

# Career Education and Students' Agency in Japan: A Qualitative Analysis of Teachers' Perceptions and Practices

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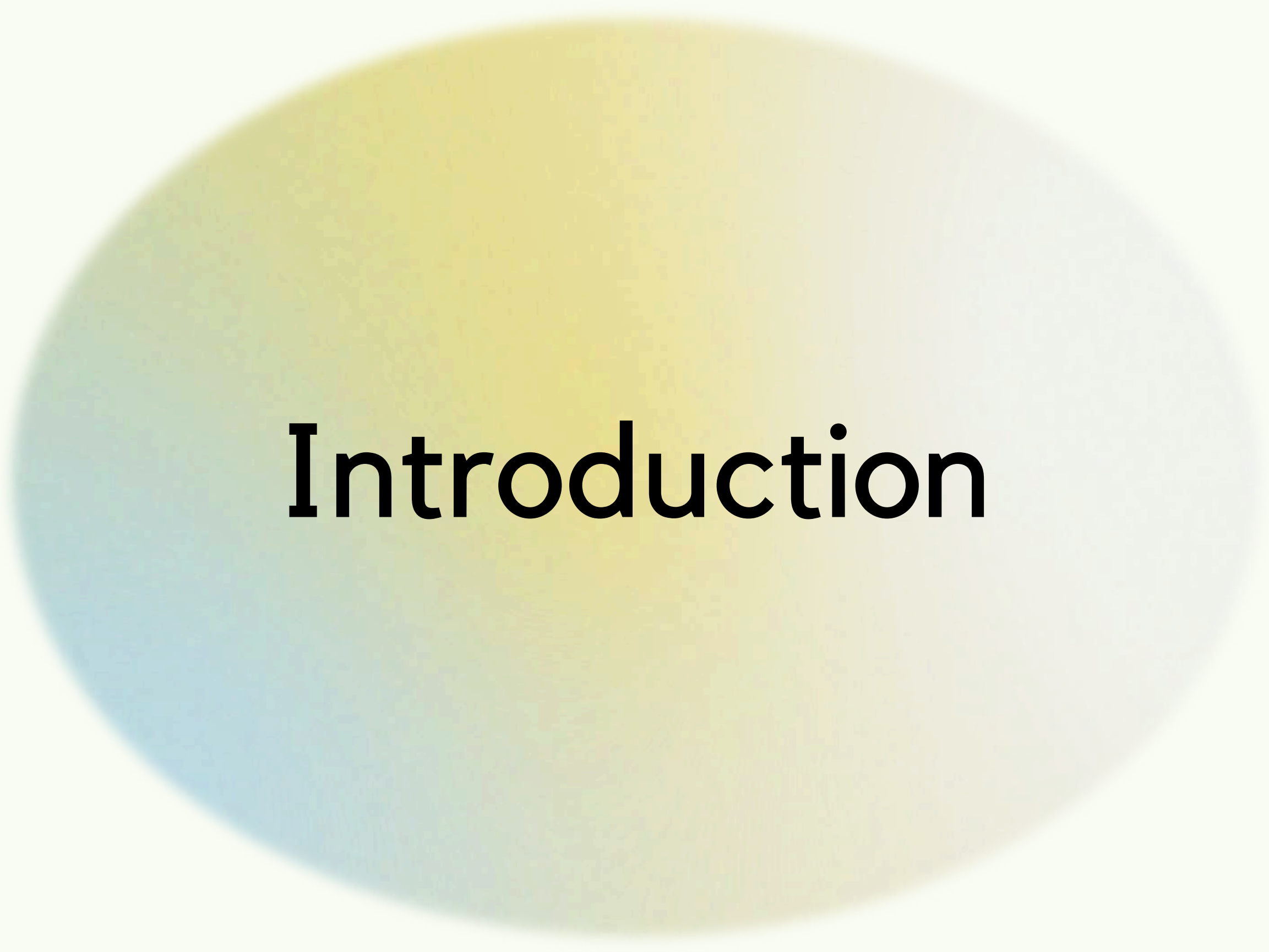
University of Tsukuba

Japan



# Agenda

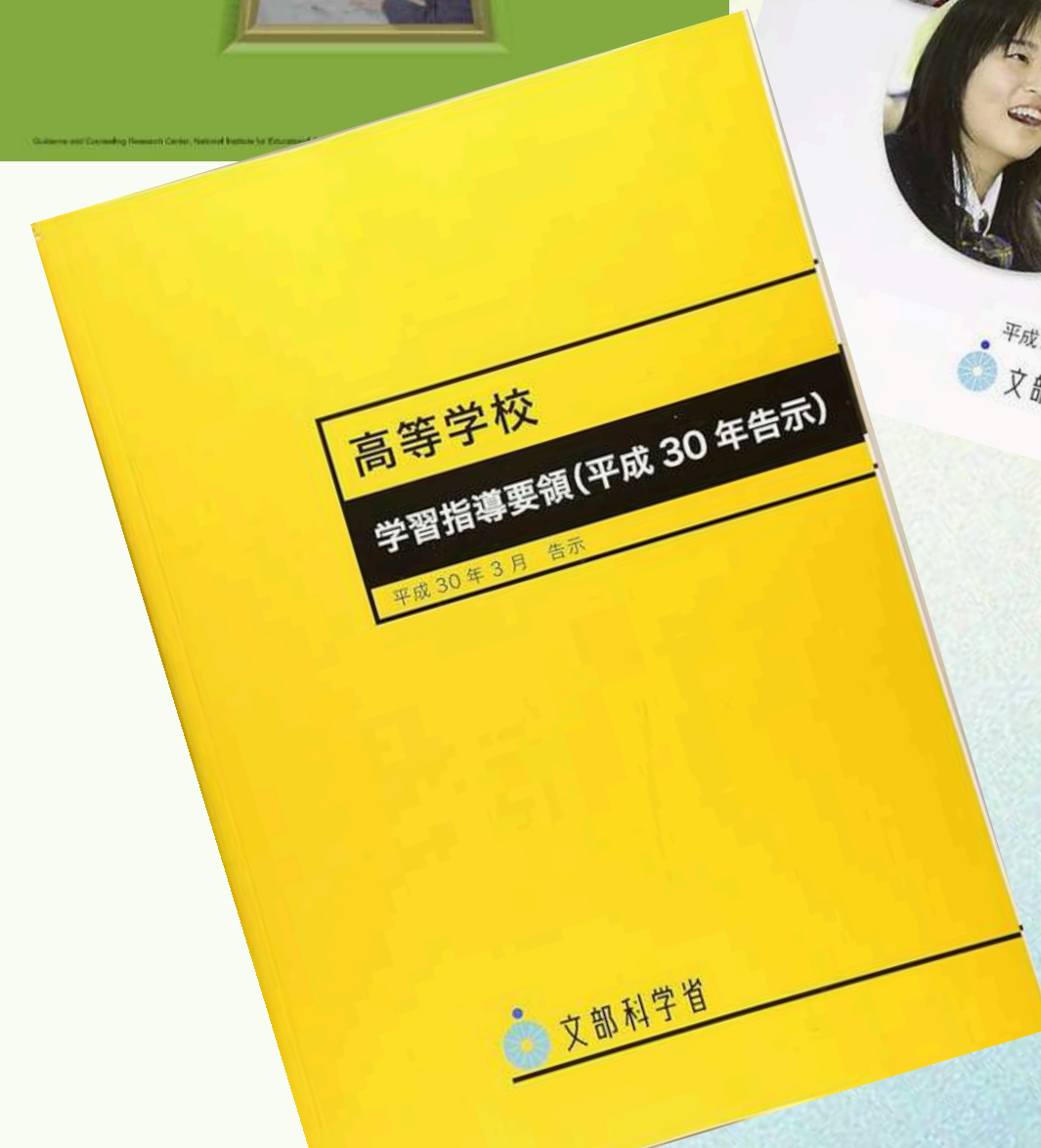
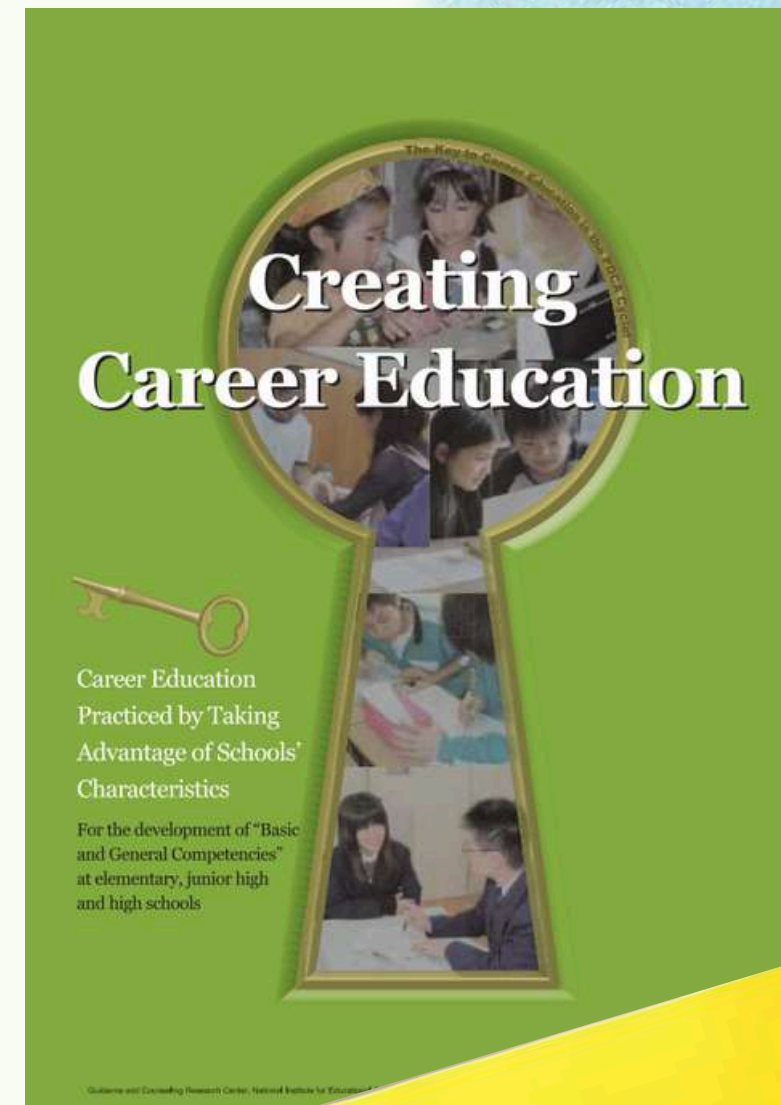
- Introduction
- Purpose
- Significance
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# Introduction

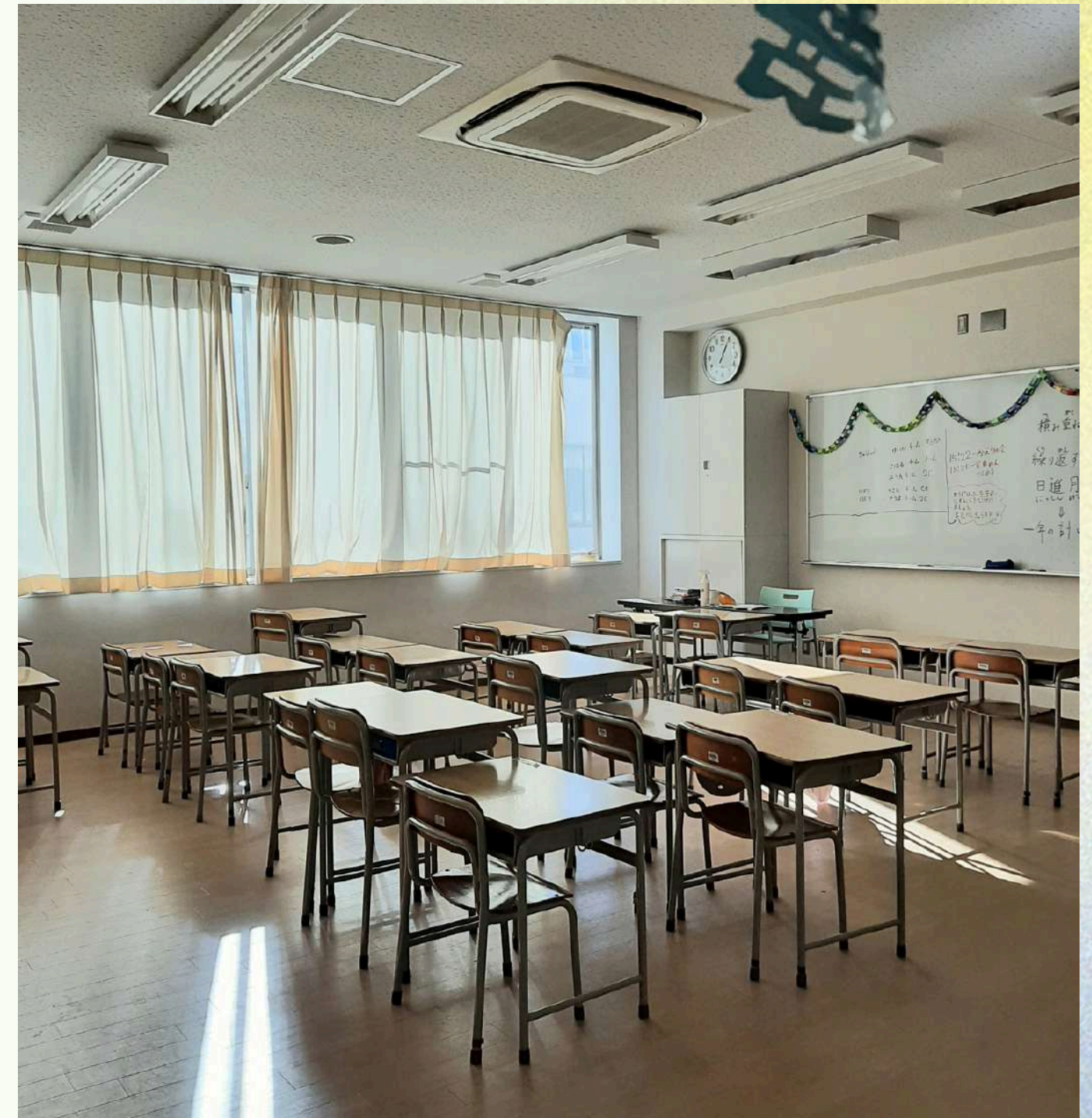
# Career Education in Japan

- Career guidance practices are deeply influenced by the social, cultural, and economic contexts of a specific country (Gong et al., 2013).
- “Education which encourages career development by cultivating the **competencies** and **attitudes** needed to raise the **social** and **vocational independence** of individuals.” (Central Council for Education, 2011, p.16).

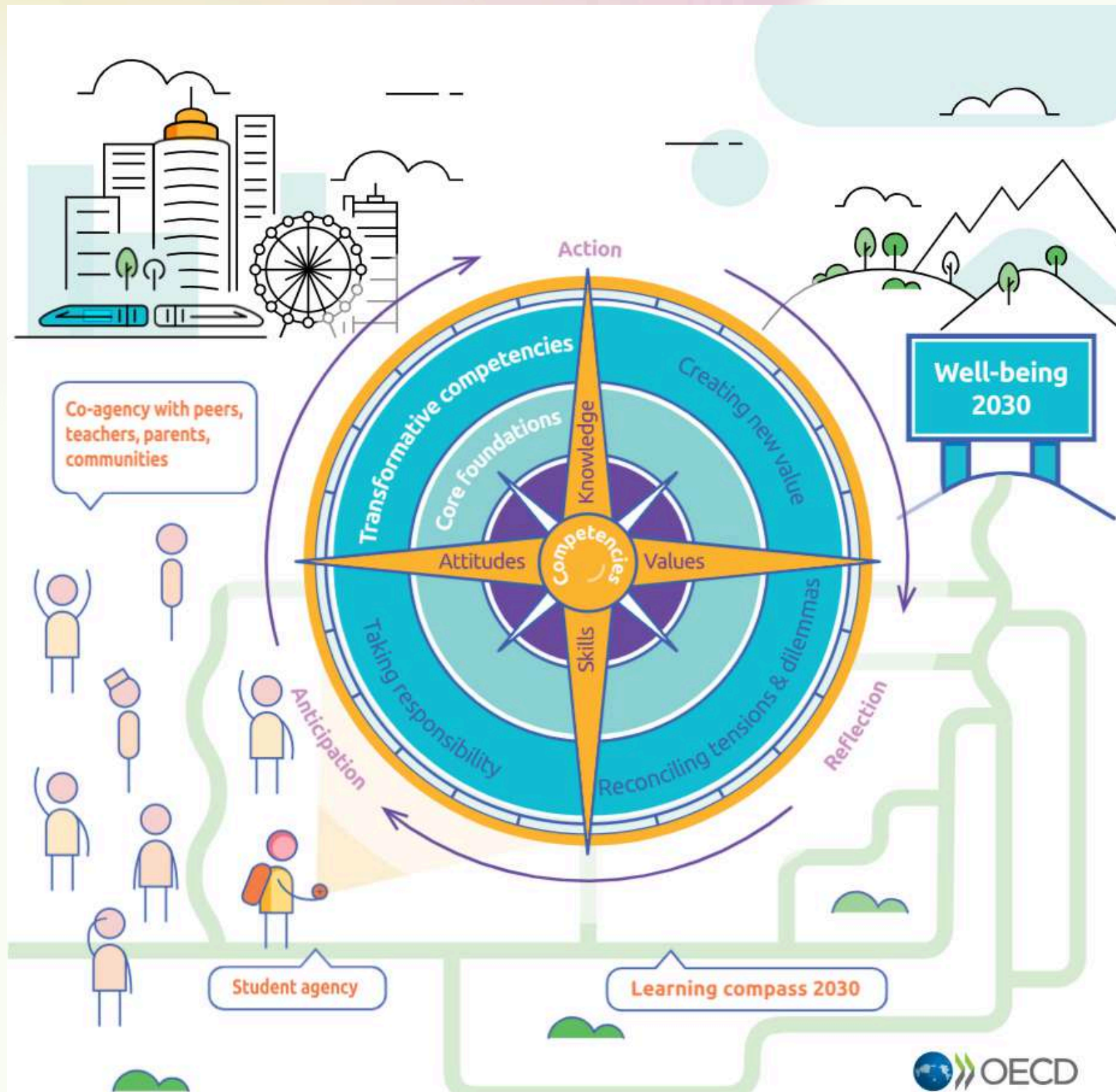


# Japan's High School Challenges

- Academic high schools are ranked based on their success in sending their graduates to prestigious higher educational institutions using “standardized rank scores” (Ishikida, 2005).
- Highly ranked schools often prioritize **university entrance exam preparation** (Wakamatsu et al., 2019), limiting students' exploration of alternative career pathways.
- This narrowed focus may diminish students' consideration of long-term career plans, and raises questions regarding their sense of agency.



# Students' Agency



- Students' agency is one of the central concepts within the **OECD Learning Compass 2030**.
- This framework is globally informed, to be locally contextualized.
- “The capacity to set a goal, reflect, and act responsibly to effect change.” (OECD, 2019)
- A guiding philosophy that emphasizes **holistic development** and the **cultivation of skills and competencies**.

# Who is Responsible for Providing Career Education?

## In Japan

- **Homeroom teachers**, each of whom has their own subjects to teach, are mainly the ones responsible for providing career education (Fujita, 2011).

## In Other Contexts

- This responsibility will be either attributed to the school counselor, or to full-time career guidance specialists, or fulfilled via partnerships with external organizations...etc.



# Teachers' Perceptions and Practices

- There is a clear relation between teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and classroom practices (Buehl & Beck, 2015).
- Teachers' perceptions influence their instructional behavior, affecting students' overall classroom experiences, educational outcomes, and performance (Hardré et al., 2006).
- The term agency has been reported to be often misunderstood and misinterpreted by many Japanese educationists (Abiko, 2017).



# Purpose



- To provide a qualitative analysis of Japanese high school homeroom teachers' perceptions of students' agency and its connection to career education.
- To identifying the classroom practices they adopt when providing career education.
- To specify the factors, experiences, and resources that influenced their perceptions and practices.

# Significance



## Academic Significance

- Filling in the gaps previously mentioned in academic research and providing a novel perspective on career education in Japan by examining it from a global lens through linking it to the OECD's Learning Compass 2030 framework.



## Practical Significance

- Advocating for professional development that better equips career education practitioners to support students' sense of agency and independent decision-making during a crucial stage of their educational journeys.

# Theoretical Framework

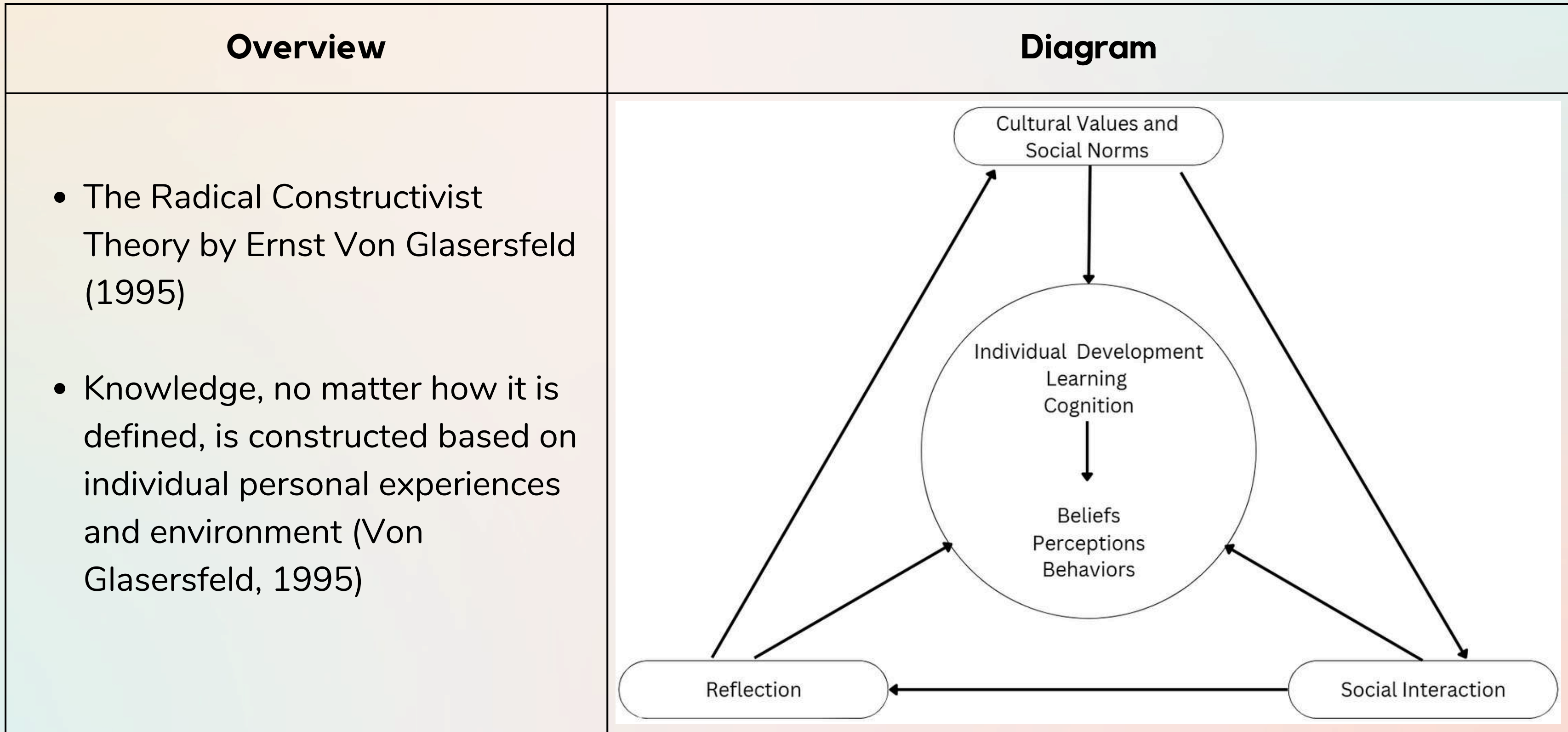



Figure 1: Theoretical Framework Diagram by the Author Based on the Work of Von Glasersfeld (1995)

# Design and Methods

- Qualitative Approach
- Semi-structured interviews in English
- 8 homeroom teachers currently teaching in highly ranked senior high schools in various regions and prefectures in Japan, Including: Tokyo, Kanagawa, Chiba, Ibaraki, and Fukuoka prefectures
- Mixture of thematic analysis and grounded theory approaches





# Results and Discussion

# Results

Three Main Themes were Identified

## Main Theme A

Conceptualization of Students'  
Agency

## Main Theme B

Career Education Strategies  
and Practices

## Main Theme C

Students' Agency and Career  
Education Connections and  
Gaps

# Conceptualization of Students' Agency

## Familiarity with Terminology

- 75% of participants had **no prior exposure** to the term.
- Unfamiliarity due to a **lack of resources** and **exposure** during teacher education programs.

## Semantic Ambiguity

- The term "**agency**" lacks a direct translation in the Japanese language.
- Confusion due to **Lexical gaps** in translation.



Motivation



Activeness



Independence



Eagerness



Teacher  
Meetings

Study  
Groups

School  
Culture

Personal  
Interest

Policy  
Documents

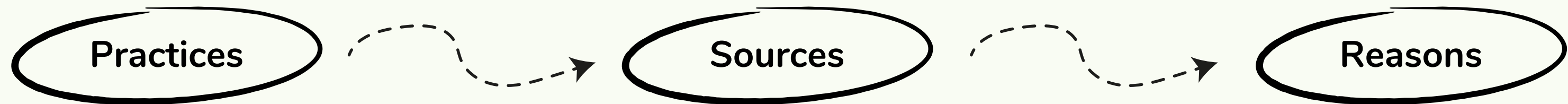
## Challenges

- Lack of formal training, resources, semantic confusion.
- Heavy reliance on informal sources.

## Solutions

- Need for conceptual clarity and time-efficient resources to bridge gaps between research, policy, and practice.

# Career Education Strategies and Practices



- Individual interviews with students
- Analogies with personal experience
- Inviting former graduates

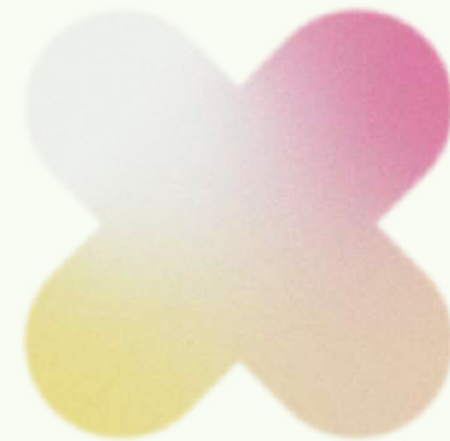
- Understanding of the role of a homeroom teacher
- Advice from more experienced colleagues
- Discussions with teachers from other schools

- Time constraints
- Vague nature of policy documents
- Unique culture, values, and mission of each school

# Career Education Strategies and Practices

The challenge of understanding the concept of student agency

The time-constrained difficulties of using teacher materials and professional methods in career education



The overlap of these challenges hinders teachers' ability to provide **comprehensive career education support**, one that respects their students' sense of agency and adheres to the standards and guiding philosophy of career education in Japan.

# Students' Agency and Career Education Connections and Gaps

## Natural Connection

- Most teachers considered the relationship between career education and students' agency to be **natural**.
- When they think of career education, they naturally think of **encouraging students to have agency** and **be proactive in their decision-making**.



## However.....

- Most teachers did not further detailly explain which **particular dimensions** of students' agency are aligned or naturally associated with career education
- The connections expressed were **vague** and **broad** in nature.



**Conclusion**

# Conclusion

- Career education and guidance that respects students' agency is vital.
- Teachers in this study associated students' agency with motivation, activeness, independence, and eagerness.
- Such perceptions, although aligned with the broader understanding of this concept, have often neglected some of its significant dimensions.
- Teachers' approaches to career education were varied and unique, unfluenced mainly by informal sources, such as personal experiences, social interaction, and collaboration with their colleagues..
- While teachers saw a natural link between career education and students' agency, they did not describe the exact dimensions or aspects they considered to be naturally aligned between the two concepts.

# Implications

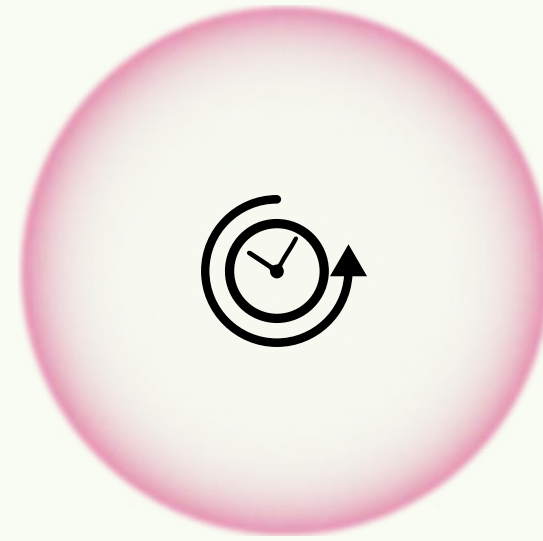


- Homeroom teachers' perceptions and practices currently mostly rely on **informal resources**.
- Such a tendency highlights a possible **policy-practice gap** as there could be a gap or **insufficient communication** between career education policymakers and practitioners.
- Further research and examination of the **reasons**, **consequences**, and **solutions** to bridge this gap could provide valuable insights into the context of future career education in secondary education.

# Recommendations and Future Tasks



Strengthening channels of communication between research, policy, and practice



Providing more accessible, time-efficient, and contextualized materials



Collaborative professional development opportunities for different career education practitioners

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# Thank you for listening!

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