, who are directly responsible for putting the program into practice in the classroom.

According to the Ministry of Education and Training (2018), today's teachers must not only possess deep expertise in their subject matter but also master modern pedagogical skills—ranging from integrated teaching and competency-based assessment to the effective application of digital technology in instruction (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). In this context, it is essential to seek out and apply insights from countries with advanced education systems—particularly Japan, a nation whose educational philosophy emphasizes discipline, self-directed learning, and a sense of community (Sarkar Arani, 2017). Japanese

practices offer practical perspectives on in-service teacher training models, empowering K-12 teachers to confidently meet the requirements of the 2018 General Education Curriculum. Consequently, teacher training and development must be viewed as a unified, continuous process guided by a long-term strategic vision, thereby addressing the current need for fundamental and comprehensive reform in education and training.

METHOD

This article employs a qualitative research approach, primarily involving the collection and analysis of documents, policies, and previous studies on teacher education and professional development in Vietnam and Japan. Analytical and synthetic methods are used to clarify the current state of teacher workforce development during the implementation of Vietnam's 2018 General Education Curriculum. A comparative education approach is also applied to examine Japan's experience in relation to the Vietnamese context. Based on the findings, the article identifies relevant lessons and proposes solutions appropriate to Vietnam's educational conditions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some basic concepts

Teaching staff:

The teaching staff comprises educators directly engaged in teaching and educational activities within educational institutions, playing a decisive role in the quality of education and the effective realization of the school's educational objectives. The 2019 Law on Education affirms that teachers constitute the core force of the national education system, bearing the responsibility of organizing the implementation of educational curricula and participating in educational activities in accordance with the law (National Assembly, 2019). Ở góc độ quản lý giáo dục, đội ngũ giáo viên không chỉ được xem xét về số lượng và cơ cấu mà còn ở chất lượng, thể hiện qua trình độ chuyên môn, năng lực sư phạm, phẩm chất đạo đức nghề nghiệp và khả năng đáp ứng yêu cầu đổi mới giáo dục

Teacher training:

Teacher training is the process of systematically equipping learners with fundamental scientific knowledge, specialized expertise, pedagogical proficiency, and foundational professional skills to prepare them for teaching roles in schools. The Ministry of Education and Training identifies teacher training as a foundational element in the development of the educational workforce, determining the quality of the future teaching staff (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). Current teacher training programs are designed based on professional competency standards, serving as a basis for student teachers to meet the requirements for implementing the 2018 General Education Curriculum (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018).

In Japan, teacher training is primarily conducted at universities of education and faculties of education, with curricula that emphasize a close integration of theory and teaching practice. Student teachers are required to undertake extended practicums at primary or secondary schools under the guidance of experienced teachers and the supervision of their training institutions (MEXT, 2020). Before obtaining their professional teaching license, student teachers in Japan must engage in classroom observation, lesson planning, trial teaching, and practical reflection within schools to ensure they possess the necessary initial professional competencies (OECD, 2019).

Teacher professional development:

Teacher workforce development is understood as a comprehensive process encompassing activities such as training, professional development, deployment, evaluation, and the provision of professional support. Its aim is to enhance the quality of the teaching workforce—in terms of quantity, composition, and competence—to meet the evolving demands of educational development at each stage. According to the OECD (2019), teacher professional development serves not only to improve professional expertise but also to enable teachers to adapt to changes in curricula, teaching methods, and the requirements of modern society (OECD, 2019).

According to the Ministry of Education and Training (2020), developing the teaching workforce involves not only enhancing professional expertise but also fostering professional motivation and creating a favorable working environment for teachers. Developing educational human resources—particularly the teaching staff—is a prerequisite for ensuring the quality and effectiveness of the current educational reform process.

Practices regarding the training and development of the teaching workforce in Vietnam

Results achieved in standardization and professional development

According to statistics from the Ministry of Education and Training (2023), the proportion of teachers meeting or exceeding qualification standards reached 92.8% at the primary level, 87.5% at the lower secondary level, and 99.9% at the upper secondary level. The continuous professional development system has also undergone significant digitalization through the online training model (ETEP). Hundreds of thousands of teachers have completed modules on teaching methodologies, assessment, and the development of competency-based lesson plans (Nguyễn Hồng Thuận, 2021).

Thus, the results achieved in standardization and professional development reflect the education sector's extraordinary efforts to upskill its teaching workforce. The fact that hundreds of thousands of teachers have completed modules on teaching methodologies and lesson planning focused on competency development demonstrates a shift from a mindset of mere knowledge transmission to one centered on fostering learners' qualities and competencies. These achievements are significant not only in terms of statistical data but also in directly enhancing the quality of pedagogical interaction within schools, serving as a pivotal factor in the success of the current educational reform.

Existing shortcomings and practical barriers

Although a very high proportion of teachers meet the prescribed standards, there remain significant gaps regarding the "actual capacity" required to implement the 2018 General Education Curriculum: (1) Teachers' capacity for implementing the 2018 General Education Curriculum falls short of requirements: The implementation of this curriculum demands a high level of both mindset and practical skills from teachers. However, in reality, the capabilities of a segment of the teaching workforce still fall significantly short of expectations. Struggling to shift from "knowledge transmission" to "competency development" represents the greatest barrier in terms of mindset. The 2018 curriculum does not ask students "what they know," but rather "what they can do with that knowledge." A survey of 268 K-12 teachers in Ho Chi Minh City revealed that 73.9% assessed teachers' capacity to implement the 2018 General Education Curriculum as falling short of requirements. Additionally, 63.5% of respondents indicated that teachers struggled with the integrated teaching approach; (2) Training content remains overly theoretical: A survey of the same 268 teachers regarding the effectiveness of training sessions showed that 66.5% considered the content to be merely theoretical, while 76.4% desired specific guidance on handling situations within integrated subjects (Natural Sciences, History and Geography) rather than listening to lectures on curriculum philosophy. (3) The evaluation mechanism fails to create motivation: Currently, teacher evaluation remains heavily focused on paperwork, record-keeping, and performative competitions. A survey of 268 K-12 teachers in Ho Chi Minh City revealed that 68.3% participated in professional development merely to meet requirements rather than to genuinely enhance their professional expertise—a stark contrast to the spirit of self-directed learning among Japanese teachers (Sarkar Arani, 2017).

Challenges arising from the current state of integrated teaching

Within the structure of the 2018 General Education Curriculum, the introduction of integrated subjects—such as Natural Sciences and History & Geography—at the lower secondary level is regarded as a significant step toward helping students develop a comprehensive worldview. However, practical implementation has revealed a substantial gap between the actual competencies of the teaching workforce and the interdisciplinary demands of the curriculum: (1) Shortcomings stemming from a "single-subject" training background: For decades, Vietnam's teacher training system has primarily operated on a model of isolated, single-subject instruction. Teachers are equipped with in-depth knowledge and the specific scientific mindset of a particular field (such as Physics, Chemistry, or Biology). When transitioning to integrated teaching, they not only lack foundational knowledge in other sub-disciplines but also struggle to establish logical connections between these different bodies of knowledge; (2) Consequences of short-term training and "mechanical integration": Although the Ministry of Education and Training has implemented

certification training programs ranging from 20 to 30 credits to "rapidly" supplement knowledge, this duration is sufficient only for covering the most fundamental concepts. According to Nguyen Hong Thuan (2021), a lack of practical experience and professional depth leaves teachers struggling to navigate—or "fending for themselves" amidst—diverse content strands. Consequently, a phenomenon of "mechanical integration" has become widespread: within a single textbook and subject, teachers continue to teach only their specific sections, thereby undermining the core purpose of integrated instruction.

Example: In the "Energy and Change" topic of the Grade 6 Natural Science curriculum, a key learning objective is for students to understand energy transformation within natural phenomena. Current situation: A teacher with a background in Physics, when teaching the process of photosynthesis (a topic belonging to Biology), often focuses primarily on analyzing light energy (radiant energy) but struggles to explain the complex biochemical reactions occurring inside the leaves.

The consequence is that students receive only fragmented pieces of knowledge; instead of grasping the interconnectedness of Physics (energy), Chemistry (reactions), and Biology (life), they perceive the Integrated Science subject as merely three traditional disciplines bound under a single cover. This inadvertently creates psychological pressure on both teachers and students, rendering the goal of developing interdisciplinary problem-solving skills elusive. Challenges associated with assessing and examining the "single-subject" status complicate the process of designing periodic tests. When teachers have not yet mastered integrated knowledge, exams often merely piece together questions from the three sub-disciplines based on the percentage of instructional time allocated to each, lacking the high-level integrated application questions needed to assess students' true competencies. According to Sarkar Arani (2017), without deep professional collaboration following the Lesson Study model, integrated teaching will remain merely superficial (Sarkar Arani, 2017).

Japan's experience in teacher training and development

Balancing theory and practice

Balancing theory and practice: Japan has long established itself as a nation with world-class education, driven by a consistent philosophy that views teachers as the pillars and "guardians" of the nation's future. The country's system for teacher training and professional development operates through a structured, comprehensive cycle that spans from university education to the entirety of a teacher's career. Teacher training at Japanese universities of education is strictly regulated through a licensing system. Curricula focus not only on subject-matter expertise but also place significant emphasis on practical professional skills; education students are required to complete a substantial number of teaching practicum hours as early as their second or third year. Universities maintain close ties with affiliated K-12 schools, providing students with opportunities to gain direct, hands-on classroom experience (Cave, 2016).

For instance, at Tokyo Gakugei University, students do not merely study child psychology theory in the classroom; they also participate in "clinical observation" sessions at elementary schools, where they document student interactions for analysis in thematic discussions. This practice helps students develop a "pedagogical eye" before they officially begin teaching. According to a 2020 MEXT report, the Japanese government emphasizes not only initial teacher training but also mandatory periodic professional development courses required for license renewal, ensuring that the teaching workforce keeps pace with the changes of the digital era.

Continuous professional development through the "Lesson Study" model

"Lesson Study" is considered a hallmark—and Japanese education's greatest contribution—to the global educational landscape. It is not merely a short-term training program but a facet of the culture of lifelong learning among teachers. Its key aspects include: (1) Process: A group of teachers from the same subject area or grade level collaborates to execute a cycle comprising lesson planning, a demonstration lesson with observation, reflective discussion, and lesson refinement followed by re-teaching (Lewis & Hurd, 2011); (2) Key Distinction: The purpose of classroom observation in Japanese Lesson Study is not to evaluate teacher competence but to analyze student learning. Observers focus on specific details, such as: "Why did Student A hesitate at the 15-minute mark?" or "Is this task too demanding for Group B?"

For example, during a geometry lesson, rather than simply evaluating the quality of the teacher's instruction, the lesson study group observes students using their learning tools; if many students are found to be struggling with the compass, the group discusses adjustments to the lesson plan's instructions or

incorporates a supplementary activity into the next lesson. According to Sarkar Arani (2017), this process transforms every classroom into a "living laboratory" where teachers continuously refine their skills based on real-world evidence.

Mentorship and support system for new teachers

In Japan, a teacher's first year on the job is regarded as a rigorous trial period, yet it is also the time when they receive the most substantial support. Every new teacher is assigned a "mentor"—an experienced educator who is either currently serving or retired (Cave, 2016). For instance, new teachers in Japan typically spend at least 90 days during their first year participating in on-the-job training programs. Mentors work alongside new teachers to prepare lesson plans, handle instances of school bullying, and meet with parents. This approach helps minimize the rate of early career attrition and ensures the continuity of educational quality across generations.

In countries with advanced education systems like Japan, teacher development is viewed as a continuous process linked to professional growth and school culture. Policies regarding teacher recruitment, evaluation, training, and compensation are implemented in a coordinated manner to ensure teachers have opportunities for lifelong learning and professional capacity building (MEXT, 2020). The Japanese model of teacher professional development through "lesson study" is considered an effective tool for developing the teaching workforce within schools, contributing to the sustainable improvement of teaching quality (OECD, 2019). Japan regards teachers as the pillars of its education system. Teacher training is systematically conducted at universities of education, with a focus on balancing theory and practice. Furthermore, continuous professional development through the "lesson study" model is considered a distinctive feature that contributes to enhancing the quality of teaching in schools.

Lessons learned for the implementation of the 2018 General Education Program in Vietnam

The shift from a content-based curriculum to one focused on developing student competencies in Vietnam necessitates a profound change in the mindset and actions of management personnel and, above all, teachers. Drawing on Japan's experience, three core lessons can be identified: (1) Shifting the objective of professional development activities: from "evaluating teachers" to "analyzing learning."

One of the major hurdles in Vietnam is the pressure teachers feel when being observed during class. They often focus on delivering a "flawless performance" rather than genuinely observing whether students are developing their competencies. Schools should adopt the Japanese "Lesson Study" philosophy, transforming professional development sessions into safe spaces for experimenting with new methods. Instead of simply noting that a lesson "lacked engagement," observers should focus on questions such as: "Why did the group of students in the corner not participate in the discussion?" or "Did the students develop problem-solving skills through this exercise?" According to Lewis and Hurd (2011), this shift in perspective helps teachers set aside their egos and focus entirely on educational effectiveness. (2) Establish professional learning communities within schools: In Japan, teachers primarily develop their competencies through mutual learning. Vietnam needs to promote the professional learning community model to support teachers handling integrated subjects such as Natural Sciences and History & Geography. Schools should not rely solely on short-term training sessions organized by the Ministry or Department of Education; instead, they need to create mechanisms that enable teachers of physics, chemistry, and biology—or history and geography—to collaborate regularly. Schools should implement monthly "Open Lessons," where teachers of integrated subjects jointly design interdisciplinary topics, conduct trial lessons, and make necessary adjustments. Peer-based learning will help teachers gain confidence when addressing areas of knowledge that fall outside their original fields of specialization. (3) Establish a substantive "pedagogical mentoring" system for teachers: The 2018 Curriculum requires teachers to rapidly adapt to new technologies and methodologies—particularly young teachers who may lack classroom management experience—necessitating a formalized "apprenticeship" model based on the Japanese mentor-mentee approach. Universities can act as a bridge, collaborating with K-12 schools to build a network of outstanding alumni or key teachers who provide direct support to recent graduates. This support should extend beyond mere paperwork to encompass active guidance on individual lesson plans and real-world pedagogical situations (Cave, 2016).

Therefore, the education sector needs to formulate a long-term strategy for teacher workforce development; reform teacher training to align with school realities; promote continuous professional

development for teachers; and innovate teacher evaluation methods to focus on competency development.

Refining the policy on teacher workforce development towards autonomy and collaboration

Policy needs to shift from management based on administrative controls and quotas to governance focused on quality and work effectiveness. A legal framework must be established to recognize the "Lesson Study" model as a formal professional activity that counts towards teachers' working hours.

Recommendation: Develop a teacher evaluation framework based on learner progress rather than solely on administrative records and documentation. Specific policies should be established for teachers of integrated subjects to encourage them to pursue professional development and upskilling.

For example, instead of requiring teachers to periodically complete short-term certification training courses, the policy could recognize the outcomes of applied pedagogical research projects or school-based lesson study initiatives as criteria for salary increments or professional rank promotion (Sarkar Arani, 2017).

Strengthening the organic link between teacher training institutions and K-12 schools

Currently, the disconnect between university-based theory and K-12 school practice poses a significant barrier; it is necessary to establish "laboratory schools" or "strategic partner schools," similar to the model implemented in Japan (Cave, 2016).

Recommendation: Establish a mechanism for the exchange of university lecturers and K-12 teachers. Teacher educators need practical experience in K-12 schools to grasp the issues arising from the 2018 General Education Program; conversely, key K-12 teachers can participate in mentoring students on pedagogical practice.

For example, universities of education and faculties of education can enter into cooperation agreements with local Departments of Education and Training to establish "school-based professional development centers." At these centers, final-year students directly participate in Lesson Study cycles alongside K-12 teachers, helping to bridge the gap between the lecture hall and the actual classroom (Lewis & Hurd, 2011).

Investing in working conditions and enhancing the social status of teachers

To enable teachers to dedicate themselves and innovate with peace of mind, it is essential to comprehensively improve both material conditions and the professional environment. Japan retains talent through stable remuneration and the utmost respect from society.

Recommendation: Implement the wage reform roadmap in accordance with Resolution 27-NQ/TW, ensuring that teachers' salaries are ranked highest within the administrative and public service salary scale. Simultaneously, invest in infrastructure, digital libraries, and specialized laboratories to enable teachers to implement competency-based instruction.

For example, implementing the "reducing the burden to foster innovation" policy involves cutting back on perfunctory competitions and easing reporting pressures, thereby allowing teachers time to recharge and engage in professional development. Only when economic status and professional prestige are firmly established can the teaching profession attract the most outstanding individuals (World Bank, 2020).

Building a digital ecosystem to support personalized professional development

Amidst the rapid digital transformation of education in Vietnam, professional development should not be limited to in-person classes; instead, a digital platform is needed to enable teachers to learn anytime, anywhere.

Recommendation: The State should invest in establishing a "National Digital Learning Resource Repository" and a Learning Management System (LMS) that integrates micro-learning courses. Policies should recognize the self-study outcomes achieved on this digital platform as equivalent to mandatory periodic professional development hours.

For example, drawing on Japan's experience in developing "digital lesson libraries," Vietnamese teachers can access a repository of videos featuring competency-based demonstration lessons. Here, instructors and experts can provide direct feedback at specific timestamps within the videos, enabling teachers in remote areas to access the most advanced pedagogical methods (Nguyễn Hồng Thuận, 2021).

Reform of assessment policies

In Japan, teaching certificates are valid for a fixed term (typically 10 years), and renewal requires teachers to update their knowledge; this creates an intrinsic motivation for educators to engage in continuous innovation.

Recommendation: A roadmap should be developed for implementing time-limited "teaching practice certificates" or "periodic competency assessments" linked to career advancement. However, such evaluations must be based on actual competency profiles rather than theoretical examinations.

For example, instead of traditional teacher ranking examinations, a policy could require teachers to compile a five-year "professional development portfolio" comprising research papers, implemented lesson study plans, and student or parent satisfaction survey results. According to Caena (2011), this evidence-based assessment accurately reflects actual competence and fosters more sustainable, self-driven effort among teachers.

In summary, the training and development of the teaching workforce is not merely a technical pedagogical task but a "key investment strategy" for realizing the goals of the 2018 General Education Program. Insights from Japan—an education system centered on "Lesson Study" and self-directed learning—have offered Vietnam pathways for systemic transformation. The five aforementioned groups of policy recommendations (comprising the refinement of autonomy mechanisms, the strengthening of institute-school linkages, the enhancement of the teaching profession's status, the digital transformation of professional development, and the reform of professional practice assessment) do not operate in isolation; rather, they form a comprehensive support ecosystem (Caena, 2011). If policies focus solely on raising qualification standards while neglecting the cultivation of a collaborative culture and the assurance of teacher welfare, it will be difficult for educators to achieve breakthroughs in their teaching methods. Macro-level policies should serve as a "launchpad," creating optimal conditions for every teacher to transform from a mere transmitter of knowledge into a researcher within their own classroom (Sarkar Arani, 2017). Only when teachers are accorded the respect they deserve and supported by a flexible, substantive policy framework can we cultivate a generation of educators who are both politically committed and professionally competent—thereby meeting societal expectations and the demands of the new era.

CONCLUSIONS

Flexibly applying Japan's experience—while aligning with the requirements of Resolution 29 and the 2018 General Education Curriculum—will help enhance the quality of the K-12 teaching workforce and meet current demands for educational reform. Educational reform under the 2018 General Education Curriculum is a long-term journey in which teachers serve as the vanguard. Japan's experience demonstrates that the development of the teaching workforce stems not from administrative directives, but from a culture of self-directed learning and collaboration. Therefore, the following actions are necessary: (1) Reduce the administrative burden: Free up time for teachers to focus on lesson study and professional innovation; (2) Invest in on-site training: Shift the budget from centralized training sessions to supporting professional activities at the school and school-cluster levels; (3) Encourage and motivate innovation: Foster an environment where teachers feel empowered to take risks and experiment with teaching methods that develop student competencies.

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