Analysis of Japanese Preschool Educational Policy with Standards from the United States of America

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Abstract

It is probably not easy to compare educational guidelines for preschools in Japan and the United States of America because only the former has a national educational policy and the latter has diverse policies and programs for preschool education throughout many different states. Such a comparison may be valuable for educators and policy makers in both countries because, to my knowledge, there is no article with such a comparison. This review analyzes the contents of the most recent version of the Youchienkyouikuyouryou *[Guidelines for kindergarten education] (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2017) and other relevant laws and regulations in Japan in comparison with the ten recommended practices for preschools from the* State of Preschool 2017: State Preschool Yearbook *that was published by the National Institute for Early Education Research in the United States (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2018). Similarities, differences, and the author's opinions are reported.*

Keywords: preschool, the United States of America, Japan, educational policy

There were famous cross-cultural investigations into preschool education in China, Japan, and the U.S. in the 1980s (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) and in the beginning of this century (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). However, to my knowledge, there is no article that has compared the actual educational guidelines for implementing preschool education between Japan and the U.S. It is not easy to make such a comparison because only the former has a national policy for preschool education and the latter has diverse policies and programs for preschool education throughout many different states (Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009).

In order to offer comprehensive, high quality early childhood education and care all over Japan, there are three educational institutions: yochien (kindergarten), hoikuen (day nursery), nintei-kodomo-en (authorized early childhood education and care center), with specific guidelines for each institution. New and comprehensive guidelines for each institution of preschool education were simultaneously created in 2017 from a unified perspective (Abumiya, n.d.1; Muto & Shiomi, 2017) and have been enforced since April 1st, 2018 all over Japan (Cabinet Office, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, & Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2017; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2017; Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2017). Here I do not describe the three educational institutions mentioned

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above in detail because such information is irrelevant to the topic of this paper. Nevertheless, if more information is desired, one may refer to Abumiya (n.d.1, n.d.2) for a succinct summary.

As to the American standards, I chose ten recommended practices from the *State of Preschool 2017: State Preschool Yearbook* that was published by the National Institute for Early Education Research: one of the most authoritative agencies for preschool educational policy in the U.S. (Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009).

Among the guidelines for the three Japanese institutions, I chose to discuss the guidelines for yochien (kindergarten) in this paper as the Japanese preschool education counterpart for the following two main reasons. First, traditionally, the yochien (kindergarten) has been assumed to be a school system under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), and the hoikuen (day nursery) has been considered to be a child welfare center system for working mothers under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) (Abumiya, n.d.1; Oda & Mori, 2006). Second, among these three institutions, only the yochien (kindergarten) targeted children from the ages of three to five (Abumiya, n.d.2) and the target ages of the *State of Preschool 2017: State Preschool Yearbook* (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2018) were three years and four years. Therefore, I chose the yochien (kindergarten) for the sake of the most valid comparison of preschool education between the two countries.

Below I listed the ten recommended practices from the *State of Preschool 2017: State Preschool Yearbook* (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2018), comparing them with similar practices described in the *Youchienkyouikuyouryou* [Guidelines for kindergarten education] (MEXT, 2017) and other relevant laws and regulations in Japan.

Benchmark 1. Early Learning and Development Standards

According to Friedman-Krauss et al. (2018), an effective preschool program should have "clear and appropriate expectations for learning and development across multiple domains" (p. 17). The *Youchienkyouikuyouryou* [Guidelines for kindergarten education] clearly described "youchienkyouikunioitehagukumitaishishitunouryoku [personal qualities and abilities that should be developed in preschool education]" (MEXT, 2017, pp. 3-4) and "youjikinoowarimadenisodattehoshiisugata [characteristics that should be developed in preschool education]" (MEXT, 2017, pp. 3-5). Therefore, the Japanese policy is aligned with this benchmark.

Benchmark 2. Curriculum Supports

Friedman-Krauss et al. (2018) stated that "states must provide (a) guidance or an approval process for selecting curricula, and (b) training or ongoing technical assistance to facilitate adequate implementation of the curriculum" (p. 17). Regarding Japan, the national government made a national policy and each kindergarten must design its curriculum based on the national policy, then each kindergarten, the committee of guardians and local citizens, and a third-party committee of school management specialists should evaluate how well the curriculum was implemented in one's school and each kindergarten should improve its quality of service based on these evaluations under the jurisdiction of MEXT (MEXT, 2011, 2018a). Therefore, the Japanese policy is aligned with this benchmark. However, MEXT (2018b) points out fewer than five percent of all kindergartens received the evaluations from a third-party committee of school management specialists. Although Japanese policy is aligned with the benchmark, its implementation needs improvement.

Benchmark 3. Teacher Degree

Friedman-Krauss et al. (2018) stated that the minimum degree that a preschool teacher in the U.S. must have is a bachelor's degree. The Japanese policy is currently not aligned with this benchmark

because there are three types of teacher certification for kindergarten teachers in Japan. The highest level requires a master's degree, the middle one requires a bachelor's degree, and the lowest one requires at minimum an associate degree from a junior college (Educational Personnel Division in Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau of Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, n.d.; Numano, n.d.).

Benchmark 4. Teacher Specialized Training

Friedman-Krauss et al. (2018) stated that kindergarten teachers "should have specialized preparation that includes knowledge of learning, development, and pedagogy specific to preschool-age children" (p. 18). The Japanese policy is aligned with this benchmark (Educational Personnel Division in Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau of Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, n.d.; Numano, n.d.).

Benchmark 5. Assistant Teacher Degree

According to Friedman-Krauss et al. (2018), an assistant teacher should have the certification of a "Child Development Associate (CDA)" (p. 18) or other similar qualifications, at least. When I considered the CDA requirements (Hannon, 2016) and the level of requirements for becoming a kindergarten teacher in Japan after earning an associate degree (Educational Personnel Division in Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau of Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, n.d.; Numano, n.d.), it seemed to me that the Japanese requirements were similar to (or surpassed) the CDA requirements. A newly-hired teacher in a Japanese kindergarten was often assigned the role of an assistant teacher and later, after gaining some experience, to become a teacher who had one's own homeroom class (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). Considering the forgoing, the Japanese policy seemed to be aligned with this benchmark.

Benchmark 6. Staff Professional Development

Friedman-Krauss et al. (2018) stated that kindergarten teachers "must be required to have at least 15 hours of annual in-service training" (p. 18) and "are also required to have annual written individualized professional development plans" (p. 18). "In addition, some professional development must be provided through coaching or similar ongoing classroom-embedded support" (p. 18). Although MEXT requires the kindergarten teachers to have (a) in-service training and (b) professional development through observation and receiving the guidance of other teachers, there are no specific descriptions in such requirements (c.f., MEXT, 2018a, p. 97). Therefore, the Japanese policy seemed to be aligned with this benchmark.

Benchmarks 7 and 8. Maximum Class Size and Staff-Child Ratio

Friedman-Krauss et al. (2018) stated that "class size should be limited to at most 20 children" (p. 18) and "class should be permitted to have no more than 10 children per classroom teaching staff member" (p. 18). In Japanese kindergarten, every class must have a teacher and the maximum number of children is 35 (Abumiya, n.d.1). Thus, the Japanese policy is currently not aligned with these benchmarks.

Benchmark 9. Screenings and Referrals

Friedman-Krauss et al. (2018) stated that "preschool programs ensure children receive vision, hearing, and other health screenings and referrals" (p. 18). The Japanese policy is aligned with this benchmark (MHLW, n.d.).

Benchmark 10. Continuous Quality Improvement System (CQIS)

Friedman-Krauss et al. (2018) stated, "An effective CQIS operates at local and state levels to ensure that information is gathered regularly on processes and outcomes, and that this information is used to guide program improvement"(p. 18). MEXT started to use the term "kariquramumanegimento [curriculum management]" (MEXT, 2018a, p. 69) and requires each kindergarten to evaluate their program and continuously improve the quality of the program (2011, 2018a). This improvement process is supposed to follow the Plan-Do-Check-Action Cycle (PDCA Cycle) which means each kindergarten should plan its curriculum based on national policy, implement it, evaluate it, and improve upon it. This cycle should be a continuous cycle aimed at further refinement of the curriculum (Muto, 2017). Therefore, the Japanese policy is aligned with this benchmark.

Author's Opinions

In summary, I found significant similarities between the two countries because most of the ten recommended practices for American preschools are aligned with educational guidelines for preschools in Japan. Therefore, I would like to discuss the differences regarding two issues: a required degree for a preschool teacher (i.e., Benchmark 3) and the maximum class size and staff-child ratio in preschool (i.e., Benchmarks 7 and 8).

The Japanese government is eager to improve the quality of preschool education and care and has already commented that 68.0% of kindergarten teachers in Japan have earned their teaching licenses with their associate degrees (MEXT, 2018b). Thus, I expect that the minimum degree requirement will eventually become more similar to the American standard in the future than they are in the present.

Nevertheless, each educational system reflects each society's ideology and philosophy of education (Kobayashi, 2000). Therefore, I would like to discuss the second issue: the maximum class size and staff-child ratio in preschool (i.e., Benchmarks 7 and 8) with reference to the reports of previous cross-cultural studies.

Famous cross-cultural studies on preschool education (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) have already pointed out that Japanese preschool education assumes that large class size and high staff-child ratio are essential methods for facilitating the social development of contemporary Japanese children who are growing up in isolated environments. These isolated environments mean that contemporary Japanese children spend much time playing with artificial toys such as video games at home, with few (or no) siblings and friends, and little involvement with their relatives and neighbors. According to Japanese preschool educators, children should learn how to get along with others in preschools. If a preschool offers small class sizes and low staff-child ratios to children, they will rely on the teacher for solving their problems because their teachers intervene too often. Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa (2009) reported that "a class size of twenty-five to thirty children with one teacher for children four- and five-years-old" (p. 129) can "support a curriculum that emphasizes children's peer relations, learning to do things as a group, and self-sufficiency in changing clothes and organizing belongings" (p. 129) in Japanese preschools.

However, the Japanese government seems to have begun following the American standard because it has been offering financial incentives to preschools which provide a staff-child ratio of 1:15 (and better) for three-year-old children since 2015 ("Sansaijimuke," 2014). The Japanese government has already started the Comprehensive Support System for Children and Child-rearing since spring 2015 (Cabinet Office, MEXT, & MHLW, 2014). The new system aims to reduce the staff-child ratio in preschools (Muto, 2017). Thus, the Japanese policy will be aligned to the American recommendations for the maximum class size and staff-child ratio (i.e., Benchmarks 7 and 8) in the near future. If the national policy requires a low staff-child ratio, how can a preschool

facilitate the social development of children? Probably, by making a large class with more than one teacher in a class, each preschool will facilitate the social development of children and simultaneously keep a low staff-child ratio.

Why did the Japanese government choose a low staff-child ratio over the traditional educational philosophy of Japanese preschools? I do not know the exact reasons but I found a low staff-child ratio became one of the featured improvements in the Comprehensive Support System for Children and Child-rearing toward the taxpayers who probably prefer individual attention for their own children (or grandchildren) to the traditional educational philosophy of Japanese preschools (See Cabinet Office, MEXT, & MHLW, 2014, p. 4). More than that, I guess that most (if not, many) taxpayers today are not familiar with or well informed on the traditional educational philosophy of Japanese preschools.

I expect that Japanese preschool education policy will eventually be matched more closely with the American standards. Historically, preschool education in Japan has been influenced by foreign educational policies and methods, and almost all of them originated from Western countries (Abumiya, n.d.1). But should we call the current trend a Westernization of preschool education in Japan? Instead of calling it Westernization, I would rather call it a kind of systematization for maximum efficiency. Every country wants to spend its human and material resources for maximum efficiency in education. If educational policies are to be made from such a perspective and countries continue to share information in this increasingly globalized world, it is a matter of course that the answers from every country will become very similar to each other.

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