Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and the meta-analysis of their results typically provide the highest quality available evidence that can be used in evidence-based policymaking and practice. In the education arena, there is a problem that little primary research involves a high quality study design such as RCT, and evidence is not easily produced.

However, studies that are well designed, have conducted RCTs, and have produced robust findings in education have had a considerable impact. For example, the Perry Preschool Program and Tennessee STAR Project have influenced policies and subsequent research.

RCTs in the social sciences, including education research, developed in the 1960s with social legislation concerning the War on Poverty, and meta-analysis was proposed in 1976. Although RCTs in the education arena were rare, RCTs and meta-analysis have currently gained importance, as “scientifically based research” has gained prominence since the latter half of the 1990s.

In Japan, RCTs are almost non-existent. However a balanced research portfolio that includes more rigorous and robust quantitative research is needed. Clearly, a basis of statistics and longitudinal surveys is also required. Such research will be indispensable for improving schools and increasing the accountability of the education system and the quality of education research itself.