

Tracing the Development of Japanese Kindergarten Education — Focusing on changes of contents and curriculum —

ODA Yutaka*

Abstract

Education for children in early childhood stresses the importance of play taking into consideration the nature of early childhood. There are many similarities with elementary school education; however, early childhood education has certain unique characteristics different from those of elementary school education. Nevertheless, early childhood education practices are based on school year curriculum and daily lesson plans same as practice of elementary school education. This is the essence of early childhood education that sounds contradictory in terms of placing the significance of planned educational curriculum and unexpected play.

In this paper, I clarify the essence of early childhood education through (1) reexamining the structure of program contents and practice from the historical perspective, and (2) highlighting the effectiveness of curriculum development of the current kindergarten education in Japan.

Introduction

The central goal of Japanese Kindergarten Education is to educate children through play. Unfortunately, not many people other than early childhood educators seem to understand the real intentions of this proposition. Kindergarten education in Japan has a definite curriculum, with content and daily lesson plans, just like the elementary school. In this paper, I examine how Japanese kindergarten education has developed by tracing historical transitions up to the current day.

1. Development of Curriculum Content

(1) From Froebelian Theory to Life-Oriented

The first Kindergarten in Japan was established in 1876, attached to Tokyo Women's Normal School (now Ochanomizu Women's University). Froebel's educational philosophy, whose central theme was the Gifts, was infused into the kindergarten's curriculum. Children at this kindergarten came from upper-class families. The curriculum was teacher-directed and emphasized the so called "3 Rs."

This attached kindergarten became the model for other kindergartens founded at that

* Deputy Director General (次長)

time. The Froebel curriculum became the basis for the contents of the curriculum (called *curriculum subjects*) and guided the development of the curriculum. This curriculum remained the standard until 1899 when the Mombusho (Ministry of Education) enacted the "Regulations for Kindergarten Practices and Settings [Youchien Hoiku oyobi Setsubi Kitei]." The Regulations contained four subjects: play, singing, talking and listening, and fine motor skill. Soon after, "observation" was added, and these five curriculum areas became the "five basic areas of kindergarten education."

These regulations reflected not only the influence of Froebel but also of elementary education. Froebel emphasized play and song; fine motor skills were a central theme of the Gifts. At the same time Kindergartens had a daily schedule that was divided into 30-minute periods like the elementary school (e.g., time for speaking and listening, time for singing, and time for playing and rhythmic activities).

As kindergartens spread across Japan, some early educators began questioning the Froebelian orientation of the kindergarten as well as the elementary-school-like schedule. Among these was Sozo Kurahashi(1882-1955), who had a great impact on the reform of kindergarten. In one well known episode Kurahashi took from a shelf a set of the Gifts, which according to Froebel must be done in a specified order following specific instructions (that must take/follow certain instructions accurately when used), he then mixed them up and converted them into set of simple wooden blocks". Kurahashi, a professor at Tokyo Women's Normal School, became the principal of the attached kindergarten.

Kurahashi's educational philosophy was "everyday-life oriented." He believed that "(teachers/adults) must facilitate children's everyday-life oriented activities, have them enjoy and appreciate everyday life through everyday-life oriented play, and bring them to a high quality of everyday life." Kurahashi insisted that teachers/adults release children from the "frame" (the system) and begin with schooling derived from "children's everyday life." Schooling should be play-oriented. Teachers begin by organizing an environment for children to play in. Then they give instruction for the play activities (for Kurahashi "giving instruction" meant facilitating children's activities--when children request instruction they initiate "teaching"). Kurahashi believed that "giving instructions" involved not teaching children something but preparing for them a place to explore and facilitating their play activities. He developed the *synthetic curriculum*, designed to develop both children's play and teachers' instruction. His ideas are embodied in Keitoteki na Hoikuan (Systematic Kindergarten Practices), which he published in 1935. To Kurahashi can be attributed the structure of the curriculum of Japanese early childhood education.

(2) From Life-Oriented to Subject-Oriented

Because of the efforts of Kurahashi and others, the kindergarten curriculum based on children's everyday life experiences became firmly established, only to be interrupted by World War II--the Kindergarten Abolition Law was enacted in 1944.

The war resulted in many orphans. Life in orphanages was difficult and chaotic. To help

these children, kindergarten that had closed during the war reopened on their own. Under the US occupation forces the Japanese education system was restructured. Chapter 1 of the *School Education Law*, enacted on 1947, reads: "The Japanese school system contains elementary schools, lower secondary schools, upper secondary schools, universities, and kindergartens." For the first time kindergarten was officially part of the public schooling. *The Child Welfare Law* was also enacted, formally recognizing day care centers. These two laws marked the beginning of a split in Japanese early childhood education.

Although kindergarten was officially recognized as a part of public schooling, many did not view it so. In that period only about 20% of children attended kindergartens, and about 7% were at day care centers. The rest stayed at home. To increase awareness of early schooling and the new curriculum, the Mombusho published the *Curriculum for Preschool [Hoiku Yoryo]* in 1948. It was intended not only as a guideline for day care centers and kindergartens but for families to use in their child rearing.

The *Hoiku Yoryo* was developed under the supervision of Helen Heffernan, an officer at the Civil Information and Education Section at General Headquarters. She presented Ohio State's kindergarten education guidelines to the Japanese members of the Committee on Kindergarten Education. They adopted her ideas and adapted the guidelines to Japanese kindergarten education. The Heffernan guidelines described what actually happened in a kindergarten and how children and their teachers lead their everyday lives at kindergarten. The basic idea resembled Kurahashi's "everyday-life orientation." For example, the emphasis on "free-play" or "no schedules" (i.e., do not divide the day into work and play) reflected Kurahashi's efforts to remove the elementary school schedule from kindergarten. Although different in some ways from pre-war guidelines, the new guidelines met the approval of many kindergarten educators.

With the peace treaty in 1951, Japan returned to being an independent country. The efforts to formulate a coherent education system, from kindergarten to upper secondary school, began. The Central Council of Education was established in 1952 to make schooling compulsory in fact and to revise the *Course of Study*, the standards for all schools. Kindergarten was charged to develop its own curriculum guidelines to parallel the elementary school Course of Study. A pilot kindergarten guideline was developed in 1956, but it was not legally binding.

Some, at the time, argued that the guidelines should be called *Yochien Gakushu Shidou Yoryo [Kindergarten Course of Study]*. The title, however, was not adopted. The term *Yochien Kyoiku Yoryo [Kindergarten Curriculum Guideline]* was used reflecting the belief that because young children develop differently from one another and because their developmental stages cannot be regarded as completed, practices should emphasize their natural everyday lives.

The Guidelines that succeeded those established by Kurahashi then Heffernan's maintained the emphasis on everyday-life oriented education. Since the 1956 Guidelines, however, the curriculum has been divided into six areas (health, social, nature, language, music/rhythm, and art/drawing/craft), reflecting the idea that kindergarten is a preparation for elementary education. The new areas contained expression such as "have children do..." or

"make children understand..." These reminded people that the kindergarten curriculum is relevant to elementary education.

The creation of areas made early childhood educators aware of kindergarten's relationship to the elementary school, as the areas reflected the elementary school *Course of Study*. At the same time early childhood educators moved away from Kurahashi's philosophy of constructing a curriculum based on children's everyday life that guided children based on play and theme-based activities. Early childhood educators also began to view the six areas as subjects and to emphasize providing specific activities designed to help children acquire specific knowledge and skills. Although kindergarten educators still paid lip service children's everyday-life oriented activities, by reducing the curriculum into the six areas, they converted the everyday-life oriented curriculum into the subject-oriented curriculum of the elementary school.

2. Current Curriculum Contents

(1) From Subject-Oriented to Activity-Oriented

As Japan grew economically, the number of day care centers and kindergartens increased. People became more aware of early childhood education. The focus became even more on teaching young children knowledge and skills. Teachers attended to children's development by sequencing the activities done by children and stressing simplified theme activities. Describing their activities as "developmental," some kindergartens began teaching elementary school subjects.

Critics of this academic orientation argued that curriculum should return to the everyday-life orientation. They especially criticized the idea of interpreting the six areas as subjects. Their criticisms became part of a public debate. In light of the pressures of high school and university entrance exams, people began to object to the increase in academic direction of kindergartens and day care centers.

In 1962 Mombusho submitted the report *Improving the Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines* to the Curriculum Council. The goal was to make the 1956 pilot *Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines* law. As the Mombusho took responsibility for increasing the number of kindergartens, it intended to examine the kindergarten curriculum, which many kindergarten educators and parents found confusing. Indeed a report of the Curriculum Council stated, "We found that some kindergarten practices were biased against young children." In response to the report, in March 1964, Mombusho made the *Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines* the national standard.

Although not greatly different from the 1956 version, the 1964 *Guidelines* explicitly distinguished the six areas from subjects. Subjects referred, for example, to "curriculum units such as Japanese, Arithmetic, Social Studies, Science, and other subjects provided by schools. Each subject is categorized based on its characteristics and divided developmentally and systematically." The six areas, in contrast, were, "just a summary of the 'goals' for young children's desirable experiences and activities, which would be accomplished through being stimulated, being led, being aware of, learning through the experiences and activities." The

section describing "desirable experiences" in the 1956 version was changed to "desirable goals for instruction." Sections and items in each area were shortened. Many expressions referring to children's feelings and attitudes such as "(children) be interested in..." or "(children) enjoy doing ..." were added.

The 1964 *Guidelines* further stated that "teachers must choose desirable experiences and activities for young children, and implement them in practices." Teachers should select experiences, activities, and instruction needed to accomplish these educational goals. Like the 1956 *Guidelines*, it stressed "goal-oriented or purpose-oriented disposition rather than enjoyable experiences and activities which children choose." While a child-centered philosophy existed and play-oriented activities were developed in kindergarten, the activities were chosen and guided by teachers. For example, the planning section stated, "Kindergarten children must be instructed..." or "(teachers) need to create an instructional plan and to construct a structure for children to have an appropriate experience."

Keeping educational goals and contents in each area maintained the idea of practical instructions in each area. As a result, the curriculum contents were regarded as a single unit of learning and a single theme-based activity on one hand, and on the other hand activity-oriented instruction through whole group activity was acknowledged as a form of instruction.

(2) To Child Initiated Activities

As economic growth accelerated, the economy outpaced education. Increasingly affluent people began to think, "It would be better for us to send our children to a better kindergarten, even if it's far away, instead of to the neighborhood kindergarten."

A third revision of the *Course of Study* occurred in 1970 for elementary school and beyond. The revision focused on "fundamental science education" and introduced "the spiral curriculum." The central idea of the curriculum was that children were able to learn complex material if they are taught in a spiral and systematic way beginning when they are young. Consequently, some kindergartens and day care centers attempted to bring back a subject-oriented curriculum.

Other early childhood educators wanted to revise the *Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines*, which had been changed since 1964. These educators believed that teachers should deal with young children individually, understand each child's characteristics and abilities, and be aware of children's feeling.

People's lives had improved materially but not spiritually. The quest began for ways to develop the quality of practices and to develop the curriculum.

In 1984, the Research Committees on Kindergarten Guidelines conducted a nationwide survey. Based on the survey results, they concluded that "some kindergartens provided inappropriate education that does not follow the original intention of kindergarten education." They criticized kindergarten educators for using the same instruction strategies as elementary school teachers to teach letters and numbers, which, they believed, was incompatible with the fundamental idea of kindergarten education. The committee issued a strong warning against

a subject-oriented curriculum and skill-centered instruction.

This study led to a 1989 revision of the *Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines*, which had not been changed in 25 years. The goal of the revision was to move away from a subject-oriented education to caring for each child's characteristics and capabilities. Moreover, considering that "the basic idea of kindergarten education is to educate young children through their environment," the fundamental theme of the revised standards was to provide suitable everyday life experiences for young children. The aim of kindergarten was defined as "nurturing the emotion, will, and attitude as foundation of a zest for living that is expected to be developed by the time children leave kindergartens." The areas were revised from six to five (health, human relationships, environment, language, expression).

The five areas were considered to be windows through which to view children's development. Development should be understood comprehensively, however, if broken down into areas, these were the areas to examine. In order to improve curriculum design, the 1989 *Guidelines* restated the "items to be noted when designing curriculum" section as follows: kindergarten education is "designed for achieving goals through concrete activities through which children are able to manipulate their environments and be creative." The *Guidelines* marked a change from teacher-directed activities to child-centered activities.

(3) Children's Autonomy and Teachers' Intention

Ironically, preschool teachers had different interpretations of what was meant by "caring for individual children" and "intentional education." Some teachers believed that the "educational intentions" in kindergarten education were in children's hands and developed their practices based on this idea. For example, they believed that classroom structure and activities should be based on children's lead – the teachers were there to provide support. Those situations can be seen sometimes and those unexpected situations by children's lead can be regarded as an important practice once a while. However, in practice a misconception about the meaning of intentional practices spread, (e.g., "Teachers should not teach or give any instruction to children," "Teachers should not tell children what not to do," etc.). It confuses many teachers.

As long as kindergarten education is regulated by School Education Law, preschool teachers should provide intentional education to young children. In order to investigate these misunderstandings, in 1997 the Ministry formed a study group, the "Future Direction of Kindergarten Education Reflecting Social Change." Their report stated, "There is not enough consensus among kindergarten teachers about the structure of the environment and the role of teachers. In order to implement aims of current kindergarten education, more improvement is necessary."

Reflecting this report, the *National Curriculum Standards for Kindergarten Education* were revised in December 1998, as was the *Course of Study* (elementary education and above). Describing the basic idea of kindergarten education, the *Standards* stated that "the environment should be created with the intention of ensuring voluntary activities among

children, based on an understanding and anticipation of the individual actions of each child. Teachers should therefore create a physical and psychological environment that reflects the importance of the relationship between a child and other people and things. Teachers should also play various roles in response to individual child's activities and should strive to make activities more enriching."

It has been some time since Japanese early childhood educators reconsidered the structure of the curriculum—since Kurahashi. Since Kurahashi, the everyday-life oriented curriculum has been a strong tradition. However, contents of the curriculum were not developed based on children's development and a form of instruction was too fluid to make it structural. Even if the contents were structuralized, it would not have been developed based on children's play-oriented everyday activities but subject-oriented ones (implemented at elementary education and above).

For example, curriculum was categorized into two subjects, play and everyday life, or three—play, everyday life, and tasks. In early childhood education, however, activity itself is "play" and "everyday life." So, it is difficult to distinguish between them. In making curriculum contents systematic, we have to avoid making children's play and everyday life-oriented activities meaningless. We have to keep in mind that structuring the curriculum requires keeping an appropriate balance between children's autonomy and teachers' intentions.

Conclusion

In this article, I traced the development of Japanese kindergarten education by focusing on curricular changes. I conclude by describing the current state of the Japanese kindergarten.

In early childhood education in Japan, traditionally, idea of the "autonomy" in children's activities has been supported by preschool teachers' cultural perspectives and values "to work toward educating and rearing young children." However, educators now argue that the fundamental principle of early childhood education is not "to work toward educating and rearing young children" but "to work toward having children develop by themselves." Needless to say, in order to change this fundamental principle, we must shift our thinking on curriculum contents from "knowledge-based (providing what to know)" to "human being-based (providing what to be)." In other words, it is important for us to switch the focus from teachers to children. If we are able to make do that, we can establish a more fertile Japanese early childhood education. To make it happen requires the efforts of all early childhood educators in Japan.

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Author's Note: I wish to thank, for a translation and insightful comments, Riyo KADOTA (Seinan Gakuin University) and Daniel J. WALSH (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign).