

Implications of Studies of Early Childhood Education in Japan for Understanding Children's Social Emotional Development

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Abstract

Preschools in Japan, as elsewhere, are key sites of child development, socialization, and enculturation. A series of ethnographically informed studies of Japanese preschools have identified and explicated approaches to early childhood education that are very unlike those of preschools in other countries. Many of these features of Japanese preschools that have been identified by ethnographic researchers challenge Western notions of early childhood education and care and child development. These features include high student/teacher ratios; low-intervention by teachers in children's disputes; an emphasis on group-mindedness and collective over individual forms of social control; a prioritization of social development and a de-emphasis on academics; the cultivation of the experience and expression of feelings; and an emphasis on teaching children to adjust their behavior to contexts.

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For scholars in the fields of education and child development Japanese preschools are an especially fruitful site for study because their structure, curriculum, and pedagogy are so unlike those of preschools in the United States and other countries. While preschools in most parts of the world participate in globally circulating discourses of best practices that have worked to produce significant similarities in their approaches, Japanese preschools have neither borrowed much from nor contributed much to practices found in other countries (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). Japanese preschools therefore are a sort of natural laboratory for comparative child development.

Tobin, Wu, and Davidson's 1989 *Preschool in Three Cultures* is among a set of ethnographic studies of Japanese early childhood education conducted in the 1980s and early 1990s. Others included Lois Peak's *Learning to Go to School in Japan* (1992); Catherine Lewis' *Educating Hearts and Minds*, (1995); Merry White's *The Japanese Educational Challenge* (1987), and Joy Henry's *Becoming Japanese: The World of the Preschool* (1989), Eyal Ben-Ari's *Body Projects in Japanese Childcare*. We suggest that it is not a coincidence that Tobin, Lewis, White, and Peak all did graduate or post-graduate work with the psychological anthropologist Robert A. LeVine. LeVine's dissertation was an ethnography of childrearing in a Gusii village that served as one of the six ethnographies of John and Beatrice Whiting's *Six Culture Study* (Whiting, 1975; Whiting and Edwards. Levine 2009). The Whitings' cross-cultural work on child development, like Margaret Mead's, focused on childrearing by parents, grandparents, and other children.

The ethnographic studies of Japanese preschools conducted by Tobin, White, Lewis, and Peak represented a shift in cross-cultural studies of childhood from the home and the community to the preschool. This cohort of scholars combined the Mead-Whiting-LeVine tradition of studying the connections between culture and child development with a focus on Japan, and on preschools as key sites of socialization and enculturation.

In this paper we describe key features of Japanese preschools that have been identified by ethnographic researchers, and suggest how these features challenge Western notions of child development and early childhood education and care and can suggest to practitioners in other countries new directions for practice. Causal inferences are risky here, but we can say that Japanese children on the whole seem to turn out well socialized, reasonably happy, and prepared for future academic achievement despite of (or, as we will suggest, because of)

attending preschools with very large student/teacher ratios, teachers who hesitate to mediate their disputes and in other ways encourage the experience of frustration, and a curriculum with little academic emphasis.

A definitional note: While not compulsory, almost all Japanese children are enrolled in an early childhood education and care setting. There are two major forms of provision: *hoikuen* (day-care centers), which take children from infancy through age six and are under the Ministry of Health, and *youchien* (kindergartens), which take children from three to six years old and are under the Ministry of Education. While there are structural differences in the two systems, the studies we cite suggest that the pedagogical approaches we discuss in this paper are commonly found in both.

Student/Teacher Ratios and an Emphasis on Group Mindedness

Japanese preschool classes typically have ratios of 25 or more children with one teacher. The official limits are up to 30 children per class in *hoikuen* and up to 35 in *youchien*. In the US and other Anglophone countries, as in most of Europe (with France an exception) typical student/teachers ratios for classes for four-year-old children are typically on the order of 15 children, with two teachers. The fact that Japanese preschools can function well with such large class sizes and student/teacher ratios challenges Western notions that see small class size and low ratios as both indicators and causes of program quality (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1987). The Japanese case challenges this linear relationship by suggesting that student/teacher ratios below a certain threshold work to make children's peer to peer interactions less rich. Tobin et al. (1987) quote an informant who suggested that:

There may be a danger zone of ratios and class size from approximately 12 to approximately 20 children per teacher and per class". . . In classes of this size, a student may be tempted to approach the teacher for some individual attention only to be interrupted by one of the other equally needy and now perhaps jealous students. . . In classes with ratios greater than 20:1, teachers and students are more likely intuitively to realize that mutually satisfying dyadic interactions between teacher and student are unlikely. In these larger classes, children may tend to have more realistic expectations and to adjust their modes of interaction accordingly (p. 546).

Studies conducted in Western countries generally show that lower student/teacher ratios lead to better academic and developmental outcomes (Burchinal et al, 2000; NICHD ECCRN, 1999, Pianta et al, 2005). In many studies of early childhood education conducted in Western countries, low child/adult ratios is treated as a proxy for quality, rather than as a variable whose effects can be measured.

In East Asian countries, in contrast, where class sizes generally are very high by Western standards, lower student/teacher ratios are not viewed as either indicating or contributing to program quality. We suggest that low ratios may be a causal factor in early childhood education in the US and not in Japan because of differences in pedagogical approaches. In early childhood education in the US, where teachers emphasize the quality of their dyadic relationship with each of their students, higher student/teacher ratios are a pedagogical impediment. In Japan, in contrast, where the emphasis is on the class as a community, low student/teacher ratios can be counter-productive.

Frustration and Perseverance

The high number of students per teacher in Japanese preschools has the practical effect of making teachers less available to help children manage such daily tasks as taking off and putting back on shoes, setting out their lunch, and packing their backpacks. Rather than view these tasks as a distraction from the curriculum, most Japanese educators view children learning to manage such tasks as a core aspect of the preschool curriculum. This is the key finding of Lois Peak's 1991 *Learning to Go to School in Japan*. Peak points out that Japanese teachers and directors view children's frustrations with managing the tasks of everyday life as a positive feature of life in preschool, as it creates the need for children to learn to tolerate frustration and develop perseverance and to learn that expressions of dependency needs (*amae*) that are appropriate in the home setting are inappropriate in the preschool context. Peak suggests that Japanese teachers encourage children to persevere through frustration by such techniques as pretending to be too busy to give assistance and by shouting encouragement rather than giving assistance.

The Japanese preschool pedagogical approach of having young children experience frustration and encouraging them to persevere in the face of difficulties has provocative

implications for strategies for scaffolding the development of impulsivity, inhibitory control, and executive functions. Studies of inhibitory control conducted in the US suggest a high degree of correlation between the ability to resist temptations (such as marshmallows) when young and later academic, social, and professional success (Eisenberg, N. et al, 1996; 2004; Kochanska, G. et al, 2000). To date, there have been only a few studies comparing U.S. and East Asian children on aspects of executive function (Oh & Lewis, 2008; Lewis et al. 2009; Lan, X. et al, 2011; Sabaagh, et al, 2006), and no studies systematically comparing US and Japanese children's development of inhibitory control.¹² The studies conducted in Korea and China suggest that East Asian children are ahead of their Western peers in the development of executive function, but no study has been conducted that can more than speculate about causal connections between preschool practices and later cognitive, social, and academic outcomes.

Perseverance is also connected to learning through student beliefs about the relative importance of effort versus innate ability (Karasawa et al, 1997; Holloway, 1988). Studies show that school-aged children in Japan rate effort more highly and ability less highly than do their US counterparts (Hamilton et al, 1989; Stigler & Perry, 1998; Stevenson, Lee, & Stigler, 1986). Research on this question has not been done on preschool-aged children, but it is plausible to hypothesize that the Japanese preschool's pedagogy of frustration and perseverance has an impact on the development of children's belief about the importance of effort for academic and other domains of achievement.

Low Intervention by Teachers

Catherine Lewis presents the example of a fight between two five-year-old boys that the teacher responds to, not by breaking up the fight, but instead by encouraging the boy who was losing the fight to cry, rather than to attempt to suppress his tears and thereby obscure his feelings (Lewis, 1984, p. 78). Lewis explains that teacher's logic here is that social interactions among classmates requires a clear communication of feeling and that if one child in an altercation cries or in other ways communicates pain, frustration, or emotional

¹ Lewis et al report that they tested Japanese children on a task requiring them to resist opening a wrapped gift, but they do not provide comparative scores with US children on this task.

vulnerability this will work to elicit an empathetic response from one or more others. In such situations, when one child is hurting another if a teacher feels the need to intervene, her intervention will often take the form, not, as in US preschools, of telling the aggressor to stop or encouraging her to be more empathetic, but instead of encouraging the victim to present his or her distress more clearly, so as to elicit the desired empathetic response.

Preschool in Three Cultures (1989) and *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* (2009) also present several examples of Japanese teachers using a pedagogical approach of watching and holding back (in Japanese, (*mimamoru*) to achieve a range of pedagogical practices and developmental goals, including giving children opportunities to develop emotional, social, and intellectual skills, including perseverance. As Tobin et al (2009, p. 111) write:

Japanese teachers are able to resist the temptation to intervene preemptively, as they balance the risk that a situation might deteriorate without their intervention with their appreciation of the value of the social experiences that would be lost if they were to act before it becomes absolutely necessary.

This strategy of hesitating to intervene in children's disputes and other social interactions reflects a cultural pedagogical belief that emotional development and social skills are better learned from the experience of interacting with peers than from didactic instruction or from adult-child dyadic interactions. These studies do not suggest that Japanese teachers never intervene, but that non-intervention is an option available to Japanese teachers for responding to fights.

Non-intervention in fights allows not only the children fighting, but also those watching to have experiences Japanese educators see as crucial to their social development. Hayashi and Tobin (2011, p. 140) quote a Japanese preschool director who commented on a scene in a video showing children fighting: "Look, there is a *gyarari* (gallery). Fights are important for the children who are *not* fighting. Teachers should pay attention to them, and to consider what *they* are learning." This observation is consistent with studies showing the value of observational learning (Gaskins & Paradise, 2009) for young children.

Most Western theories of child development emphasize constraint on antisocial behavior as self-constraint and the locus of control on misbehavior as an individual trait. In contrast, the Japanese early childhood educators' strategy of low-intervention suggests the importance of children learning to function collectively to encourage prosocial and discourage antisocial

behavior. This perspective on behavioral regulation, while not negating the importance of understanding individual processes of emotion, cognition, and behavior, can work to expand the Western psychological literature by seeing the locus of control in a preschool classroom not just or primarily as the sum of the self-regulation of each child, but also as the collective, distributed emotional, social skills of the class as a community.

An Emphasis on Social-Emotional Development

Given Japan's high scores on international measures of academic achievement (of 30 participating countries, in the last PISA ratings Japan was 8th in reading, 4th in mathematics, and 3rd in science), one might expect Japanese preschools to be focused on getting children off to a quick academic start, but this is not the case. Nearly all studies of Japanese preschools have shown that the curricular emphasis is on social-emotional development, and that very little attention is given to the teaching of reading or math (Peak, 1991, p. 65) or systematic efforts to scaffold children's intellectual development. Some private Japanese preschools advertise that they give children academic skills (Holloway, 2000). But the evidence suggests that such programs are in the minority, and that the norm in Japanese preschool is "free" or "relaxed" education, an approach that emphasizes giving young children abundant opportunities to play freely and engage spontaneously in interactions with each other and the physical world (Tobin et al., 1989; Lewis, 1995; Hendrey, 1986; Ben-Ari, 1996; Tobin et al., 2009). While the Japanese elementary curriculum has switched back and forth over the past thirty years between more "relaxed" and more academically rigorous expectations, the preschool curriculum has remained centered on play (Oda & Mori, 2006) and on the development of the "whole child" (Hess & Azuma, 1991; Hoffman, 2000).

Diane Hoffman argues that Japanese preschools differ from their US counterparts primarily in not individualizing instruction and in not trying to rush children through stages of cognitive development. Hoffman goes so far as to argue that Japanese preschools challenge the very notion of child development by emphasizing the importance of valuing the "childlikeness" of children: "It is somewhat misleading to speak of child *development* in Japanese education—because the emphasis is on the child remaining true to her or his childlike nature rather than throwing off childlike characteristics in favor of attaining adult modes of being and

functioning as soon as possible (2000, p.195).

The fact that Japanese preschools give such little emphasis to early academics or to systematically scaffolding cognitive development, coupled with the fact that Japanese children from the elementary years on perform well on measures of academic achievement serves as a challenge and potential corrective to the growing academic emphasis of preschool curricula in the US and many other countries.

Feelings

The Japanese psychoanalyst Takeo Doi (1973) introduced the concept of *amae* as a core element of the Japanese psyche and of Japanese interpersonal relations. *Amae* is sometimes translated into English as “dependence,” but we suggest that a better translation of *amae* is “the desire to elicit caretaking, nurturing behavior in others.” In their study “Culture, Emotion, and Well Being: Good Feelings in Japan and the United States,” Kitayama, Markus, and Kurokawa (2000, p.100) present a taxonomy of Japanese emotions that includes a section they call “*amae*-related emotions.” Under this heading they include *tanomi*, which they translate as “feel like relying on others” and *sugari* (“feel like leaning on others”). We would add to this list of *amae*-related emotions *sabishii* (which we translate as “lonely sadness” or “the sadness that comes from being alone”). Loneliness, which is produced by a desire for connection to others, is a key component of sociality, as it leads people to seek companionship and membership in a group.

Hayashi, Karasawa, and Tobin (2009) suggest that *sabishii* is an emotion that is emphasized in Japanese preschools. They cite an example from *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited*:

At lunchtime at a preschool in Tokyo a teacher notices that many of the children have finished their meat and rice and dessert, but left their carrots untouched. Speaking to a boy in a theatrical voice loud enough for the whole class to hear, the teacher says “ Poor Mister Carrot! You ate Mr. Hamburger, Mr. Rice, and Mr. Orange, but you haven't eaten any of Mr. Carrot. Don't you think he feels lonely (*sabishii*)?” (Hayashi, et al., 2009, p. 32)

The logic here is that the carrot is lonely and therefore sad because he has been passed over and left alone on the plate, and not been allowed to join his lunch compatriots, the hamburger,

rice, and orange in being eaten. This logic works because being a member of the group is so highly valued in Japanese culture in general and in preschool pedagogy in particular that missing out on the opportunity of being consumed alongside one's comrades makes one an object of pity and concern, even if you are a carrot and your comrades other inanimate objects.

A key pedagogical goal of Japanese preschool teachers is to provide young children with opportunities to experience feelings. All feelings are not of equal value. *Sabishii* is emphasized much more than, for example, anger or embarrassment, because this feeling is seen to provoke responses of *omoiyari* (empathy) and to fuel the desire for sociality, which is a core curricular goal of the Japanese preschool. Loneliness and sociality are reciprocally connected: Feeling lonely motivates people to seek the company of others. Expressions of loneliness, in turn, provoke the empathic response of inviting the lonely person to join the group. Shared experiences of talking about and both directly and vicariously experiencing loneliness provide a sense of intersubjectivity that strengthens group ties (Hayashi et al., 2009).

Conclusion

The corpus of ethnographic studies of Japanese preschools demonstrates the value of attending to preschools as key sites for child development, socialization, and enculturation. These studies have important implications not only for the field of early childhood education, but also for the field of child development. Collectively, they have the power to expand and in some cases challenge understandings of child development based solely on research conducted in Western countries. Japanese preschool pedagogy begins with the assumption that child development occurs not just within individuals, but also within groups of children as they learn to function collectively.

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