

1 Framework and mechanisms of early childhood education in Japan

First, we will introduce several models that illustrate diverse Japanese early childhood education, followed by a discussion on the philosophies and regulatory systems that sustain and make the diverse early childhood education work.

1 The characteristics of early childhood education in Japan

Four characteristics can be identified in Japanese early childhood education:

Classroom teachers of early childhood education collaborate with researchers at universities and similar institutions to review the practice and strive toward its improvement. Many classroom teachers go on to become researchers or vocational instructors at universities, junior colleges, or vocational institutes, either through acquiring new or additional education or because of recognition for their practical achievements.

There are several philosophical streams in early childhood education, with distinct methodologies for each. However, in actual practice, these streams are not applied mechanically but with flexibility, based upon a finely tuned approach to the life and actions of each individual child.

Early childhood education comes in a diverse array of forms. Each kindergarten works to establish its own methods for early childhood education, through the productive interaction of the specific content and methodology of multiple forms, or through the adoption of better features of other forms. However, some kindergartens are closed into their own ways of doing things, adhering rigidly to one form and making no attempt to try anything new.

The relationship between the classroom and the teacher training school is very close in early childhood education. Schools that engage in teacher training and development, such as universities, junior colleges, and vocational schools, not only train teachers, but also simultaneously work to support the classroom through the development of methodology that has practical utility.

2 Forms of early childhood education in Japan

In Japan, care and education for infants and little children is divided into kindergartens and daycare centers. Kindergartens provide three years of care and education for children three years of age or older, who go on to enter elementary school after finishing kindergartens. Daycare centers accept infants and children under elementary school age. Nearly one hundred percent of children at the pre-elementary school stage attend either a kindergarten or a daycare center. While the general directional framework for early childhood education is indicated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, and the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, the details of early childhood education are left up to each kindergarten or daycare center, with a resulting diversity of forms.

(1) A form of early childhood care and education that is based on nurturing the human relationships within the group: The main objective is for children to learn the basic routines of daily life and study habits. Activity times consist of slots that are put together by the teacher, and slots that the child can use with relative freedom, without instructions from the teacher. During free play times, children are encouraged to play with other children or turn their attention to, and relate with, one another, rather than spending time on their own. Materials for plastic arts activities are provided by the teacher as needed. Teachers are affectionate toward the children, avoid becoming authoritarian, behave calmly, and build a warm relationship with the children.

(2) A form of early childhood care and education that extends the child's ability to perform functions: The basic curriculum focuses on having the child learn study skills in a group setting. Children learn such skills as reading Chinese characters, writing Hiragana characters, recognizing concepts of number, volume, and geometry, training their memory, playing musical instruments, and drawing pictures. The child's activities are predetermined by a time schedule, with almost no room for individual choice. Children are strictly disciplined to observe kindergarten rules.

(3) A form of early childhood care and education that is child-centered: The majority of the time is used by the child for free play. While there are group activities as well, there is minimal direct instruction from the teacher. Materials and equipment for play, as well as such articles as blocks and plastic arts supplies are provided for the children to use freely whenever they wish, with the environment also arranged to accommodate the activities. The teacher is warm and cheerful, and adapts his or her approach to each individual child.

Some positive features that are shared by all these diverse forms of early childhood education include “saying ‘Good Morning,’” “closeness,” “unhurried time,” “responsibility of children,” and “physical activity.” The children are respected for their very existence, and are nurtured through a variety of experiences within a time and space that is separate from their home life while learning the rules for living in society.

These forms of early childhood education have traced their own paths of evolution in Japan. However, from Montessori method to Reggio Emilia approach to the more recent American method of DAP (Developmentally Appropriate Practice), where the development of all American is the objective in utilizing academic knowledge in the curriculum, there has been selective adoption of new educational methodologies and knowledge from overseas sources, and daily efforts toward improvement in Japan, which continues today.

3 Philosophy of care and education supporting early childhood education

What serves as the foundation for the diverse forms of education as described above is the philosophy of early childhood care and education called the “guiding child care theory” or the “free child care and education” approach. With the 1989 amendment of the Course of Study for Kindergarten, the philosophy was set forth as the nation’s policy as well. Its characteristics are presently understood to be as follows:

- Children make the most of their abilities and grow when they have a feeling of freedom.
- Children grow through interaction with the things and people within the kindergarten environment. The free interaction with these things and people is important. This shall be called “education through environment.”
- The teacher devotes him/herself to supporting the child. Indirect support includes “setting up the environment around the child,” while direct support includes “helping out the child.”
- The sympathetic relationship between the teacher and the child is the foundation of early childhood education.
- Relationships among children start with close twosomes or threesomes, to gradually expand to the group.
- Roles and relationships are learned in the order of necessity in the context of play and daily life.

The teacher, in full consideration of the significance the main subject of the child’s activity has in early childhood education, supports the child’s acquisition of the values included in the main subject during the process of its pursuit and manifestation.

The “theory of three activities in preschool” is also in use as something that continues the legacy of group-based early childhood education while taking a broad range of matters into consideration. In this theory, the content of early childhood education is divided into three layers for teaching purposes. The first layer is the “life that serves as the base,” and indicates the child’s ordinary day to day life, which is comprised of such elements as free-flow play and educational guidance and serves as the foundation for daily life in general. The second layer is the “central activity,” in which a game or play that is central to the child’s life at every period in preschool and early childhood is extracted and re-constructed. Group play, activities centering on a seasonal or celebratory event and “work” are included in this layer. The third layer is comprised of “systematized learning activities” that include content such as nature, concepts of numbers, volume, and geometry, language, letters, plastic arts, and music. Through these activities, play and daily life are enhanced, and the child’s development is promoted. While the three layers are considerably different in terms of how the teaching should be or how the child’s activities are organized, they are not deployed as completely separate things. They are extracted from play in the child’s daily life, with a certain portion of the play being pursued as a learning activity, or there may be connections with different pathways. Although the activities are categorized into “play,” “assignments,” and “work,” and are conducted during separated time slots, they are tied together in complex ways.

In present-day Japan, endeavors and developments are underway between those forms of early childhood care and education that are based on the development of human relationships in the group and those forms that are child-centered, in which various forms are eclectically blended or used in combination.

4 Institutional framework of early childhood education

The content of early childhood care and education in kindergartens is regulated by the Course of Study for Kindergarten stipulated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, while daycare centers are regulated by Guidelines for Nursery Care at Day Nursery proscribed by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. These two Guidelines have certain commonalities for the contents of early childhood care and education. There are also specific standards for buildings and facilities, which are strictly observed. However, it is possible to set up unlicensed daycare centers under less stringent criteria than those applied to licensed daycare centers.

There are public and private establishments for both kindergartens and daycare centers. Public kindergartens and daycare centers are financed through taxpayer's money, while private facilities are funded by the fees for daycare from the children's guardians as well as subsidies from the national and municipal governments.

Public kindergartens are supervised by the municipal government's educational committee, with the Supervisor providing guidance on how early childhood care and education is carried out. Private kindergartens are supervised by the municipal government's private schools division, with independent groups of private schools doing most of the training to improve the methods for early childhood care and education. However, private schools are under less of an obligation for teacher training, making for varying degrees of training among kindergartens. It is noteworthy that the majority of such supervisors and persons in charge of teacher training used to be kindergarten teachers themselves, and in many cases they return to teaching in the classroom of kindergarten.

5 Framework of teacher development and training in early childhood education

(1) Framework of teacher development in early childhood education

Kindergarten teachers must be licensed according to one of three standards approved by the national government. Teachers who, upon graduation from high school, complete two years of training in a vocational school or junior college, are given Class II Certificates. Teachers who complete four years of training at a university obtain Class I Certificates. Teachers who go to graduate school can obtain a "Specialized Certificate" during their master's programs. Teachers with different classes of certificates are usually treated more or less the same in terms of pay and other matters. While most teachers had Class II Certificates in the past, the number of Class I Certificate holders has been gradually increasing, and approaching half of the total. There are still very few people with "Specialized Certificates." Thus, teachers have a relatively high level of career education, ranging from those with two years of training after high school to those with master's degrees.

Courses and subjects for teacher development are governed by laws relating to teacher-training course stipulated by the national government. Instructors of these programs are also required to pass national examinations. The framework and number of courses are largely similar to those for elementary school teachers.

(2) Method of teacher training for early childhood education

In both public and private kindergartens, beginning teachers undergo one year of in-service training under an experienced mentor. At public kindergartens, teachers with ten years of experience are provided with special training programs. Other training sessions are held by both public and private kindergartens, during normal workdays or vacation times. Almost all teachers take part in these sessions, alternating with their colleagues while they are on duty. Thus, there is generous administrative support for the practice of early childhood care and education, not only on the financial side but also in terms of teacher training. Some teachers, who are particularly passionate about their work, serve further their training by giving up their weekends or nights to take graduate school courses or participate in study groups.

(3) Mechanism of designated research and presentation

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, municipal governments, and independent groups of private school commission hands-on research projects on a variety of themes to their kindergarten of choice as “designated research.” In any public kindergarten, this kind of research project comes around every few years. Working with some grant provided by national government, each kindergarten conducts a series of study sessions, either by themselves or with the help of outside lecturers such as university professors, ultimately to give a presentation of their research results and exhibit the resulting improvement of their early childhood care and education. Research designated by municipal governments is valuable training opportunities for the neighboring kindergartens, while research projects commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Scienceand Technology are sometimes attended by teachers not only from neighboring facilities but from all over Japan, who wish to learn about the research results.

Some teachers who are even more passionate about their work become members of the Japan Society of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education, a society with a membership of over 4,000. Over half the members are classroom teachers at kindergartens and daycare centers. Joining among their colleagues who teach at vocational schools and universities, these teachers strive to pursue their studies through presentations of their hands-on research. Thus, mechanisms exist for classroom teachers themselves to carry out research relating to the practice.

(4) In-House mechanisms in kindergartens for improving early childhood education

Many kindergartens review and improve their early childhood care and education. Homeroom teachers review their own early childhood care and education, make a record of the day, and lay out plans and preparations for early childhood care and education for the next day or later.

Through meetings and briefings on how to conduct early childhood care and education, the principal of kindergarten or chief nursery teacher provide guidance to their staff. An increasing number of kindergartens now have such sessions as the entire kindergarten staff observing and discussing the early childhood care and education of one teacher, or taking a videotape recording of actual early childhood care and education and having everyone discuss what they see.

Bulletins issued by kindergarten groups and journals for teachers published by general publishers contribute to the improvement of early childhood care and education through the

provision of information regarding various teaching methods that relate to early childhood care and education, new creative ideas about toys and play equipment, and the publication of new picture books and the like. There are also many publishers that specialize in early childhood education, which provide books and journals for teachers as well as for children.

(5) Expert support from outside the kindergarten for early childhood education

There are also many opportunities for the teaching staff of teacher training schools and universities to take the initiative in conducting training sessions aimed at improving the early childhood care and education in kindergartens, or to visit kindergartens, observe early childhood care and education, and offer advice to the teachers as they dialogue about what they see. Such advisory and consultative functions are increasingly being positioned among the roles of university researchers. For example, to address the issue of developmental disabilities, some municipal governments have adopted a system of having an expert make the rounds of the kindergartens, offering advice to teachers on relating to these children and on providing them with early childhood care and education.

