

Advancing Sustainable Development Goals through Character Education and Social Studies in Japanese Schools

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Abstract: Character education is increasingly recognized as a critical component in developing individuals who are not only academically proficient but also possess strong moral and ethical values. This study examines the integration of social studies, character education, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within Japan's educational system, focusing on how these elements equip students with the skills and values necessary to address contemporary global challenges. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the study combines field research and literature analysis. The literature review provided a foundation for analyzing the issues under study, while field research was conducted from November 17 to 24, 2024, in Tokyo City and Tokushima Prefecture, Japan. The findings reveal that 17 SDGs components are embedded within Japan's educational practices, including competency in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Moreover, character education in Japanese schools significantly contributes to nurturing individuals with strong ethical and responsible values, empowering them to act as agents of change in addressing the complexities of a globalized world, particularly in responding to environmental issues. Integrating character education and social studies with the SDGs is identified as a strategic framework for shaping a better future for younger generations. This model offers valuable insights for educational systems worldwide to consider in their efforts to enhance character education.

Keywords: character education; SDGs; ESD; social studies; Japanese schools.

Memajukan Tujuan Pembangunan Berkelanjutan melalui pendidikan karakter dan ilmu sosial di sekolah-sekolah Jepang

Abstrak: Pendidikan karakter merupakan komponen penting untuk membentuk individu yang tidak hanya unggul secara akademis tetapi juga memiliki nilai moral dan etika yang kuat. Penelitian ini mengkaji integrasi ilmu sosial, pendidikan karakter, dan Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) dalam sistem pendidikan di Jepang, dengan fokus pada bagaimana elemen-elemen tersebut membekali siswa dengan keterampilan dan nilai-nilai yang diperlukan untuk menghadapi tantangan global terkini. Menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini menggabungkan observasi lapangan dengan tinjauan literatur. Tinjauan literatur menjadi dasar untuk menganalisis permasalahan yang dikaji, sedangkan observasi lapangan dilakukan pada 17-24 November 2024 di kota Tokyo dan Prefektur Tokushima, Jepang. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa 17 komponen SDGs telah terintegrasi dalam pembelajaran di Jepang, termasuk kompetensi dalam Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Pendidikan karakter di sekolah-sekolah Jepang berkontribusi membentuk individu dengan nilai etika dan tanggung jawab yang kuat, sekaligus memberdayakan mereka untuk bertindak sebagai agen perubahan dalam menghadapi kompleksitas permasalahan global, khususnya dalam merespons isu lingkungan. Integrasi pendidikan karakter dan ilmu sosial dengan SDGs merupakan kerangka strategis untuk membentuk masa depan yang lebih baik bagi generasi selanjutnya. Model tersebut merupakan praktik baik di Jepang bagi sistem pendidikan di dunia dalam upaya untuk meningkatkan pendidikan karakter.

Kata kunci: pendidikan karakter; SDGs; ESD; ilmu sosial; sekolah Jepang.

1. Introduction

As a developed country, Japan effectively blends traditional wisdom with modern knowledge. For example, the design of Tokyo Sky Tree reflects the application of the core pillar structure, characterized by a triangle-circle configuration, a principle also evident in the resilient and earthquake-resistant architecture of traditional temples and pagodas. In the realm of human resource development, Japan is widely recognized for its robust cultural traditions. These traditions are preserved, as the cultivation of high-quality human resources is essential for fostering national progress and contributing to global development, which can be realized through improvements in educational system.

Nations worldwide are actively working to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations (UN), which seek to enhance societal well-being, particularly through improving the quality of education (Firdaus & Nugraheni, 2024). Character education, a crucial component of holistic development, plays a vital role in achieving these goals. By incorporating character education, educational systems can equip students with the knowledge and skills to address global challenges effectively. The SDGs reaffirm the vital importance of integrating the principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) at all levels of education.

This comprehensive educational strategy aligns with Japan's commitment to the SDGs, ensuring that students are equipped with the knowledge and skills required to navigate an increasingly complex world (Ofei-Manu & Shimano, 2012). By incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives and experiential learning opportunities, educators can enhance student engagement in addressing these global challenges, fostering a sense of responsibility and agency in their future endeavors (Trencher et al., 2015).

In Japan, character education is not limited to a separate subject but is embedded across all aspects of learning, including social sciences. This concept, known as *Doutoku-kyouiku*, encompasses moral education taught from elementary through secondary levels, and emphasizes the importance of ethics in students' daily lives. Through this approach, students are taught to appreciate human values, discipline, perseverance, honesty, respect, environmental consciousness, and their roles and responsibilities as members of society, and contribute positively to society (Widisuseno, 2019). This character education framework focuses not only on

developing students' personalities and encourages them to preserve heritage and culture but also aligns with the SDGs.

At the high school level, character education is specifically integrated into social studies, creating a supportive environment for students' character development through practical, contextual, and collaborative learning experiences. This method ensures that students acquire not only theoretical knowledge but also practical skills applicable to their daily lives. For example, in the *Seikatsu* (life skills) program, students are taught social responsibility and ethics through hands-on activities, such as maintaining environmental cleanliness, learning how to interact with others in public settings and engaging in community-based projects (Nadila & Alam, 2024; Mulyadi, 2014). Similarly, the *Tokkatsu* program, which engages students in daily school activities, such as cleaning classrooms and maintaining the school environment. These activities promote not only responsibility but also a sense of solidarity and environmental consciousness.

The implementation of character education in Japanese schools employs various methods, including practical activities designed to foster the development of these values. For example, students participate in social activities and community projects that allow them to apply moral principles in real-world situations. This approach cultivates a learning environment that extends beyond theoretical concepts, focusing on practical applications that are directly relevant to everyday life (Nadila & Alam, 2024). By engaging in direct projects, community involvement, and critical thinking activities, students are encouraged to develop practical solutions that contribute not only to their local environment but also to global sustainability efforts (Didham et al., 2017). These initiatives not only enrich students' academic experiences but also empower them to act as proactive agents of change, equipped to address the multifaceted challenges encountered by society today (Bonatti, 2018). This article seeks to examine how the integration of social studies, character education, and the SDGs in Japan prepares students with the essential skills and values required to confront contemporary global challenges. The study will investigate the learning models employed and their influence on the development of students' character in relation to the attainment of SDGs.

2. Materials and Methods

The study employs a qualitative descriptive methodology, incorporating a combination of

field research and literature review. The literature review was used to analyze the issues under investigation, while the field study was conducted from November 17 to 24, 2024, in Tokyo City and Tokushima Prefecture, Japan. The sample schools observed include Gakken Educational Co., Ltd., Tokushimakita High School, Sanagochi Elementary School, and Matsushige Junior High School, with respondents consisting of school principals and teachers from these institutions. Additionally, direct information was gathered from Tokushima Prefecture Governor, Gotōda Masazumi. Furthermore, secondary data for this study was sourced from various academic journals and books.

This study is part of the initiative supported by The Japan Foundation through the FY 2024 ASEAN-Japan Exchange Program for Secondary School Educators, a program designed to promote the exchange of 29 teachers in the field of social sciences across ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Lao, Vietnam, and Brunei Darussalam). Participants were invited to Japan to engage in lectures, school visits, fieldwork, and attend official events organized by the Tokushima Governor, interacting with relevant personnel and gaining cultural experiences. Through their participation in this program, participants enhance their understanding of Japan, allowing them to share their experiences through educational activities in their respective schools, thereby fostering a deeper comprehension of Japan among the younger generations in ASEAN, who will serve as future collaborators for Japan.

The methodology employed in this study involves the following steps: 1. Observation: This method was utilized to gain insight into the lives and communities of Japanese individuals. The resulting data serves as primary material for subsequent analysis. 2. Interviews: This technique was employed to gather more in-depth understanding of the research topics. Interviews were conducted with informants, school principals, teachers, and students. 3. Classification: Following the collection of sufficient data, a classification process was carried out based on urgency and the type of materials/data. 4. Analysis: A thorough analysis was conducted on the collected data, supported by information from relevant literature. 5. Interpretation: This method was applied to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the study materials, focusing on understanding the fundamental concepts and illustrating their practical implementation. 6. Synthesis: Synthesis

was achieved by integrating findings from various aspects studied through deductive logic. This synthesis leads to a conclusion that addresses the research questions. 7. Description: All research materials, scientific studies, and implementation trials were described while preserving the integrity of the interpretation, ensuring a thorough understanding of the findings.

3. Result and Discussion

Implementation of Social Studies

Learning Aligned with SDGs

The integration of social studies with SDGs presents a significant approach to cultivating a comprehensive understanding of global challenges and promoting sustainable development among students (Trencher et al., 2015). By integrating real-world issues into the curriculum, educators can foster critical thinking and empower students to actively engage in creating solutions for a sustainable future. This approach not only improves students' awareness of social, economic, and environmental matters but also fosters collaboration and innovation as they collaborate to address pressing challenges (Sachs, 2013).

The integration of social studies with the SDGs in Japanese secondary schools represents a comprehensive approach designed to develop students with a broad understanding, ethical values, and global awareness. This educational strategy is demonstrated through various case studies, including institutions such as Gakken Educational Co., Ltd., Tokushimakita High School, Sanagochi Elementary and Junior High School, and Matsushige Junior High School. These schools have implemented innovative methods to embed SDGs into their curricula, promoting a holistic and inclusive learning environment.

The educational objective of Matsushige Junior High School is to cultivate individuals who respect human rights and possess the spirit of independence, self-discipline, creativity, responsibility, and service. Project-Based Learning integrated with Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (PBL-STEAM) is applied, aligning with SDG goal 13 (climate action) in social studies subjects like culture and geography. The activities include creating processed food products from cassava, puzzles, keychains, and tumblers, which are later sold publicly to raise funds and distributed to the needs of the community. In a commercialization project, students harvest and process potatoes in the school lab, using the profits to fund wheelchairs and support schools abroad,

including in Vietnam. Another project involves crafting bamboo lighting, where students carve bamboo stems and display their work alongside artisans at local festivals. Additionally, a recycling initiative involves collecting, washing, and sending used milk cartons to the Kiseki Rei company to be transformed into lunch trays. Use of technology such as Smartboards and Chromebooks playing a crucial role in supporting SDGs-focused instruction. Some schools selected in Japan are provided with Chromebooks by the government for each student, which are returned to schools upon graduation. Minor damages are repaired by school technicians, while severe damages require students to take responsibility for their own repairs. Notably, the school has experienced no incidents of theft. PBL-STEAM, which focuses on real-world relevance and active student participation, has been demonstrated to improve learning outcomes by promoting critical thinking and creativity (Lydiati, 2019).

To enhance students' comprehension of global issues and improve English language proficiency, Matsushige Junior High School actively participates in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, which enables foreign nationals to teach in schools across Japan. This initiative promotes international collaboration and supports the attainment of goal 17 in SDGs (partnerships for the goals), with the presence of American English teachers fostering a global learning environment. To develop these competencies, each student is required to meet with "successful" individuals, three people per academic year. They then reflect by answering the question: "What is my vision of myself in the future?"

Tokushimakita Senior High School aims to cultivate principled, independent, and empathetic individuals, foster creativity for global contribution, and strengthen ties with parents and the local community. The school promotes addressing real-world issues like climate change, waste management, gender equality, and peace through social studies, while fostering 21st-century skills, social-emotional learning, and support for students with disabilities, including goal 5 of SDGs, gender equality (Loh et al., 2020).

The daily schedule at Tokushimakita begins with a 5-minute homeroom session. The first class starts at 9:00 AM and lasts for 50 minutes, with a 10-minute break between each class, there are 6 hours of lessons a day. Lunch break is from 12:50 PM to 1:30 PM (students serve their own meals at noon, each student says *Itadakimasu* before

eating, a tradition that reflects gratitude for the gifts of nature, the hard work of farmers, and the hands that prepared the meal). Classes conclude at 3:20 PM, followed by a 15-minute school cleaning activity, and the day ends with a 5-minute homeroom session. Following this, students may spend up to one hour or more participating in club activities after school, depending on the students' elective club schedule.

Besides following the national curriculum, Tokushimakita Senior High School offers elective subject packages that are integrated with social studies, which are as follows: Package 1 (Advanced Mathematics, Food Design, Written Expression, Local Culture), Package 2 (Biology Exercise, Essay Writing, Music, Art and Design, Calligraphy, Childcare), Package 3 (Basic Japanese, Living and Politics, Chemistry Exercise, Earth Science Exercise, Sports), and Package 4 (Politics, Economics, Advanced Mathematics, Written Expression, Essay Writing).

Sanagochi Elementary and Junior High School aims to develop critical thinking, communication, and academic skills, foster independence and individuality, and strengthen ties with families and the community to build trust. The school incorporates experiential learning to enhance students' understanding of local and global issues, promoting active involvement in community welfare and environmental preservation (Ichinose, 2017). The development of primary and lower secondary education in Japan is integrated over a nine-year period. The curriculum features systematic English education, "Hometown Learning" with local resources in Sannokuchi, structured instruction across subjects with information and communication technology integration, practical lessons to boost critical thinking and communication, quality improvements via Whiteboard Meetings, and the use of national surveys and Step-Up Tests. Besides that, Grades 1-3 students with special needs are taught in a class known as the Sunflower Class. There are two teachers who will teach simultaneously by using the riddle methods and body movements to help the students learn and memorize Japanese words.

A key feature is the "Hometown Learning" approach, where students from Grades 1-3 engage in character education and local traditions. In Grade 4, they visit local institutions like police stations, factories, farms, and shops. Grade 5 includes hands-on activities such as rice planting, harvesting, and preparing rice cakes, aligning with SDG Goal 2: Zero Hunger. In Grade

6, students visit shrines and parks, create tourism posters or videos, and present them at local festivals for tourists. The New School ISO Version on the Environment is also developed through the following ways: Students with ethics who value life, nature, and love their homeland are developed through the analysis of the current situation of schools, and energy-saving, waste sorting, and recycling activities are carried out at school. Environmental conservation, environmental beautification, and environmental learning activities are also conducted at the local level. Students and teachers are developed to actively participate in energy saving, waste sorting, and recycling. Open schools are established to cooperate with local communities in sorting and recycling.

Gakken Educational Co., Ltd. integrates STEAM learning with inquiry-based and problem-solving approaches to develop both character and academic abilities. Its curriculum distinct from other Tokyo schools, emphasizes unique content, for example; different way of calculation, technology of puzzle, robot programming debut and problem solving. Gakken supports educational diversification to meet diverse student needs, by employing a continuous learning approach, focusing on the development of two key competencies: invisible skills and visible skills. Invisible skills encompass abilities such as concentration, logical thinking, curiosity, perseverance, good judgement, motivation, reasoning, independence, planning, and observation skills. These skills are cultivated through social studies, which serve as a foundation for the acquisition of visible skills. Visible skills include competencies in mathematics, science, writing, reading, and quantitative comprehension.

Gakken School's approach provides a more balanced curriculum by incorporating a variety of courses and practical skills, which may facilitate a more seamless transition to higher education or the workforce, this is included in goal 1 of SDGs, poverty reduction. The advantages of this school compared to others are; 1) Having instructors who actively guide and teach children individualized worksheets. 2) Self-learning is realized by using learning worksheets, that match each child's academic abilities. 3) No grade based system. 4) Students repeat studying same contents if necessary. 5) Science and programming are experiment and experience education. Gakken classroom is not necessary to have many time slots and rooms because students who have different grade and ability study at same place and same timing.

Gakken's student-centered approach enhances engagement, joy of learning, self-confidence, and zest for living, positively impacting academic performance. Research indicates that teaching methods shape learning experiences and influence achievement. Differentiated teaching, which caters to individual learning needs, improves success, particularly in complex subjects, while individualized models support students with disabilities (Barone & Crişan, 2023). Overall, Gakken's diverse methods foster a supportive environment that promotes academic success and prepares students for future challenges.

The integration of social studies education with character education to support SDGs

Character education in Japan emphasizes the development of deep moral values, including discipline, hard work, and a sense of responsibility. The Japanese curriculum is structured into three primary components: 1) Academic subjects (compulsory and elective), 2) Moral education, and 3) Special activities. Moral education has been increasingly oriented towards citizenship education, which focuses on understanding rights and responsibilities as members of society (Mulyadi, 2014). In this framework, character education aims to cultivate individuals with strong moral and ethical foundations, while also preparing a generation capable of addressing global challenges and contributing to sustainable development.

In Japanese high schools, social studies education serves not only to impart knowledge about society and culture but also to cultivate character values. Through this approach, students are guided to: 1) Embrace cultural diversity: Students gain an understanding of various cultures and traditions, fostering respect for others (Widjayanti et al., 2024). 2) Engage in social activities: Activities such as community projects and group discussions allow students to apply moral values in real-world contexts (Widisuseno, 2019). 3) Enhance social skills: Through interactions with peers in both academic and extracurricular settings, students develop essential skills in teamwork and solidarity (Nadila & Alam, 2024).

The following illustrates how the integration of character education and SDGs in Japan supports students in addressing contemporary social challenges: Firstly, character education is a fundamental element for moral and ethical development through holistic learning. Sanagochi Elementary School emphasizes this approach, fostering collaboration among schools,

families, and the community to promote strong moral values and ethical behavior. This cohesive environment helps students understand and apply these values in daily life, preparing them to navigate complex social situations with appropriate attitudes. These values are aligned with several SDGs, including goal 4 (Quality Education) and goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) (Nadila & Alam, 2024). To ensure educational quality, the Japanese government requires: 1) a teacher's license for each school type, 2) completion of a teacher training program accredited by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

Secondly, social skills development and contextual learning are prioritized at the school, with students encouraged to collaborate, express opinions, express themselves, support each other, and integrate character values into daily life. School community service programs highlight the importance of cooperation, interaction, and social responsibility, aligning with SDGs for inclusive and sustainable communities (Firdaus & Nugraheni, 2024). Extracurricular activities and group projects provide valuable hands-on experiences, essential for enhancing communication and teamwork skills, which are crucial for effective societal participation.

Thirdly, social and environmental awareness is emphasized. Character education in Japanese schools places significant importance on fostering social and environmental awareness, encouraging students to apply character values in real-life contexts. Students are taught to understand global issues such as climate change and social injustice, enabling them to actively contribute to achieving SDGs. Activities like school clean-up campaigns and community service projects teach students social responsibility and a sense of care for their surrounding environment (Erviana & Nugraheni, 2024).

Fourthly, the cultivation of discipline and time management. Japan's emphasis on punctuality contributes to the development of students' discipline and efficiency. Through adherence to class schedules and respect for others' time, students develop the capacity to become reliable individuals. This practice is beneficial not only within the school environment but also in their daily lives.

Fifthly, preparation for independent living. Character education also encompasses preparing students for independent and responsible living. Students are taught to manage their time, plan activities, and take responsibility for personal

tasks. This prepares them to face life challenges after graduation, equipping them to pursue suitable careers and job opportunities, aligning with goal 8 of SDGs, which focuses on decent work and economic growth.

Sixthly, the role of teachers and the school community. Teachers in Japan act as facilitators in the character education process, creating a supportive learning environment for the moral development of students. They serve as role models for ethical behavior and integrate character education into their instructional practices. The involvement of all stakeholders within the school community, including parents and the broader community, enhances the implementation of moral values, fostering an environment that supports student growth. This is crucial for ensuring the integration of character values into the school's culture (Firdaus & Nugraheni, 2024).

Method of Integrated Social Studies and Character Education to support ESD

The Japanese education system frequently utilizes a learning-by-doing approach, wherein students actively participate in practical activities related to their education. Examples of such methods include: 1) Daily cleaning sessions lasting 15 minutes and large-scale clean-ups conducted three times annually. Through these activities, students take responsibility for maintaining the cleanliness of the school environment, fostering a sense of responsibility and environmental stewardship, as schools typically do not have dedicated janitorial staff (Widisuseno, 2019). 2) Group projects: In social studies, students often work collaboratively in groups to complete tasks requiring teamwork and discussion (Widjayanti et al., 2024). In Japanese schools, character education is integrated into social studies through various approaches, as follows:

Firstly, Tokushimakita Senior High School also incorporates contextual learning, where students explore social concepts while applying moral values. For instance, the integration of English lessons with studies of Japanese history or culture, such as the traditional Tokushima dance "Awa Odori" and Japanese puppetry, helps students develop an appreciation for cultural diversity and understand the importance of tolerance. Another approach involves practical activities: Through group projects and social initiatives, students have the opportunity to practice values such as teamwork and responsibility. These activities frequently involve direct engagement with the community,

including community service projects aimed at raising social awareness.

Additionally, the school adopts *Tokkatsu*, a holistic educational framework that emphasizes the development of non-cognitive skills, such as social abilities, empathy, and perseverance, alongside academic instruction (Tsuneyoshi, 2022). This method is further supported by innovative educational practices, such as the introduction of mental health literacy programs designed to enhance students' understanding of mental health issues and reduce stigma, promoting a nurturing school environment, including maintaining the use of chalk rather than markers for teaching, this is included in goal 3 of SDGs, good health and well-being (Ojio et al., 2021).

Moreover, efforts are made to fostering interactive and effective communication skills among students, the school participates in the JET Programme and currently hosts assistant language teachers from Birmingham, England and Christchurch, New Zealand. Uniquely, students here are taught English Debate & Discussion lessons with a goal to enhance not only their fluency in the English language, but the students' skills in logical reasoning, critical thinking, and the ability to analyze complex social and political topics. As a result of these lessons, based on teacher observations, students become more confident in their English speaking ability and have an increased awareness and empathy towards important Japanese and global issues, including the SDGs. The International English Department offers a program designed to teach social science topics in advanced English through various academic and extracurricular activities. One of the key courses is the second-year International English Class "Debate Discussion II: SDGs and Global Issues," which focuses on critical global challenges and the SDGs. Additionally, the department organizes student development activities such as English camp, English day, students exchange, and the Kitako Cup debate competition, providing students with opportunities to enhance their language proficiency, engage in meaningful discussions, and develop essential communication skills in a global context.

To advance the SDGs, it is essential to instill the 8 principles of ESD at all levels of education (Meda, 2022). In this context, ESD has been implemented in social studies education at the senior high school level, as outlined in Table 1. The ESD calendar, developed by MEXT in 2016, illustrates how subjects, integrated learning time, extracurricular activities, non-curricular

development, and other elements are interconnected based on the content covered in each class throughout the year. ESD is widely present as part of the description of all subjects in the curriculum under the 2008 Revised National Curriculum Guidelines. The content of ESD is most prominent in geography, civics, and home economics. As UNESCO noted, ESD in Japan is mainly practiced during integrated study time, rather than in core subjects. This time was introduced with the 1998 revision of the Curriculum Guidelines, the national standards for Japanese school curricula. It allows for teaching methods that promote task-based inquiry, problem-solving, and participatory learning, key elements of the pluralistic approaches to ESD (Ichinose, 2017).

Table 1. Social Studies subjects
In senior high school

| Subject | Principles of ESD | Competence |
|---|----------------------------|--|
| Geography, History. | Systemic Thinking | Able to recognize problem relationships and analyze complex systems. |
| Home economics. | Anticipatory | Able to understand and evaluate various possibilities, opportunities, and what is needed. |
| Politics, Civics, Public studies, English. | Strategic | Able to collaboratively develop and implement new actions that improve sustainability both on a local and broader scale. |
| <i>Tokkatsu</i> , Inquiry-Based Cross-Disciplinary Study. | Integrated Problem Solving | Able to produce various feasible, inclusive and fair solutions that can help encourage sustainable development. |

Secondly, Matsushige Junior High School in Tokushima, Japan, follows a curriculum and teaching approach reflective of broader trends in Japanese education, which is centralized and guided by MEXT. This curriculum ensures uniformity and control, with a strong focus on academic subjects, including music, arts, and moral education, which are compulsory. A key component of the curriculum is the "Environmental Studies" unit within the geography curriculum, serving as a foundational element for developing geographic methodologies and problem-solving skills. This unit is designed to be applicable across various subjects, promoting the integration of knowledge and skills. These values are aligned with several SDGs, including goal 14 (life below water) and goal 15 (life on land).

The teaching approach at Matsushige Junior High School incorporates learning structures

centered on problem-solving, aimed at actively engaging students and fostering critical thinking skills. The educational environment is enhanced by innovative teaching tools and platforms that improve teaching efficiency and reduce teacher workload, such as advanced whiteboards and digital platforms for managing educational materials. Furthermore, while implementing these technological resources, educators must consider disparities in resource access that could affect student participation and learning outcomes, ensuring inclusive strategies that address potential educational inequalities (Okubo et al., 2021).

Another approach utilized by the school to promote character development is the “Homeroom” rotation system, an intensive mentoring strategy conducted by teachers or class advisors on a rotational basis. Teachers engage in open dialogues with homeroom groups from 8:50-8:55 AM and 3:40-3:45 PM. Overall, the curriculum and teaching methods at Matsushige Junior High School combine traditional Japanese practices with modern innovations, fostering advanced knowledge and skills while promoting a balanced learning experience (Nakayasu, 2016). Lastly, interactive discussion is emphasized: In social studies classes, teachers facilitate discussions on contemporary social issues and challenges facing society. Students are encouraged to engage in critical thinking and reflect on how their actions can impact their communities. In general, the implementation of ESD principles in social studies subjects at the junior high school level can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Social Studies subjects
in junior high school

| Subject | Principles of ESD | Competence |
|---|-------------------|---|
| Social Science, Home Economics. | Critical thinking | Able to maintain norms, opinions, reflect on one's own values, views and actions. |
| Moral Education, English, <i>Tokkatsu</i> . | Collaboration | Able to understand and respect the needs, points of view and actions of other people (empathy). |

Thirdly, Sanagochi School in Tokushima, Japan, adopts the Lesson Study (LS) approach, a collaborative teaching method that emphasizes joint lesson planning, implementation, and analysis to improve pedagogy and student outcomes (Jacobs, 2012). Japanese teachers design lesson plans in a simple two-page format for several meetings, including components such as credit hours, time, class, textbooks, lesson

content, student characteristics, learning objectives, guiding questions, assessment criteria, teaching plan, instructional goals, and evaluation. Teachers design lessons together, teach them, observe classroom outcomes, and review them to identify improvements. LS is central to teacher training and professional development at Sanagochi, fostering a culture of ongoing improvement and collaboration. The effectiveness of LS in Japan is attributed to its creation of a teacher community that fosters collaborative learning and teaching innovation. ESD is best implemented through multidisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches, where collaboration in interdisciplinary projects helps teachers expand their knowledge beyond their expertise. Collaborative teaching with colleagues from different subjects is key to enhancing ESD.

Furthermore, LS can be adapted to various educational contexts, including special education, demonstrating positive impacts on both teacher practices and student learning outcomes (Seleznyov et al., 2020). Based on observations and interviews, in Tokushima, there are limited specialized schools for students with communication and cognition disabilities, meaning students with special needs attend regular schools. However, there are schools for students with physical disabilities such as for the hearing impaired, but these are also limited. Therefore, each class with students requiring additional support is taught by two or more teachers. This is to adhere to goal 16 of SDGs, to encourage inclusive environments and provide access for all. In summary, the curriculum and teaching methods at Sanagochi School exemplify a commitment to collaborative, reflective, and iterative teaching practices central to the LS model, fostering the development of both teachers and students (Ermeling & Graff-Ermeling, 2014). The principles of ESD in social studies subjects at the elementary school level are explained in the following Table 3.

Table 3. Social Studies subjects
in elementary school

| Subject | Principles of ESD | Competence |
|---|-------------------|---|
| Social Science (grade 3-6), Home Economics (grade 5-6). | Normative | Understand and reflect the norms and values of an action. |
| Moral Education, <i>Tokkatsu</i> . | Self-awareness | Managing emotions, engage in ongoing self-reflection and foster further drive to act. |

The support from community, company, and the government

The support from community, businesses, and the government is evident in the promotion of character-based education and SDGs, particularly through modern and eco-friendly waste management systems. In our observations, these three stakeholders have played a significant role in managing waste and promoting healthy living in both Tokushima and Tokyo. In Kamikatsu Village, located one hour from Tokushima city, there is a community-based waste management facility, the Kamikatsucho Zero Waste Center. The facility manages a recycling rate of approximately 80%, classifying waste into 43 distinct categories, and collaborates with neighboring cities to collect waste. Reusable items are donated to the Kuru-kuru shop located within the waste management complex or make a decorative base with old stuff, which align with goal 10 of SDGs, reduced inequalities.

The waste management services provided by Kiseki Rei Co., Ltd., located in Tokushima, involve the collection of milk carton waste from schools within the region. This waste is subsequently processed into kitchen furniture and household equipment. The Tokushima Prefecture government actively supports initiatives aimed at reducing kitchen waste and promoting sustainable waste management practices, particularly through educational efforts, which align with goal 11 of SDGs focused on creating sustainable cities and communities. All water channels in Japan are also hygienic and potable, this is included in goal 6 of SDGs, clean water and sanitation.

In Tokyo, waste management is carried out by The Ota Waste Incineration Plant, located in Ota Ward. This facility handles waste from the entire city of Tokyo and surrounding areas using advanced, environmentally sustainable technology (free from dioxins and CO2 emissions). The residual waste is utilized in the production of cement or bricks for construction, and the heat generated from exhaust gases is used for electricity generation supplied to schools in Tokyo. This initiative contributes to goal 7 of SDGs, which emphasizes clean and affordable energy solutions, and goal 9, industry, innovation and infrastructure. Community, company, and government involvement is crucial, as it represents the most prioritized factor in partnership programs aimed at achieving objectives. This highlights the presence of opportunities for improvement in engaging external stakeholders in the 17th component of the SDGs (Ichinose, 2017).

Although character education in Japan has demonstrated success in supporting the achievement of the SDGs, there are several challenges that need to be addressed. These include high academic pressures and the necessity to adapt teaching methods to meet the needs of modern society. However, by continuing to develop innovative and relevant approaches, character education can play a vital role in advancing SDGs (Nadila & Alam, 2024).

In summary, character education in Japanese schools not only shapes individuals who are ethical and responsible but also prepares them to become agents of change in an increasingly complex global society. Consequently, integrating character education with the SDGs serves as a strategic approach to fostering a better future for future generations. Additionally, the rapid changes in Japanese society necessitate curriculum adaptation to remain aligned with contemporary needs.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

This study examines the integration of Social Studies, character education with the SDGs in Japanese secondary schools, showcasing a commitment to global awareness, critical thinking, and active participation in social, economic, and environmental issues. Schools in Japan employ innovative methods such as PBL, STEAM integration, and experiential learning to enhance students' understanding of global challenges and essential skills for sustainable development. These schools also prioritize collaboration, technology use, and community engagement.

Character education in Japan focuses on moral and ethical development, preparing students to tackle societal challenges and contribute to sustainable development. The curriculum combines academic subjects, moral education, and special activities to instill values like discipline, responsibility, and social awareness. This holistic approach, emphasizing cultural diversity, environmental responsibility, and personal independence, equips students with the knowledge and ethical foundations to address global issues. Japanese schools integrate SDGs and ESD, fostering critical skills like communication, problem-solving, and empathy. However, challenges such as high academic pressure and the need for curriculum adaptation remain, requiring continued innovation and collaboration to enhance the effectiveness of character education in achieving the SDGs.

To promote SDGs integration in education, schools should refine multidisciplinary teaching

methods that connect subjects to real-world issues, enhancing students' understanding of global challenges. Strengthening international partnerships, and investing in technology, will support SDGs-focused education. Schools should also prioritize community-based learning through local sustainability activities and adopt student-centered models to address diverse needs. Integrating character education with the SDGs will empower students to take action on issues like climate change and social justice. Collaboration with businesses and governments can enhance these initiatives, while adapting teaching methods will develop critical skills for societal challenges. Expanding SDGs integration across subjects, supporting teacher development, and reducing academic pressure will prepare students to become responsible global citizens. Additionally, fostering inclusivity and collaborative learning environments will promote social responsibility and personal accountability.

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