

Japan • A 'Whole Community Service' Learning Approach to ESD

Special thanks to Hiroko Shibakawa and Jun Takagi for this contribution

One of the practices in Japan that led to them proposing to have the UN Decade of ESD (UN-DESD), at the UN Summit in 2002, was the citizen-led environmental education project in Okayama. This project was conducted through close cooperation between schools, service learning and adult education organisations, and local communities. In the beginning of UN-DESD, Okayama City launched the citizen-led "Okayama ESD Project" and the city was one of the first seven cities in the world to receive RCE certification from the United Nations University. In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been promoting UNESCO Associated Schools (ASPnet) as regional centres for ESD. Since that time they have been aiming to increase the number of member schools. In 2014, the final year of the conference, the number of member schools had increased from 16 to nearly 1,200 - the largest number of member schools per country in the world. In the Okayama area, the Okayama City Board of Education, in cooperation with the ESD Collaboration Promotion Centre at the Faculty of Education, Okayama University, has started to support public primary and secondary schools to become members of the UN-DESD, and 51 of the city 163 public schools have been accredited, the highest membership rate in Japan.

School Overview and Features • The driving force behind this collaboration (The Okayama UNESCO School Network) is Okayama Prefectural Yakage upper-secondary school, located in the town of Yakage (population 14000), situated in a mountainous and nature-rich area. The school received the first UNESCO School/ESD Grand Prize in 2006 and in 2008 it was the first school in the prefecture to be accredited as a UNESCO ASPnet school³³.

School-based subject "Environment" • Since 1995, a Physical Education teacher, Jun Takayuki Muro had been practicing various hands-on activities with his students,

such as environmental conservation activities in local rivers, firefly farming, and hands-on activity camps on remote islands. He then encountered the concept of ESD, focused on its potential, and went through trial and error with the help of university experts. This led to the creation of a new subject called "Environment" in 2004, which was a rare attempt in Japan to set up a school-unique subject. Although it was the first course without a textbook, the school began to position this subject as a new and distinctive education. In 2008, a living and learning biotope, similar to what nowadays is referred to as a green school-garden, was created in the school's courtyard.

"Yakage Studies", a school subject • In 2010, a new element was added: "Yakage Studies". This is a Comprehensive Service-Learning Course designed to help students grow and realise their career goals by using the relationships with the local community that they have cultivated through their "Environment" courses to execute and experience actual activities that serve the well-being and sustainability of the community. Every Thursday afternoon, students ride their bicycles to various local places, such as kindergartens and nursery schools, primary and secondary schools, libraries, welfare facilities, farms, and businesses to provide a service. As a result, the students' sense of purpose changed to a clear one of creating a sustainable society, and this also clarified the educational goals of the school.

Establishment of the Okayama UNESCO Secondary School Network • In 2012, it was decided that secondary school students from UNESCO schools in Japan would take the lead in planning and organising a forum for high school students at the UN-DESD World Conference³⁴ to be held in Okayama City, where they would discuss the creation of a sustainable future with young people from across the world. UNESCO schools in Okayama Prefecture³⁵, including Yakage High School³⁶, held a series of study sessions in the prefecture, and the event was held. Students were the main organisers of the conference, but were supported by university students, mainly graduates of UNESCO secondary schools. In the time leading up to the UN-DESD World Conference, Jun Takagi, who contributed to the writing of this case study, became the teacher in charge of ESD at Yakage High School as a successor to Mr. Muro, the physical education teacher who initiated the project originally. Jun Takagi deepened his understanding of

a: The UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPnet) links educational institutions across the world around a common goal: to build the defences of peace in the minds of children and young people. The over 11,500 ASPnet member schools in 182 countries work in support of international understanding, peace, intercultural dialogue, sustainable development and quality education in practice." ASPnet, (2022)

Key WSA Principles in action at *Yakage upper-secondary school*

Capacity building • Community Connections • Curriculum

- These three WSA principles are the schools strongest WSA interlocking strands. However, it is not collaboration for the sake of collaboration, but something that can be done by the members of the group at the time as they face the issues that need to be addressed - The creation of a system that allows both teachers and students to tackle these issues boldly and happily has resulted in professional growth and regional collaboration
- In the current regular meetings of the ESD Section, each member talks about the growth of students that they have witnessed in ESD classes and events, and this has a positive effect on the team and the school as a whole
- Weekly meetings where the team of teachers in charge of the "ESD Basics" class develop the annual plan and share the progress are also a creative learning opportunity for the teachers

Vision, Ethos, Leadership & Coordination

- The school's mission of nurturing the shapers of a sustainable society is shared and has already become part of the school's culture
- ESD is well positioned in the school's educational goals and philosophy and sends a clear message as a pillar of the school

Pedagogy & Learning

- The ESD class "Yakage Studies," is recognised as one of the most unique classes in Japan in that it is based on students' independent activities in the local community
- Learning at the school covers a wide range of fields in order to solve sustainability issues in the local community

Institutional Practices

- The school has a biotope called Eco Square, which is a project of Okayama Prefecture and was planned and proposed by the students themselves from the viewpoint of universal design
- Blocks containing wood chips from thinning, recycled glass, and paving materials made from rubber chips from waste tires are used to deepen students' awareness of the need to create a recycling-oriented society
- An outdoor classroom area called FOREST, planned and proposed by the students. It is made of wood from Okayama Prefecture and is used in various ways like a meeting room for the UNESCO School

ESD and came to realise that the issues of sustainable development are connected to the issues of declining birth-rates, aging society, and depopulation in the mountainous region where the school is located. The students learned that the challenges of sustainable development are also connected to the challenges of declining birth-rates, aging society, and depopulation in the mountainous region where the school is located, and that addressing the challenges of local communities can lead to solving global sustainability issues. Jun Takagi proposed to create an international network of UNESCO Schools facing similar sustainability challenges to learn from each other.

Whole School Approach of Yakage Upper-Secondary School

• Entry points for ESD at various levels: Classes, events, and extracurricular activities. At Yakage upper-secondary school, there are various fields of activities: Biodiversity, disaster mitigation/disaster prevention, environment, cultural diversity, world heritage, intangible cultural heritage and local cultural assets, international understanding, welfare, sustainable production and consumption, and health. The three pillars of these activities are "community cooperation," "environmental study," and "international exchange," and in line with these pillars, (1) classes, (2) events, and (3) extracurricular activities are systematically incorporated and developed. In the first year, students take a class entitled "ESD Basics", and in the second year, they are divided into three courses: General Course, Exploratory Course, and Regional Business Course. In the General Course of the Regular Course, students experience "Yakage Studies," in which they practice at local facilities to create a sustainable local society. In the Exploratory Course, students enter a "student contest" to solve social problems. In the Regional Business Course, students work with the local shopping district to develop healthier and more sustainable products and services. In all courses and departments, cooperation with the local community is essential. Unlike urban areas, local communities are facing a variety of problems, including depopulation, declining birth-rates and aging populations, difficulties in sustaining various cultures and industries due to the outflow of young people, a decrease in number of farmers, abandonment of farmland, and issues related to the revitalisation of shopping districts.

• **Collaboration with the local community** • At present, the whole town of Yakage is supporting the activities of Yakage upper-secondary school, and the town's PR magazine has a section introducing the school's activities in the community. Still, it is not so easy for any school to cooperate with the local community. One of the reasons why this kind of cooperation became possible was that teachers visited various facilities in the town when starting "Yakage Studies", so that they could share their philosophy firmly and gain understanding. It is of great importance that the students understand that the program is not simply an activity to

gain experience or to supplement the labour shortage at the facilities. Rather collaboration to support the growth of the students throughout the town and to form a sustainable society, which will benefit not only the students but also the school and the local community. Naturally, students will sometimes make “mistakes,” and it is these moments that will inspire growth and learning. Therefore, Jun Takagi clearly states in his explanation of Yakage Studies that students should expect to make mistakes in advance.

In Japan, many “comprehensive learning” programs do not allow room for failure, but rather lead the students to study the region as planned and to achieve the same results as in previous years, which results in superficial experiences without deepening learning. On the contrary, at Yakage upper-secondary school, it is noteworthy that the school considers that “learning does not proceed as planned” and that “it is not necessary to achieve the same results as in previous years”.

Integration of formal, non-formal and informal education • ESD events are also linked to ESD classes. For example, the YAKO Presentation Week is a fun event in which students share their learning on stage, and not only do second-year students report to first-year students on their activities in the above-mentioned Student Contest, Yakage Studies, and Product Development, but first-year students also share with second-year students what they have been working on in ESD Basics. At the YAKO Awards, groups of students will present their ESD activities to each

other, and the evaluation will be done by the students themselves. The presentations are open to the local community.

Strengths/Prospects

- The local community fully supports the school's ESD
- ESD regional coordinator is properly assigned
- The ESD Division has been established, which includes the school's public relations staff and those in charge of the primary and secondary school cooperation. This is very important so that the school does not have to take on everything

Challenges

- Schools in depopulated or rural areas are rich in nature and have strong human ties, but they face different sustainability issues from those in urban areas, such as a declining population and a serious shortage of successors in agriculture, even though they have a self-sufficient and sustainable economy
- Sometimes difficult to continue such efforts in public schools where there is a rapid turnover of teachers. It is urgent and a challenge not only to consider staffing by dividing the entry points to ESD and community learning for teachers into different levels, but also to create a foundation for developing the activities that have been carried out so far with an eye to after the next team that establishes the ESD Section moves on

Yakage upper-secondary school Eco Park and Biotope





Yakage Gaku Service Learning at a local farm

In addition, students take a field trip during the summer vacation to visit an ESD-developed area, which is related to all the classes mentioned above.

Pluralistic ways to participate in ESD activities •

Furthermore, ESD extracurricular activities provide a variety of entry points, including participation as volunteers in local community festivals. The following are some of those that have been implemented with ingenuity in the Corona disaster.

1. Japanese language classes for Vietnamese trainees living in the town
2. Yakage Children's English Day
3. Science Club's "Outdoor Experiment Class" for parents and children visiting the Sunday Market
4. Development and dissemination of SDGs card game
5. Interviewing and transcribing "experts" in various fields in the local community, and preserving their records
6. Meeting of primary and lower and upper-secondary school students, and local residents who suffered from the heavy rain disaster to talk about their feelings
7. Creation of a disaster prevention backgammon

In addition to the fixed annual projects with local partners, the school meets new groups and organisations every year and engages in a variety of small-scale activities, which has led to the emergence of new activities. This not only prevents the activities from getting stuck, but also provides a variety of entry points for students to become involved in ESD. For upper-secondary school students who are in the process of deciding their future career paths, challenging themselves to various types of activities can help them see what is truly important to them and discover new strengths that they were not aware of before.

Capacity Building of Teachers • Structure and Team Formation to Support Teachers' Community Debut. From the point of view of the continuous professional growth of teachers, it is important to consider who oversees classes, events, and extracurricular activities, and how these are organised into activities from the stage of "getting used to the community," to the stage of "worrying about the community," and then to the stage of "challenging the community". In Japanese public schools, teachers are transferred every few years. Newly appointed teachers may have no connection to the Yakage area. Not all teachers understand or are good at working with students in the community and solving problems for a sustainable society. If such teachers are suddenly put in charge of classes and activities at the level of "taking on the community," they may not only fail to continue their existing activities but may also fail to work well with the community. This is a serious problem because the ESD practice that has been accumulated and matured will be discontinued when the teacher changes. Therefore, it is necessary to start from the level of "getting used to the community" and explore the field in ways that are suitable for the individual. Like the students, some of them come to move onto the stage of "worrying about the community" or even to "want to challenge the community".

The most important point is to set up a Division of ESD, form a team of teachers, and have a meeting once a week. The Division of ESD consists of five teachers including Jun Takagi, the division chief, and one regional coordinator. Each teacher is in charge of "Public Relations", "Volunteering", "Planning", "Yakage Studies", "UNESCO School", and "Primary and Secondary School Collaboration". This has a significant effect on the promotion of ESD. In other words, having a person in charge of the pillars of school education in the Division of ESD makes it possible to incorporate ESD perspectives and principles into all activities. The person in charge of public relations, who disseminates the school's activities to the community, learns from Yakage Studies and UNESCO School staff about the skills that students have developed through ESD activities in the meeting. Afterwards, s/he disseminates this information through newspapers, government magazines, and the school's website. This is where the "Primary and

Secondary school collaboration," which is responsible for cooperation between all the schools can be linked. When local school students learn about the ESD activities of Yakage upper-secondary school. They then enter the school with similar aspirations, it is beneficial for both the town, which wants to reduce the outflow of young people to urban areas, and the upper-secondary school, which is in danger of reducing its capacity. This is a mechanism for the local community to fully understand what effect the ESD activities of Yakage upper-secondary school are having. It is also a mechanism for fostering a culture rooted in sustainability in the local community.

Assignment of regional coordinators • Yakage Kids Group (YKG) was founded in 2015 by Mr. Muro and local parents and is an organisation for all primary and secondary school students to develop activities to improve the community in the town of Yakage. Its representative serves as the regional coordinator for Yakage upper-secondary school. Jun Takagi has been introducing students to the coordinator, who have an idea of what they would like to try but are unlikely to be able to realise it in the school education system with its various restrictions. As these students have achieved results, the school has gained trust in YKG, and this has led to the securing of a proper budget and the inclusion of YKG as a coordinator within the school. By being involved inside the school, the regional

coordinator has been able to better understand the work of the teachers. It is considered important for informal education (YKG) and formal education to work together in just the right degree. It is a unique job for teachers to identify students' potential and growth buds, and providing them with support, rather than sending them out completely irresponsibly. Although there are some activities that can be done because they are away from formal education, it is believed that greater results will be produced if both the community and the school support students' community experiences so that they can feed their own learning. In other words, the school's Division^b of ESD believes that students should be able to experience the local community. Having a division just for ESD is unique for Japanese high schools and is making a huge difference. Accordingly, the Division of ESD plays the role of "a behind-the-scenes producer" who creates a learning environment so that students can experience authentic learning rooted sustainability.

^b: Generally, in Japanese high schools, several divisions are common –Academic Affairs Division General Affairs Division, Career Guidance Division, Student Guidance Division. Teachers are generally assigned to any of these four. As Yakage HS's unique point is that they established ESD Division, assigned the dedicated teacher (Jun Takagi) as its chief, and four other teachers, who also belong to other sections, and one regional coordinator.

Yakage Gaku Service Learning in a local canteen

