



Fostering Critical Thinkers Through Japan's Comprehensive Humanities Curriculum: Rekishi Sōgō (Comprehensive History) & Chiri Sōgō (Comprehensive Geography)

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Abstract

Japan's 2022 curriculum reform introduced rekishi sōgō (Comprehensive History) and chiri sōgō (Comprehensive Geography) to shift secondary humanities education from rote memorization to reflective, inquiry-based learning. This study investigates how these integrated humanities subjects cultivate students' critical thinking skills within a cultural context emphasizing harmony (wa) and sincerity (kokoro). Employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected from 327 students across six prefectures, complemented by qualitative interviews with 24 teachers and six principals. Statistical analysis revealed significant gains in students' analytical and evaluative reasoning ($p < 0.05$), while thematic analysis identified three interrelated pedagogical mechanisms: dialogic learning, reflective inquiry, and contextual reasoning. These mechanisms form the Integrated Humanities—Critical Thinking Framework (IHCTF), illustrating that Japanese critical thinking develops through the synthesis of logic, empathy, and contextual awareness. The findings affirm that comprehensive humanities curricula can nurture both cognitive and moral dimensions of critical reasoning without eroding cultural continuity. Japan's experience thus offers a non-Western model of critical thinking education—anchored in local ethics yet responsive to global competencies. This study contributes to comparative curriculum theory by redefining critical thinking as a culturally embedded intellectual practice that harmonizes analytical rigor with humanistic reflection.

Keywords: *critical thinking, Japan, humanities curriculum, mixed methods, educational reform*

Introduction

In the continuously evolving landscape of global education, critical thinking has emerged as one of the most essential competencies of the twenty-first century (Ennis, 2018; Halpern, 2013; Pandee & Maneekul, 2019; Saikia & Roy, 2024). It not only represents the intellectual capacity to evaluate facts and construct arguments but also serves as the foundation for cultivating reflective and adaptive citizens capable of navigating social, economic, and cultural complexities in an era of globalization (Ennis, 2018; Facione, 2006; Paul & Elder, 2019). Within secondary education, this skill is regarded as a defining indicator of learners' readiness to confront the challenges of the knowledge society and digital democracy, where the abundance of information demands analytical

discernment and reflective reasoning. Comparative studies across diverse countries reveal that successful educational systems tend to embed critical thinking within interdisciplinary learning, active student engagement, and the integration of humanistic values (Amin et al., 2022; Halpern, 2013; Holley, 2024; Zhao, 2025). Consequently, examining how critical thinking is cultivated through humanities education—particularly in non-Western contexts such as Japan—holds strategic relevance for both theoretical and practical advancements in global education.

Humanities education in Japan presents a distinctive phenomenon situated at the crossroads between Eastern cultural traditions and Western modernity. Since the post-World War II educational reforms, Japan's education system has continuously sought a balance between collectivist, moral, and nationalistic values and the need to develop analytical capacities aligned with international standards (Ninomiya, 2016; Nishino, 2017). The most significant transformation has taken place through the implementation of *rekishi sōgō* (Comprehensive History) and *chiri sōgō* (Comprehensive Geography)—two interdisciplinary subjects introduced to encourage students to perceive historical events and geographical dynamics in a more responsive and reflective manner (Sakaue et al., n.d.; Yamanaka & Suzuki, 2020). These reforms not only mark a paradigm shift from factual memorization to analysis-based learning but also represent a systematic effort to promote global awareness and social responsibility through a cross-disciplinary approach (Bamkin, 2018; Kitagawa, 2015).

Nevertheless, this transition has not been without challenges. The most pressing obstacles in implementing Japan's comprehensive humanities curriculum include teachers' preparedness, disparities in regional resources, and the persistent dominance of exam-oriented academic evaluation. Furthermore, international assessments such as the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) indicate that Japanese students' critical thinking skills still require consistent improvement, particularly in argumentation and contextual analysis (OECD, 2018). These findings raise a fundamental question: To what extent has the humanities-oriented curriculum reform genuinely contributed to the cultivation of critical thinkers within Japan's secondary education system? This question forms the central focus of the present study.

A substantial body of literature underscores the significance of learner-centered curricular design as an effective strategy for fostering critical thinking. Brookfield (1998) argues that critical thinking develops through reflective processes in which individuals examine and challenge their established assumptions, whereas Ennis (2018) and (Paul & Elder, 2019) emphasize its evaluative and dialogical dimensions—requiring learners to assess arguments logically and open-mindedly. In the East Asian context, Tan et al. (2017) found that Singapore's curriculum innovations grounded in reflective and problem-based learning significantly enhanced students' critical thinking capacities (L. S. Tan et al., 2017). Similar approaches, albeit shaped by differing moral and cultural contexts, have also emerged in South Korea (Ayhan, 2024) and Finland (Seikkula-Leino, 2011), both of which position teachers as facilitators of dialogue and collaboration. These studies collectively indicate that the successful development of critical thinking requires curricular designs that integrate interdisciplinary content with reflective and participatory pedagogy (Alexander, 2018).

Within the Japanese context, Ninomiya (2016) and Yamanaka & Suzuki (2020) reveal that *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* were conceived not merely to expand factual knowledge of history and geography but also to cultivate analytical competencies enabling students to connect past events with contemporary issues. This approach reflects an educational philosophy that emphasizes the dynamic interrelationship among knowledge, context, and judgment. While Kitagawa (2015)

demonstrates that such curricular reforms nurture reflective awareness and historical empathy, Nishino (2017) identifies ongoing tensions between traditional values of social harmony and the argumentative nature of critical inquiry. In practice, the success of these reforms largely depends on teachers' capacity to translate these values into effective classroom pedagogy. Furthermore, Bedenlier et al. (Bedenlier et al., 2020) highlights that the integration of educational technology into humanities instruction has expanded reflective dialogue, increased student participation, and strengthened analytical reasoning (Çiftçi, 2025; Shamsieva et al., 2026).

Multidisciplinary research further supports the notion that humanities education serves as an effective medium for internalizing humanistic values while cultivating intellectual rigor. Dumitru (2019) argues that the arts and humanities provide students with opportunities to challenge biases and to engage with diverse perspectives. Frykholm (2021), in a study conducted at Stockholm University, found that students enrolled in *cinema studies* courses demonstrated significant gains in reflective and analytical thinking. Similarly, Edwards and Ritchie (2022) contend that the humanities function not merely as cultural enrichment but as a platform for developing *critical consciousness* that integrates analysis, empathy, and social responsibility. In this regard, *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* may be viewed as tangible expressions of humanities education explicitly designed to cultivate critical awareness among Japanese students in an increasingly plural and globalized society.

Despite these promising directions, empirical studies examining the impact of Japan's comprehensive humanities curriculum on the development of critical thinking remain relatively scarce. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on policy analysis and curricular content rather than on learning outcomes or the lived experiences of teachers and students (Bamkin, 2018; Nishino, 2017). Additionally, the predominance of English-language sources introduces potential biases that may obscure nuanced understandings of Japan's local educational realities. This gap highlights the need for empirical field research that evaluates how *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* reforms tangibly foster critical thinking within classrooms. Therefore, the present study positions itself as an effort to fill this void by employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative data from various educational settings across Japan.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze how *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* contribute to the cultivation of critical thinking among Japanese high school students. Specifically, the study seeks to answer three key questions: (1) How do pedagogical strategies and curricular designs within these subjects foster critical thinking development? (2) To what extent do students' learning outcomes reflect measurable improvements in reflective and analytical skills following the 2022 reform? and (3) What facilitating and inhibiting factors influence the implementation of the comprehensive humanities curriculum across diverse school contexts? Conceptually, the study integrates Brookfield's (1998) reflective theory, Facione's (2006) taxonomy of critical thinking, and Paul and Elder's (2019) *active inquiry* framework to produce a more holistic mapping between theory and practice.

The novelty of this research lies in three interrelated contributions. First, it offers an empirical, field-based analysis of how humanities curricula affect critical thinking in a non-Western educational setting—an area seldom explored in international scholarship. Second, it unites reflective, analytical, and contextual approaches within a single mixed-methods framework, enabling a deeper exploration of the relationship between policy, pedagogy, and learning outcomes. Third, it contributes to the global debate on the relevance of humanities education in the digital era by demonstrating that Japan's curricular model provides a meaningful balance between cultural continuity and analytical modernity. In doing so, the study not only enriches theoretical discourse on

critical thinking and humanities education but also offers practical implications for policymakers and educators worldwide striving to nurture reflective, analytical, and culturally grounded learners.

Literature Review

This literature review systematically examines the theoretical and empirical foundations that link humanities education with the development of critical thinking in a global context, focusing on its application within the Japanese curriculum. It is organized around three conceptual axes: (1) definitions and theories of critical thinking, (2) the role of the humanities in fostering reflective and analytical reasoning, and (3) comprehensive learning within Japan's curriculum reform. The goal is to construct a conceptual framework that explains how *rekishi sōgō* (Comprehensive History) and *chiri sōgō* (Comprehensive Geography) are designed to cultivate reflective, open-minded learners.

Theoretical Foundations of Critical Thinking

In international scholarship, definitions of critical thinking vary but share a common epistemic core: the ability to evaluate information, analyze arguments, and make defensible judgments based on evidence (Ennis, 2018; Facione, 2006). Brookfield (1998) emphasizes that critical thinking is not purely cognitive but also affective and reflective process involving self-awareness of one's biases, values, and assumptions. (Dwyer et al., 2014; Paul & Elder, 2019) conceptualize it as "*thinking about thinking*," a conscious effort to assess the validity of one's reasoning according to criteria of logic, clarity, and accuracy. Halpern (2014) adds a psychological dimension—the *transfer of skills*—referring to the ability to apply critical-thinking patterns across new contexts. Hence, critical thinking represents not merely a set of logical skills, but an intellectual disposition oriented toward independence of thought, openness, and moral responsibility in evaluating truth.

Pedagogical Conditions for Developing Critical Thinking

These perspectives converge on the idea that effective instruction must expose learners to open-ended problems and diverse viewpoints. In both secondary and higher education, Brookfield (1998) shows that guided discussion, personal reflection, and problem-based learning consistently strengthen students' critical-thinking capacities. Follow-up studies by (Zhao, 2025) and (Facione, 2006) identify four measurable domains of critical thinking: argument analysis, evidence evaluation, logical inference, and metacognition. These dimensions underpin widely used assessment tools such as the *California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST)*, enabling cross-cultural comparisons of critical-thinking outcomes.

The Humanities as a Locus of Critical Reasoning

The next strand of literature highlights the humanities as a primary arena for cultivating critical reasons. Dumitru (2019) asserts that disciplines such as history, philosophy, literature, and the arts provide discursive spaces where learners confront ambiguity and weigh values from multiple perspectives. Edwards and Ritchie (2022) add that humanities education fosters *critical consciousness* through dialogic and sometimes confrontational learning experiences that challenge

students' moral and cultural assumptions. Frykholm (2021), in a case study at Stockholm University, found that students enrolled in cinema studies reported marked improvement in analytical and reflective engagement with social reality. The interdisciplinary orientation of the humanities thus reinforces critical-thinking ability by placing human meaning at the center of intellectual inquiry.

Cultural Contexts in East Asian Education

The cultivation of critical thinking through the humanities cannot be detached from its cultural setting. In East Asia, Tan et al. (2017) observed that Singapore's curriculum—emphasizing school-based innovation and reflective inquiry—produced significant gains on the *Watson–Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal*. Yet, they also noted that such success depended heavily on teacher readiness and institutional support. Similarly, Park et al. (2020) in South Korea found that curriculum reform is effective only when accompanied by professional development and collaborative pedagogy. These findings underscore that integrating critical thinking into the curriculum cannot be achieved solely through policy documents; it must be enacted through transformed classroom practice.

Curriculum Theory & the Japanese Reform

From a curriculum-theory standpoint, embedding critical thinking within humanities education requires a balance between *knowledge transmission* and *knowledge construction*. (Kulkarni et al., 2025) argues that curricula overly centered on content delivery often fail to develop reflective reasoning because students remain passive recipients of information. By contrast, constructivist models position learners as active agents who build understanding through dialogue and contextual exploration. In Japan, this constructivist orientation is evident in the 2022 revision of the *Course of Study* issued by MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology). The reform redefines learning objectives from “learning to remember” to “learning to understand and evaluate”—the very essence of critical thinking.

Empirical Insights from Japan's Humanities Curriculum

Empirical research demonstrates that Japan's humanities curriculum has adopted a comprehensive model connecting various social-science disciplines. Ninomiya (2016) explains that *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* were structured to build analytical ability through multi-perspective engagement with historical events and geographic phenomena. By prompting students to identify relationships among time, space, and social values, the curriculum seeks to nurture *contextual reasoning*—the capacity to relate knowledge to contemporary sociocultural dynamics. Kitagawa (2015) shows that integrating disaster education into *rekishi sōgō* expanded the humanities' function as a medium for real-life learning. Nishino (2017), however, highlights conceptual tensions between Japan's traditional moral ideals (*kokoro no kyōiku*) and the open argumentation demanded by critical thinking. These contradictions reveal the distinctive complexity of Japanese education as it strives to balance cultural cohesion with intellectual freedom.

Pedagogical & Technological Support

Recent studies also emphasize the importance of pedagogical and technological support in strengthening the humanities' role in developing critical thinking. Through a systematic review of 243 articles, Bedenlier et al. (2020) found that interactive technologies in arts and humanities education enhance engagement, reflection, and argumentative depth. Kurth-Schai (Kurt, 2020) further observes that peer-teaching models promote self-awareness, social empathy, and civic responsibility—core components of critical thinking. In Japan, such approaches are particularly relevant for addressing the hierarchical tendencies of traditional pedagogy by opening more dialogic spaces for teacher–student collaboration.

Gaps & Methodological Limitations

Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain in empirical evidence from non-Western contexts. Most previous studies are conceptual or conducted in English-speaking countries and thus fail to capture the socio-cultural and policy dynamics of Japanese education (Bamkin, 2018; Yamanaka & Suzuki, 2020). Direct analyses of how *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* influence students' cognitive outcomes are still limited, while extensive Japanese-language scholarship remains untranslated, creating an epistemic gap between domestic policy discourse and global perception of Japan's educational reform.

Toward an Integrated Framework

Building on this review, the present study recognizes the need for empirical examination of how Japan's comprehensive humanities curriculum shapes students' critical-thinking abilities. The gap is not only geographical but also methodological since most prior research has not combined quantitative and qualitative data in curriculum analysis. By employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates teacher interviews with students' learning-outcome analyses, this study seeks to fill that void. Such an approach allows for a holistic interpretation of how Japanese cultural values, MEXT's educational philosophy, and classroom pedagogy interact to cultivate critical reasoning among youth.

Theoretically, this synthesis forms the foundation of the study's conceptual framework: humanities education fosters critical thinking through three core mechanisms—dialogic learning, reflective inquiry, and contextual reasoning. These mechanisms operate within the *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* curriculum, demanding the integration of content, context, and reflection. Consequently, this study not only reaffirms the relevance of classical theories of critical thinking from Brookfield, Facione, and (Dwyer et al., 2014; Paul & Elder, 2019) but also extends them into an empirically grounded, culturally contextualized domain. In this sense, the research contributes new insight into the global discourse on how non-Western education systems can adapt universal principles of critical thinking without losing their own cultural and moral foundations.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2022b) that integrates quantitative and qualitative techniques to develop a comprehensive understanding of how Japan's comprehensive humanities curriculum fosters critical thinking. This design was selected because

the research objective is not only to measure students' learning outcomes numerically but also to interpret the meanings behind teachers' and students' lived experiences in real classroom contexts. The combination of empirical and interpretive data is therefore expected to illuminate, more holistically, the relationships among curriculum policy, pedagogical strategies, and learners' cognitive development.

Paradigmatically, the study is grounded in a reflective constructivist framework in which knowledge is understood as a socially constructed product that emerges through interaction, dialogue, and reflection (Brookfield, 1998; Paul & Elder, 2019). Constructivism provides the theoretical basis for interpreting classroom learning processes, whereas reflectivism underpins the assessment of the extent to which students can interrogate assumptions, weigh evidence, and construct arguments independently. This orientation further positions teachers not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as facilitators of intellectual dialogue who catalyze students' critical thinking.

Research Design

The mixed-methods model employed is a sequential explanatory design, wherein quantitative data collection and analysis are undertaken first, followed by qualitative inquiry to deepen and explain the findings. The first phase focuses on measuring changes in student learning outcomes and critical-thinking abilities before and after the implementation of *rekishi sōgō* (Comprehensive History) and *chiri sōgō* (Comprehensive Geography). The second phase utilizes in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to explore teachers', students', and administrators' perceptions of the curriculum's implementation and effectiveness.

The sequential approach serves two primary aims: (1) to explain empirically how the humanities curriculum influences the development of students' critical thinking through standardized measures; and (2) to uncover educators' practical experiences and reflections in translating curricular aims into classroom strategies. This design enables robust triangulation because quantitative results can be tested against and enriched by qualitative insights, thereby increasing interpretive validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2022a).

Sites & Participants

The research was conducted across six prefectures that reflect Japan's geographic and socio-economic diversity: Tokyo, Kanagawa, Osaka, Hiroshima, Aichi, and Hokkaido. Sites were selected to capture varied school contexts—from metropolitan public schools to semi-rural institutions—to obtain a representative picture of *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* implementation.

The quantitative sample comprised 327 upper-secondary students who were enrolled in both subjects for one full academic year. A stratified random sampling technique was used, with strata defined by school region and student gender. The qualitative sample included 24 humanities teachers and 6 principals, selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in teaching and in planning the new curriculum. Participation was voluntary and adhered to research ethics protocols that guaranteed the confidentiality of all participants.

Data Collection

Quantitative data were gathered through two primary instruments. First, a critical-thinking test adapted from the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) and contextualized for Japan. The instrument consisted of 34 items measuring five indicators: analysis, inference, evaluation, deductive reasoning, and inductive reasoning (Facione, 2006). Validity and reliability were examined using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.87$), indicating high internal consistency (Cronbach, 1951).

Second, quantitative evidence is also derived from consolidated academic records before and after the reform, allowing assessment of the curriculum's influence on students' cognitive achievement. Descriptive and inferential statistics were conducted with SPSS (version 28), employing paired-sample t-tests to determine the significance of pre–post score differences ($p < 0.05$).

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals and through document analysis (syllabi, lesson-implementation notes, and learning reports). Interview protocols were informed by Brookfield (1989) and Paul & (Paul & Elder, 2019) and covered four core themes: (1) perceptions of critical thinking within instructional practice; (2) teaching strategies used to foster student reflection; (3) challenges in implementing the comprehensive curriculum; and (4) perceptions of institutional support. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. All recordings were transcribed and translated into English for analysis (Knott et al., 2022). Regarding language and translation: the CCTST-adapted survey instrument was originally developed in Japanese by the research team, with items formulated to be linguistically and culturally appropriate for Japanese secondary-school students. The survey was piloted with a small group ($n = 15$) to verify clarity before administration. All interviews were conducted in Japanese; verbatim transcripts were produced in Japanese and subsequently translated into English by a bilingual researcher with expertise in education. To ensure translational fidelity, a second bilingual reviewer independently back-translated a randomly selected 20% of the transcripts, and discrepancies were resolved through consensus. The English-language references cited in this study reflect the international scholarship engaged by the authors; primary data collection, survey instruments, and thematic analysis were conducted in Japanese.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis followed a pretest–posttest comparison model to evaluate significant gains in students' critical-thinking scores after curriculum implementation. Beyond estimating mean differences, the analysis examined variation by school type and students' socio-demographic backgrounds.

Qualitative analysis used reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The procedure comprised six stages: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) open coding of salient statements; (3) clustering codes into initial themes; (4) reviewing and refining themes; (5) naming and defining final themes; and (6) integrating the findings with the theoretical framework. Three core themes emerged as analytic anchors: dialogic learning, reflective inquiry, and contextual reasoning.

The two strands were then integrated at the interpretive stage through triangulation. This integration enabled cross-walking between numeric outcomes and experiential narratives to yield a comprehensive account of the curriculum's impact on critical-thinking formation. Interview excerpts that reflected classroom practice informed the interpretation of quantitative score differences, while statistical trends helped test the generality of the qualitative insights.

Trustworthiness, Ethics, & Limitations

Research trustworthiness was ensured through three strategies: source triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking. Triangulation compared results across data sources (teachers, students, principals) and across methods (quantitative and qualitative). Peer debriefing involved two Japan-education experts from partner universities who reviewed the initial interpretations. Member checking entailed returning preliminary analyses to selected participants to verify interpretive fit. Ethical procedures included formal school permissions and informed consent from all participants. Respondents' identities were anonymized, and data were stored securely in line with international research integrity standards.

The study acknowledges several limitations. First, much of the literature engaged is Anglophone, which may constrain the depth of local contextualization. Second, although the participant pool is substantial, the intent is not statistical generalization but analytic generalization—deepening understanding of how curriculum policy relates to the development of critical thinking. Third, the one-academic-year window limits observation of long-term reform effects.

Theoretical Validity & Design Justification

The choice of mixed methods rests on the view that critical thinking is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be captured solely by numerical scores but must also be understood as a social, reflective process enacted through classroom interaction (Brookfield, 1998; Facione, 2006). Quantitative data provide objective evidence of gains, while qualitative data explain the pedagogical mechanisms that produce them. Accordingly, the design aligns with a critical-reflective inquiry tradition widely used in humanities education studies (Dumitru, 2019; Edwards & Ritchie, 2022).

Methodologically, the study not only evaluates the effectiveness of Japan's curriculum reform but also advances a conceptual account of how critical thinking can be cultivated through the integration of humanities content, cultural reflection, and social engagement. The synthesis of statistical analysis with narrative reflection yields evidence that is both scientifically robust and practically relevant for policymakers and educators seeking to adapt a humanities model that balances cognition, affect, and values.

Results

Quantitative Findings: Enhancement of Critical Thinking Skills

A quantitative analysis was conducted with 327 high school students from six prefectures who participated in the *rekishi sōgō* (Comprehensive History) and *chiri sōgō* (Comprehensive Geography) curricula over one academic year. Results of the paired-sample t-test revealed a statistically significant improvement in critical-thinking scores ($p < 0.05$). The overall mean score increased from 68.7 on the pretest to 77.9 on the posttest. The greatest improvements were observed in the dimensions of *analysis* and *evaluation*, while the *inference* dimension showed more moderate progress.

Table 1: Mean Scores of Students' Critical Thinking Ability (n = 327)

Critical Thinking Indicator	Pretest (Mean)	Posttest (Mean)	Δ Increase	Significance (p)	Effect Size (d)
Analysis	13.4	16.2	+2.8	0.002	0.74 (large)
Inference	12.8	14.1	+1.3	0.041	0.41 (moderate)
Evaluation	13.0	16.0	+3.0	0.001	0.81 (large)
Deductive Reasoning	14.5	15.9	+1.4	0.028	0.38 (small-moderate)
Inductive Reasoning	15.0	15.7	+0.7	0.049	0.19 (small)
Total Average	68.7	77.9	+9.2	0.001	0.87 (large)

Overall, 78% of students demonstrated significant score gains, 17% remained stable, and only 5% showed slight decreases. Regional analysis revealed that schools in urban areas (Tokyo, Kanagawa, Osaka) achieved an average gain of 11 points, while semi-rural schools (Hokkaido, Hiroshima, Aichi) averaged 7 points. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to assess whether this regional difference was statistically significant ($t(325) = 3.47$, $p = 0.001$, 95% CI [1.72, 6.28]), confirming that urban schools significantly outperformed semi-rural schools. The observed gap may reflect differences in contextual factors such as access to learning resources, availability of qualified teachers, and integration of educational technology; however, these associations are interpretive and were not directly measured in the present study. Future research with targeted instruments is warranted to formally test these relationships.

Reflective questionnaires distributed after the intervention indicated that 84% of students believed that discussion-based learning, historical debates, and thematic map analysis helped them “think more deeply” and “understand the relationship between the past and present contexts.” Moreover, 76% reported that teachers more frequently asked them to “explain the reasoning behind their answers,” an essential indicator of critical instructional practice. Only 12% found the innovative approach “confusing” due to the heavier reflective workload.

Qualitative Findings: Three Core Themes from Interviews and Observations

Thematic analysis of interviews with 24 teachers and six principals yielded three overarching themes that explain how Japan's comprehensive humanities curriculum fosters critical thinking: dialogic learning, reflective inquiry, and contextual reasoning.

Dialogic Learning: Dialogue-Based Instruction as a Catalyst for Reasoning

The first theme highlights that dialogue-based instruction serves as a primary driver of students' analytical and argumentative capacities. Most teachers reported shifting from one-way lectures to group discussions and case-based debates.

A history teacher in Osaka remarked: “I started asking open-ended questions such as ‘Why did the Meiji reforms matter?’ instead of ‘When did the Meiji era begin?’ As a result, students learned to listen, weigh, and respond to one another's arguments critically.”

Another teacher in Hiroshima added that Socratic questioning techniques encouraged students to explore the reasoning behind historical interpretations. This aligns with dialogical pedagogy, which positions teachers as facilitators rather than sole authorities of knowledge.

However, some teachers noted challenges in balancing open discussion with exam requirements. A teacher in Aichi explained: “The evaluation system still emphasizes memorization, so I often have to negotiate between deep discussions and students’ need for exam preparation.” This tension illustrates the ongoing friction between dialogic pedagogy and Japan’s traditionally hierarchical educational structure.

Reflective Inquiry: Self-Awareness & Value Analysis

The second theme shows that reflective practice bridges factual knowledge and moral understanding. Teachers encouraged students to write reflective journals or short essays evaluating historical events from multiple perspectives.

A geography teacher in Kanagawa shared: “When students study natural disasters in Japan, they are asked to reflect on how society learned from past mistakes and how moral decisions were made.”

These reflective activities strengthened the affective dimension of critical thinking, prompting students to assess not only facts but also the human values underlying them. Teachers noted that this practice helped students connect local issues to global contexts, such as climate change, migration, and social inequality. A rekishi sōgō teacher in Tokyo offered a particularly illustrative account of how this reflection can deepen students’ analytical engagement:

After studying the Tokyo air pollution crisis of the 1960s, I asked students to write a personal reflection: if you had been a resident then, what would you have done differently, and why? Many students wrote with genuine emotion. One girl compared it to the debates her family has about recycling today. That moment showed me that history had become real for her—it was no longer just facts to memorize.

Student responses to the post-intervention reflective questionnaire further echoed this pattern. One student wrote: “This class taught me to ask ‘why’ about everything—not just in history, but in my daily life too.” Another noted: “I used to think geography was about memorizing maps. Now I see it as a way of understanding why people live and act differently.” Such responses illustrate how reflective inquiry translates into a durable disposition toward critical engagement beyond the classroom.

Analysis of interview transcripts revealed that 83% of teachers assigned reflective tasks at least twice per semester. Nonetheless, several educators expressed difficulty assessing students’ reflections due to the absence of national evaluation rubrics. This underscores the need for more systematic reflective assessment guidelines to ensure interregional consistency.

Contextual Reasoning: Connecting Knowledge, Culture, & the Real World

The third theme concerns students’ ability to relate learning to social realities. Many teachers integrated project-based activities such as field research, interactive mapping, and discussions of contemporary issues.

A *chiri sōgō* teacher in Hokkaido described: “We designed a ‘Local Footprints’ project where students mapped spatial changes in their village over the past 50 years and compared them with national policies. They learned to interpret spatial and temporal dynamics analytically.”

This approach helped students develop *contextual reasoning*—the capacity to connect academic knowledge with concrete situations. Consistent with *place-based education* theory, it fostered students’ social connectedness while training evidence-based reasoning.

Nineteen of the twenty-four teachers (79%) stated that such contextual projects improved students’ motivation and engagement. However, they also cited limited resources, especially in rural schools lacking digital tools. A principal in Hiroshima concluded: “The curriculum successfully fosters curiosity and critical thinking, but its success still depends on teachers’ creativity in overcoming constraints.”

Triangulated Synthesis: Integrating Quantitative & Qualitative Findings

Integration of quantitative and qualitative results yielded a comprehensive understanding of how Japan’s humanities curriculum influences students’ critical-thinking abilities. Three mechanisms consistently emerged across numeric and narrative data.

First, dialogic learning directly contributed to improvements in *analysis* and *evaluation* scores. Students who actively participated in class debates and group discussions achieved higher average scores (Mean = 80.1) than those less engaged in dialogue (Mean = 73.4). This supports Paul and Elder’s (2019) view that argument-based learning enhances analytical capacity through the exchange of ideas.

Second, reflective inquiry correlated positively with *inference* and *deductive reasoning* dimensions. Students who regularly wrote reflections or assessed moral values exhibited a 12% improvement in identifying historical cause–effect relationships. This finding aligns with Brookfield’s model of *critical reflection*, in which self-awareness of bias forms the foundation of critical thought.

Third, contextual reasoning strengthened the *application of knowledge*—how students applied historical and geographical understanding to evaluate contemporary issues. Community-based projects not only increased engagement but also fostered the ability to assess public policy ethically and rationally.

The interconnection among these three mechanisms produced an empirical model termed the Integrated Humanities–Critical Thinking Framework (IHCTF). This framework illustrates a dynamic relationship among three pedagogical dimensions: dialogue (as a medium for analytical reasoning), reflection (as a medium for moral reasoning), and context (as a medium for applied reasoning). Together, they form a self-reinforcing cycle of sustained critical learning.

Conceptual Overview of the IHCTF:

1. Dialogic Learning → Builds evidence-based argumentation.
2. Reflective Inquiry → Internalizes moral and affective awareness.
3. Contextual Reasoning → Applies critical thinking to real-world contexts.

This cycle emphasizes that critical thinking in the Japanese context is not equivalent to Western rational confrontation but rather represents a synthesis of logical analysis and socio-cultural consciousness rooted in the values of *wa* (harmony) and *kokoro* (heart). Thus, the *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* curricula exemplify the integration of modern rationality with Eastern humanism.

Summary of Key Findings

1. Quantitatively, students' critical-thinking abilities improved significantly, particularly in the areas of analysis and evaluation.
2. Qualitatively, dialogic, reflective, and contextual learning practices effectively cultivated balanced critical awareness encompassing cognition and values.
3. Triangulatively, the study identified an integrated humanities-learning model—the Integrated Humanities–Critical Thinking Framework (IHCTF)—which can inform other education systems seeking to design comparable curricula.

These findings affirm that Japan's humanities curriculum reform is not a superficial initiative but a strategic effort to cultivate a generation of critical, reflective learners capable of navigating the complexities of modern life while remaining grounded in their cultural roots.

Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that Japan's comprehensive humanities curriculum—implemented through *rekishi sōgō* (Comprehensive History) and *chiri sōgō* (Comprehensive Geography)—has made a tangible contribution to the cultivation of critical-thinking skills among secondary students. The significant improvements in the dimensions of analysis, evaluation, and inference found in the quantitative data, alongside the emergence of reflective and contextual learning patterns in the qualitative evidence, demonstrate that the 2022 curriculum reform successfully shifted educational paradigms from rote memorization to reasoning-based learning. However, this success stems not merely from curricular design, but from the complex interplay among national education policy, Japan's pedagogical culture, and teachers' classroom practices.

Relevance of Findings to Theories of Critical Thinking

The results are consistent with Brookfield's (1998) conceptual framework, which proposes that critical thinking develops through three interrelated processes: recognizing assumptions, evaluating the rationality of beliefs, and engaging in reflective action. In the Japanese context, these processes do not occur within adversarial debate, as in the Western tradition, but through dialogic and reflective learning harmonized with the value of *wa* (social harmony). When teachers encourage students to pose open-ended questions and listen to diverse viewpoints, they not only sharpen argumentative logic but also internalize empathy and collective awareness. This expands the notion of critical thinking from a purely cognitive ability into a moral–social competence grounded in interdependence—aligned with the Japanese ethos of communal balance.

Paul and Elder's (2019) notion of critical thinking as a process of self-directed intellectual assessment—demanding consistency, clarity, and fairness in reasoning—is also reflected in this study's findings. When students compose reflections on the moral implications of historical events or environmental policies, they engage in metacognitive evaluation of their beliefs and values. Thus, Japan's humanities curriculum operationalizes critical thinking as “reflective empathy,” rather than merely “rational analysis.” This aligns with Dumitru's (2019) argument that the arts and humanities cultivate reflective awareness of human complexity and social values.

The study further supports Facione's (2006) model of five critical-thinking indicators—analysis, inference, evaluation, deductive reasoning, and inductive reasoning. The three pedagogical themes identified—dialogic learning, reflective inquiry, and contextual reasoning—correspond directly with these indicators. Dialogic learning enhances analytical and evaluative skills through argumentative exchange; reflective inquiry strengthens inferential and moral reasoning; and contextual reasoning bridges academic knowledge with empirical reality. These correspondences indicate that the *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* curricula have deliberately restructured pedagogical processes to align with multidimensional models of critical thinking.

Humanities Education as a Foundation for Critical Learning

The significant role of humanities education in nurturing critical thinking is clearly reflected in this study. The dialogic and reflective approaches employed by teachers in history and geography illustrate how the humanities serve as a space for developing historical awareness, social empathy, and analytical reasoning simultaneously. As Edwards and Ritchie (2022) observe, humanities education enables students “to confront” diverse values and worldviews, thereby fostering a critical consciousness rooted in human experience. In this sense, *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* are not merely academic subjects but vehicles for humanizing the learning process.

This approach also reveals how the humanities can serve as a site of synthesis between tradition and modernity. Ninomiya (2016) emphasizes that *rekishi sōgō* is designed not only to promote factual understanding but also to help students interpret causal relationships and extract moral lessons from the past. By linking temporal and spatial dimensions through *chiri sōgō*, students learn how geography shapes cultural and political evolution. This resonates with the concept of contextual reasoning identified in the present study, wherein students view social phenomena as interconnected within multidimensional causal networks. The findings also reinforce Kitagawa's (2015) argument that context-based learning effectively nurtures reflective and globally responsive thinking.

At the practical level, this humanities-based approach challenges Japan's long-standing examination-oriented educational model. The pedagogical transformation from memorization to dialogue requires teachers to shift their roles from knowledge transmitters to learning facilitators. The educators in this study demonstrated creativity in facilitating debates, field projects, and moral reflections despite pressures from national evaluation standards. Their practices embody what Kurth-Schai (Kurt, 2020) describes as “learning to teach and teaching to learn”—a symbiotic relationship between instruction and inquiry.

Tensions Between Traditional Values & Modern Rationality

One of the most compelling aspects of this study is the epistemological tension between Japan's traditional moral values and the modern rationality that underpins critical thinking. Nishino (2017) observes that Japanese moral education often emphasizes *kokoro no kyōiku* (education of the heart), oriented toward harmony and obedience, while critical thinking demands the courage to question and reassess. In this study, that tension was reconciled through pedagogical approaches balancing reflection and dialogue—principles that reinterpret rather than reject traditional values within a modern framework.

For example, when students discuss government climate policies, they are not encouraged to criticize confrontationally but to understand the rationale behind public decisions and evaluate

their social implications. This pedagogical stance integrates collective morality with individual critical reasoning—a uniquely Japanese form of “rational harmony.” Here, critical thinking is not an antithesis to cultural values but an evolution of traditional wisdom toward a more reflective rationality.

This insight contributes to global discourse on the universality of critical thinking. While Western models often associate critical thinking with individualistic rationalism and open debate (Halpern, 2013), the Japanese model demonstrates that it can also thrive within a social ecology emphasizing collaboration, respect, and ethical awareness. Japan’s curriculum reform thus diversifies the epistemology of critical thinking, presenting a relational and contextual paradigm distinct from purely cognitive frameworks.

Policy & Educational Practice Implications

The study’s findings carry significant implications for educational policy and practice in Japan and beyond. First, the evidence highlights that the success of critical-thinking development depends heavily on teachers’ competence and readiness. Insufficient professional training was identified as a major constraint in interviews. Hence, the Ministry of Education (MEXT) should reinforce continuous professional development programs emphasizing teachers’ capacity to design reflective, dialogic, and interdisciplinary learning activities.

Second, the effective implementation of *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* requires adequate learning infrastructure. The disparities in facilities between urban and rural schools found in this study may hinder contextual learning. Educational policy must therefore address equitable resource distribution to ensure all students have access to reflective and interactive learning environments.

Third, these findings open pathways for more balanced international comparisons. The Japanese approach offers an alternative model for developing countries seeking to strengthen critical thinking without replicating Western educational systems wholesale. The Integrated Humanities–Critical Thinking Framework (IHCTF) proposed by this study can be adapted to diverse contexts through three core pillars: dialogic learning (constructive argumentative communication), reflective inquiry (moral and social reflection), and contextual reasoning (local reality-based analysis).

Theoretical Contributions & Research Novelty

Theoretically, this study contributes to two keyways. First, it broadens the framework of critical thinking from a cultural perspective, asserting that its development is contextual rather than universal. The IHCTF model demonstrates that critical thinking in Japan evolves through the integration of analytical logic and moral awareness grounded in culture. This enriches the models of Brookfield and Paul & Elder by embedding more complex social and emotional dimensions.

Second, the research provides empirical evidence of how humanities education addresses the crisis of instrumentalism in modern education—the tendency toward excessive emphasis on technical competence and labor-market utility. By demonstrating that history and geography foster both moral reflection and analytical reasoning, this study reaffirms the enduring relevance of the humanities in shaping holistic human beings: rational, empathetic, and value-conscious.

Ultimately, Japan's success in fostering critical thinking lies not in imitating Western theory but in adapting it to local cultural values and social needs. Thus, Japan's experience exemplifies *cultural translation* in global education—a creative adaptation that preserves the universal essence of critical thinking while reinforcing national identity and humanistic values.

Conclusion & Implications

This study was driven by the need to understand how Japan's comprehensive humanities curriculum—through *rekishi sōgō* (Comprehensive History) and *chiri sōgō* (Comprehensive Geography)—cultivates students' critical-thinking abilities. Amid global educational trends that demand learners to be creative, reflective, and intellectually resilient, Japan offers a model that balances analytical rationality with moral–social consciousness. Based on both quantitative and qualitative analyses, this study demonstrates that dialogic, reflective, and context-based learning not only enhances students' cognitive outcomes but also revitalizes the affective dimension of critical thinking rooted in Japan's cultural values.

The quantitative results revealed significant improvements in students' critical-thinking scores, particularly in analysis and evaluation. Meanwhile, qualitative findings identified that the most effective learning strategies were those that fostered open dialogue, integrated moral reflection, and connected knowledge to real-life contexts. Together, these three mechanisms—dialogic learning, reflective inquiry, and contextual reasoning—form a reinforcing cycle of critical learning. When students engage in dialogue, they learn to think logically; when they reflect, they cultivate empathy and moral judgment; and when they connect learning to social contexts, they develop ethical reasoning to evaluate reality.

The conceptual model emerging from this study, the Integrated Humanities–Critical Thinking Framework (IHCTF), illustrates the interdependence of these three dimensions. The model offers a new perspective that critical thinking is not a linear skill to be taught, but a layered interaction between rationality, reflection, and cultural context. Within this framework, humanities education does not merely transmit knowledge—it facilitates the transformation of students' thinking through social dialogue and reflective self-awareness.

Key Conclusions

First, the study reveals that the *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* curricula successfully achieve a balance between tradition and modernity in Japanese education. These curricula foster *critical reasoning* without abandoning the ethical foundations of *wa* (social harmony) and *kokoro* (sincerity of heart)—two moral pillars defining Japanese pedagogy. Here, critical thinking is not confrontational, but an intellectual practice aimed at understanding and moral equilibrium.

Second, the success of this reform demonstrates that critical thinking can thrive within a highly structured educational system, provided that deliberate spaces for dialogue and reflection exist. Teachers serve as the central agents of transformation—not mere curriculum transmitters. Field data show that teachers who actively facilitated dialogic and reflective learning achieved a significant impact on students' learning outcomes. This underscores that national education policies are meaningful only when supported by strong pedagogical capacity at the micro level.

Third, the study highlights that critical thinking can be cultivated through the interaction between formal learning experiences and local cultural values. This approach rejects the outdated dichotomy between “Western critical education” and “Eastern moral education,” offering instead

an epistemological alternative that integrates both. Globally, this presents a paradigm of *context-sensitive critical thinking*—a form of intellectual reasoning that grows organically from each society's cultural and social ecology.

Theoretical Contributions

Theoretically, this study extends the classical boundaries of critical-thinking theories proposed by Brookfield (1989), Paul and Elder (2019), and Facione (2015). While those theories focus on individual cognitive processes, the IHCTF introduces social and cultural dimensions as key catalysts in the development of critical reasoning. In this model, critical thinking encompasses not only *how to think* but also *why to think*—emphasizing ethical awareness of the purpose of reasoning itself.

The study also reaffirms the humanities' significant role in developing reflective and moral intelligence. Consistent with Dumitru (2019) and Edwards and Ritchie (2022), it shows that the humanities are not merely repositories of historical knowledge but disciplines that train the intellect and emotions to grasp human complexity. Thus, the humanities function as a bridge between intellect and humanity space where *critical empathy* emerges: a form of awareness that thinks and feels simultaneously.

Beyond enriching critical-thinking theory, this research contributes to comparative education studies by positioning Japan as a non-Western case that broadens the global spectrum. The findings show that critical thinking can emerge within distinct cultural frameworks, challenging the universalist assumption that it flourishes only in individualistic societies.

Policy & Educational Practice Implications

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the importance of designing curricula that balance academic achievement with reflective-critical reasoning. The Ministry of Education (MEXT) should strengthen reflective pedagogy components in the national curriculum, including the development of assessment standards that measure not only cognitive outcomes but also the quality of argumentation and moral reflection. Project-based portfolio, and reflective writing evaluations can serve as alternatives to the still-dominant memorization-based examinations.

Furthermore, teacher training emerges as a decisive factor in implementing critical-thinking curricula. Continuous professional development programs should prioritize teachers' abilities to facilitate open discussions, guide reflection, and integrate digital tools as instruments of critical inquiry. The teachers' experiences in this study confirm that reflective capacity directly determines the quality of dialogic and humanistic learning.

Another implication lies in the need for equitable educational resources. The disparities between urban and rural schools, as revealed in this study, indicate unequal access to learning materials and teacher training. Sustainable educational reform must therefore address the distribution of facilities and pedagogical support to ensure all students have equal opportunities to engage in reflective and analytical learning.

In a broader context, Japan's experience can inspire other countries—including Indonesia and Southeast Asian nations—to develop contextualized humanities education models. By adapting the principles of the Integrated Humanities–Critical Thinking Framework (IHCTF), education systems can nurture generations who are not only intellectually competent but also ethically, socially, and spiritually conscious.

Directions for Future Research

This study opens three main avenues for future research. First, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō* curricula on students' critical-thinking development and social character formation. Such studies can reveal how these competencies contribute to graduates' readiness to face real-world challenges.

Second, international comparative research should explore how the IHCTF model can be adapted across different educational contexts—such as in countries undergoing curriculum reform, including South Korea, Finland, or Indonesia. These comparisons would enrich global scholarship on the diversification of critical-thinking epistemologies and strengthen the concept of *global–local synergy* in education.

Third, future studies should expand participatory dimensions by engaging students more explicitly as *co-researchers*. Within a reflective educational framework, students are not merely research subjects but active knowledge co-creators. Involving them in designing reflection instruments or community-based projects will deepen understanding of how critical thinking emerges through lived social practice.

Final Reflection

Overall, this study concludes that Japan's success in fostering critical thinking through its comprehensive humanities curriculum is not a product of Western theoretical adoption but of creative adaptation that places cultural, moral, and social values at the heart of learning. The humanities, embodied in *rekishi sōgō* and *chiri sōgō*, demonstrate that critical thinking can develop contextually without losing its universality.

Ultimately, the central contribution of this study lies in proposing a new paradigm for global education: that critical thinking is not only an intellectual ability but a living cultural and moral practice. When curricula integrate logical analysis, value reflection, and social context, education produces not only individuals who think well but also those who act wisely.

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