



## Pre-Primary Education In Japan: Present Scenario

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### ABSTRACT

Pre-primary education has become popular strategy to protection drop-out from formal education of children all over the world. It has a strong and positive impact on further learning during the primary level and beyond. Pre-primary education is very important for the development of young children before they enter formal school. It helps in cognitive development of children at the early grades of primary education and it has strong bearing on attendance and participation of children once they enter primary school. So, protection drop-out from formal education of child is most necessary for a nation. For this reason pre-primary education is especially important for a nation. This article is about school younger children between the ages of three and five or seven, prior to the start of compulsory education.

In this article I have investigated the role of governments of Japan in pre-primary schooling. The main objective of this paper is to study nature of pre-primary education, infrastructure, target group, curriculum, school activity and relationship among teacher, parents and student in pre-primary sector. This paper focuses how the daily activities and routines of Japanese preschool day constitute an unwritten curriculum for socializing children in the fundamental habits and attitudes of group life in Japan.

**Keywords:** pre-primary education, learning, Japanese, younger children

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Pre-primary education is considered to be very important for the child as it is the first step towards entering the world of knowledge as well as a healthy and purposeful life. This education system helps children become more independent and confident as well as promoting the all round development of the children. Children who have been to pre-primary schools tend to learn more rapidly through an organized curriculum, learning aids and by interacting with other children. The main purpose of pre-primary education is to prepare children physically, emotionally, socially and mentally for formal schooling and to prevent poor performance and early drop out. It also helps older children particularly girls, to attend their schools making them free from responsibility of sibling care. Therefore, early childhood education including pre-primary education is regarded as a necessary area of intervention for the success of primary education.

Most of the Japanese preschool or kindergartens are

privately run, because the compulsory education system does not cover the preschool years. However, according to press reports, the government is currently considering a bill to make preschool or kindergarten compulsory as part of its bid to boost academic skills and discipline of children entering elementary schools.

### Nature of Pre-Primary Education

#### *Yōchien and Hoikuen*

According to the Ministry of Education of Japan more than 70 percent of three-year-olds, more than 80 percent of four-year-olds, and more than 90 percent of five-year-olds attend either Yochien (preschool) or Hoikuen (Day-care/Nursery school).

Yōchien is the Japanese preschool and kindergarten. Under the jurisdiction of the MOE, preschools teach three- to six-year-olds approximately four hours a day.

Nursery schools provide full-time childcare for infants and preschoolers to the age of six whose guardians are unable to take care of them because of work, illness, or other reasons. Nursery schools began as a social welfare program for poor working mothers under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. The local government had examined eligibility and assigned nursery schools before the 1997 Amendment to the Child Welfare Law allowed parents to select nursery schools. As the number of working mothers has risen, more mothers prefer nursery schools to preschools.

Preschools provide two or three years of education for children before they enter elementary school. The first public preschool was affiliated with Tokyo Women's Normal School in 1934. Since the 1960s, the number of private preschools has rapidly grown. Most preschools operate four hours a day and lunchtime, and are finished by around two o'clock. Therefore, the children sent to preschools often have stay-at-home mothers, or working mothers whose relatives, usually a grandparent, can watch the children in the afternoon.

The ratio of enrollment in preschools and nursery schools has changed over the years, as more and more working mothers use nursery schools rather than preschools. Many preschools, especially private ones, are pressured to provide extended childcare hours in order to stay in business. Private preschools, approximately 60 percent of all preschools, receive less public funding than public preschools do, and have to rely primarily on tuition fees from parents.

The average preschool has 23.9 students in a classroom, with 16.2 students per teacher. Some classes have two teachers: a regular teacher and an assistant. Large classes promote interaction, socialization, and group consciousness among children. The assistant teachers help to meet a child's individual needs.

Ninety-four percent of preschool teachers are female; most of them received a teaching certificate from a junior college. They generally remain in the classroom for less than five years, leaving either when they marry or when they have their first child. Recently, however, more preschool teachers have kept teaching because their earnings help the household income. Their salaries

are decent, and the social prestige of being a preschool teacher is relatively high among female workers. Many female students wish to become a preschool teacher.

Japanese preschool education is child-centered and based upon the principle of "whole person education," which focuses on social and emotional development, friendship and responsibility. The 1989 Course of Study for Preschool changed preschool education pedagogy from planned classroom teaching into child-centered education with minimal intervention from teachers. Children learn social skills through playing, while teachers create optimal environments for their development, and monitor their activities. Many preschool teachers were initially confused by this hands-off policy.

### Curriculum and School Activity

The curriculum of Japanese preschools is contained in the structure and routine of the school day itself. Most Japanese preschools are in session between 235 and 239 days a year recommended by the MOE. Preschools are in session six days a week, including Saturday. Children enrolled in preschool attend every day that it is in session, unless they are sick. The 1986 Monbusho survey asked preschools to choose the seven activities to which they attached the most importance. The seven most commonly chosen, in descending order of popularity, were activities using Rotated Monitors, Annual Sports Day, Pretend Play, Sand Play, Making Things, Picture books, and Cultivating Plants. Other activities chosen as important were playing with ball, playing in a swimming pool, sharing time, talking with friends, playing with seeds, leaves, and insects and all school assemblies. These activities are typical of virtually all Japanese preschools, even if they are not among the seven considered most important by any particular preschool.

The beginning and end of each daily activity typically involves a brief formal ritual, during which the children stand in assigned places, assume a predetermined and immobile body position, and recite or sing unison a brief, situationally appropriate expression of sentiments.

### Showing general timetable of a day at pre-school in Japan

Arrival of Teachers at Pre-school	8:00~8:30
Arrival of Student at Pre-school	8:30~9:00
Morning Play Period	9:00~10:00
Cleanup and Setting up the Room	10:00~10:15
Morning Greetings	10:15~10:30
1 <sup>st</sup> Group Activity period	10:30~11:15
2 <sup>nd</sup> Group Activity period	11:15~12:00
School Lunch	12:00~12:30
Play	12:30~1:15
Cleanup Campaign and Setting up	1:15~1:45
End of School Hours	1:45

Every morning, the teachers are the first to reach the preschool, usually arriving between 8:00 and 8:30 A.M. to prepare classroom and day's materials. Children begin arriving at preschool between 8:30 and 9:00 A.M. hand in hand with their mothers or riding in a child's seat on the back of mother's bicycle. Teachers then move to school entrance to greet the arriving children and their mothers.

Proper greetings are an important part of Japanese preschool curriculum. A polite greeting is more than a smile of welcome or a friendly hello. A proper greeting must follow a ritual format. As child and mother come within speaking distance of the teacher in the morning, they make the first move. Coming to a full halt with both feet together and hands in front child and mother bow, inclining their heads from three to six inches, and loudly announce, in standard formal language, *sensei ohayo gozaimasu* (good morning, Teacher). The child has now officially arrived at school. The teacher smiles in recognition and returns the greeting and bow, saying *ohayo gozaimasu* to the mother and child collectively.

The child proceeds to the classroom to put away his belongings and change clothes. After removing and hanging up his traveling smock, shoulder bag and play hat he puts on his play smock and play hat. After three to six months of school, children become able to accomplish this transition quickly and efficiently, with virtually no assistance from the teacher. Changing into appropriate clothing and organizing materials

immediately on arrival is one of the many basic habits of daily life that Japanese preschool take great pains to inculcate in students. Changing clothes on arrival at school reinforces the symbolic distinction between the outside world and the group life of the institution and ensures that all participants are properly organized for the activities of the day.

The morning play period lasts from the time the child has finished changing clothes and organizing his belongings until roughly 10:00 A.M. Children are encouraged to play outdoors during all seasons and all weather except heavy rain. Children of all ages and both boys and girls enjoy playing on the swings, jungle gym, and bars. Girls also play traditional line and circle singing games, boys enjoy playing with cars and trucks and building roads in sandy dirt. Running, shouting, and mock dueling games are also extremely popular.

The goal of the play period is not to stimulate intellectual or social development through guided play. Rather, its main goal is to foster enjoyment of play for its own sake, and secondary goal is to provide experience in social interaction.

The play period draws to a close as teachers quietly remark to the children around them that is time to start picking up the toys. Cleanup activity gradually spread, and teachers move about, encouraging individual children and assisting cleanup jobs. Until the children become able to pick up the school area and classroom on their own, teachers assume an active role in cleanup. Usually, the teacher formally arrives and begins the lesson after this step is completed.

As soon as the room is setup, the teacher begins to play a melody at the piano, the signal for the students to hurry to their seats. This melody is the same every day of the year, and also the same in all classes in a given school. Once everyone is seated, the music changes to the introduction to the morning hello song. During morning announcements the teacher briefly describes the plan for the day.

At about 10:30 A.M. immediately following the announcements, a thirty or forty five minute group activity period begins. The specific nature of the activity varies from day to day, but invariably it involves the

entire class. Activities requiring desks and paper are common, such as doing origami, drawing pictures or making materials for upcoming school projects. In the activity period children are encouraged to participate, and instructions are addressed to the class as a whole.

At about 11:45 A.M. the teacher remarks to the children near that it is almost time for lunch. Children pick up the toys and materials used during the activity period, encouraged by the teacher's instructions. They are supposed to use the toilet, if necessary, and wash their hands before readying their things for lunch. As the lunch time approaches, each child takes his lunch box from his shoulder bag, removes the chopsticks from their box and places them horizontally in front of him. He must arrange the box, chopsticks, and other assorted pieces properly on the desk in front of him. In Japan eating together is an important occasion for social interaction. A great deal of care is taken to ensure that each person eats identical food, so mutuality and common preference are affirmed. Before taking meals they say *sensei, itadakimasu*. After finishing lunch, each child expected to incline his head briefly and recite *gochisosamadeshita*. Lunch is a significant part of the preschool curriculum. It is much more than merely a chance to eat or even to chat socially with friends. It constitutes a valuable lesson in basic daily habits and the customs of Japanese group life.

After lunch and brushing their teeth, children play for thirty to forty-five minutes. At about 1:15 P.M. another cleanup campaign is begun. The teacher sweeps the remnants of lunch from the floor as the children move the chairs into a line and stack the tables against the walls. They then change from their play uniforms into their traveling uniforms. By this time it is usually 1:45 P.M. All children have taken their seats, the teacher engages them for five to ten minutes focused content oriented group activity, ranging from telling stories from picture cards to playing clapping and listening games.

### Role of Teachers and Parents

Preschool teachers are usually young women in their twenties. Ministry of Education statistics show that in 1986, 99.6 percent of preschool teachers were women. The average age was twenty-seven years and almost half

were under the age of twenty-five. Preschool teaching in Japan is a relatively prestigious job for young women. The salary is comparable to that received by collage educated women elsewhere in the economy. It is the third most popular course of study at the junior-college level, after literature and home economics. It attracts energetic, confident, middle-class and upper middleclass young women who typically devote themselves to teaching until they retire from outside employment when their first child is born. With rare exceptions, they are well educated, cheerful, and self-possessed in their approach to children.

Japanese preschool teachers have an above-average education and must pass a certification exam to be qualified as a teacher. Most of the teachers have a junior-college diploma. These teachers have all majored in preschool and early education and have passed a prefectural certification examination. Japanese preschool teachers work an eight or nine hour day, arriving at school at about 8:00 A.M and leaving for home between 4:00 and 5:00 P.M. In most cases there is only one teacher for each classroom. Legally forty children may be assigned to a single class, although the national average is about twenty eight children per class.

In interactions with each other Japanese teachers are remarkably positive, supportive, and industrious. After the children have left for the day, the atmosphere in the teachers' room is one of girlish high spirits and sisterly companionship. Despite the friendliness of the teachers' relationships with each other, however, there is a subtle hierarchy within a group. Each teacher differs to her colleagues with one or two years more teaching experience, who in turn gives advice and assistance to the younger ones.

Mothers in Japanese preschools play an extremely important and time-consuming supporting role. Japanese mothers never work in the classroom as instructional aides or assistant teachers. In fact, mothers avoid entering the classroom while class is in session except on carefully planned observation days for parents.

Although not present in the classroom, mothers are expected to be active in preschool-related activities. All

are expected to participate in monthly parent-teacher association (PTA) meetings and various rotating work groups. In addition to organized group activities, mothers of children enrolled in Japanese preschools must devote time to assisting their child in various ways each school day. All preschools required each mother personally to bring her child to the preschools gate and return for him in the afternoon. Laundered uniform each day, at least four times a week mothers were expected to awaken early in order to pack a nutritionally balanced attractively prepared lunch box.

## CONCLUSION

We can conclude that, the aim of the preschool education as to encourage children to develop self-confidence and self-esteem and to feel valued as an individual. To promote children's social, intellectual and physical development through play and structured activities, preparing them for a smooth transition from pre-school to school.

It is clear that the pre-primary experience teaches Japanese children the basic principles of social interaction that govern classroom and later public life. In the process they internalize the standards of group attitudes and behavior that make the member of Japanese society. In the field of education and human development, Japanese children's transition from home to preschool life is an important window on the acquisition of Japanese culture.

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