

Exploration of the Early Childhood Care and Education Provided in Kindergartens in Japan

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Abstract - This study tends to shed light on early childhood care and education (ECCE) institutions with special reference to kindergartens in Fukuoka, Japan. The choice of the topic for study was derived by the importance of ECCE in children's life and huge economic growth of Japan after worst effects of world war-II, which are thought to be linked with the education that children receives in Japan. The study is limited to four kindergartens in Fukuoka City and observations made for the study refers to 2018. Herein, different types of institutions providing ECCE, their infrastructural set-up, activities, along with curriculum are discussed. At the end, issues and challenges of ECCE system in Japan are discussed. It has been observed that the infrastructural facility and nature of activities are of high quality. Each and every care is being taken to inculcate habits, as well as to maintain physical and intellectual growth of children. The children seem to be highly happy and enjoy learning via various activities in these schools. It is clear that the devised policies on education and care of children are implemented in full spirit.

Keywords: Education, Quality, Children, Infrastructure

I. INTRODUCTION

Japan has emerged as one of the developed economy and technologically advanced country (The World Bank, 2018) during last 60 years. After the worst effects of world war-II, the growth of Japan has taken place at tremendous pace. Despite having a small habitable area of 378000 km² (Geospatial Information Authority of Japan, 2018), small population of 127 million with a marginal area under cultivation (13%) (OECD, 2009), Japan has managed to achieve the top ranked positions in various disciplines at global level. Obviously, among various factors, education is considered as a key factor that has played a very important role in producing worthy human capital, required for such growth and development. As per the then Director-General, UNESCO (UNESCO, 2012), Irina Bokova, "The equation is simple: education is the most basic insurance against poverty. Education represents opportunity. At all ages, it empowers people with the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to shape a better future."

Among different stages of education, the care and education provided to children in their early years of life is very important as it exerts long lasting impact on children's life. Therefore, the concept of early childhood care and education (ECCE) has become a policy matter in many of the developing and all of the developed countries. ECCE is

defined as the education and care provided to children from birth to 8 years of age (UNESCO, 2012), for their holistic growth. UNESCO defines ECCE as "a range of processes and mechanisms that sustain and support development during the early years of life: it encompasses education, physical, social and emotional care, intellectual stimulation, health care and nutrition. It also includes the support a family and community need to promote children's healthy development" (UNESCO, 2012, p.4).

There are many studies which established the importance of ECCE in children's life that has a long lasting impact and during which, maximal intellectual growth of children takes place and foundations of personal and social health are laid down (NCERT, 2005). The importance of ECCE lies in the fact that it imparts various benefits to children that includes but are not limited to physical and mental well-being (Rao & Pearson, 2009), socialization, (Burger, 2010; Linberg, Baeumer & Rossbach, 2013), reduced adjustment and behavioural problems (Raver et al., 2009; Powell et al., 2010), preparation for schooling (UNESCO, 2008; Ohara, 2013), minimising dropout rate (Chaudhary, 2006) in subsequent schooling, ability to co-operate and exposure to diversity (Janelidze, A. 2014), confidence and self-esteem (Troshikhina&Manukyan, 2016). Even better economic return of a country has been found to be correlated with quality of ECCE provided to children (Heckman, J. J. 2006). Further, to achieve the millennium development goals (MDGs), providing high quality ECCE to children seems to be most important and necessary step (MDG, 2017). Japan has attained the rank of one of the developed nations of globe and it is non-deniable that ECCE system (policies, implementation and commitment) prevailing in Japan has played a major role in achieving those goals (NIER 2009). The strength of Japanese education system can be judged from their ranking obtained in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in the subjects of Maths, Science and Reading, where Japan ranked ahead of USA, Netherlands and many other developed countries (PISA 2012). Similarly, a mortality rate of 2 for the children under 5 speaks about the prevalence of a strong ECCE system in Japan (The World Bank, 2018^a).

The success of ECCE system in any country depends on many factors that include commitment of government, society and staff along with social and economic set up of

the country. On the other hand, these criteria of economy, society and quality education seems to be interrelated to each other. Therefore, it is worthy to mention that provisions of quality education at different stages, beginning from ECCE, are a key to growth and development of any country. Going along with the above introduction, it is imperative to shed light on ECCE system in Japan in terms of certain quality parameters such as infrastructure (physical and activity materials), teacher-child ratio, teacher qualification and curriculum etc., which prevails across kindergartens. At the end, issues and challenges faced by ECCE system in Japan would be discussed and based on the observations, futuristic provisions for ECCE in India are provided.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the present study is to shed light on ECCE provided by kindergartens in Japan in light of certain quality parameters that affect the outcome of ECCE. The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To describe general set-up of ECCE in Japan.
2. To evaluate infrastructural facilities and teacher-child ratio.
3. To describe and analyse the daily schedule of kindergartens.
4. To describe and discuss about indoor and outdoor equipment.
5. To explore the curriculum of ECCE centres in Japan.
6. To illustrate the challenges and discuss futuristic provisions of ECCE in Japan.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present work deals with the quality of ECCE in Japan based on certain parameters. To gain an insight, the published literature by different agencies and researchers was considered. Further, to get concrete inputs about different ECCE provisions in Japan, activities, infrastructure, and teacher-child ratio in 04 kindergartens that also impart ECCE to children aged between 0-3 years, in Fukuoka, Japan, is discussed. Some of the data in this regard was collected from the respected websites of these kindergartens. The selection of schools was made by lottery method, two each from public and private sector.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. General Information about ECCE in Japan

The period from birth to 6 years of age is considered for ECCE in Japan (NIER 2009), after which the formal schooling starts. There are three main types of institutions that provide ECCE: (i) kindergartens, (ii) day nurseries and (iii) ECCE centres. These institutions are being run privately as well as publicly. However, the number of private institutions surpassed the public one with the exception of day care centres. The target age of children to provide ECCE is 0-5 years in day nurseries and ECCE centres,

whereas kindergartens accept the children in the age of 3-5 years. Many of the kindergartens are also running nurseries for children between 0-3 years of age. It is important to mention that an adequate number (21%) of children at the age of 1 are enrolled in day care nurseries, whose number increases with age (NIER 2009). All of these centres although governed by different ministries (NIER 2009), however, adopt similar standards for methods and content of ECCE, which naturally would maintain the quality.

Besides these institutions, alternative types of ECCE services also exist. Family day-care, where a so-called "nursing mother" looks after infants at her home, are being operated using the public spending and municipal budgets have been allocated. There also exist other non-formal ECCE programmes that are provided by non-profit organizations and local governments at children's centres, community centres (kominkan) or play parks.

The application for admission in day care nurseries and ECCE centres is considered by the municipalities based on the need of child care specifically to children aged between 0-3 years of age. For example, if both mother and father of a child are working, the child is considered to have immense need of ECCE and is given priority in admission. Similarly, the fee is generally decided by the concerned department from local municipality based on the income of the family (Hay, 2008). Further, a discount in tuition fee is provided for the second child and administration provides total day care tuition fee for the third child.

B. Infrastructure and Student Teacher Ratio of Nursery Schools

Both, the physical infrastructure (Fenech, 2011) and teacher-child ratio (Perlman, Fletcher, Falenchuk, Brunsek, McMullen, & Shah, 2017) are among the indicators reflecting the quality of ECCE. A large outdoor space and materials for play activities are found to be available. The presence of open space in line with nature makes it very attractive to children where they learn the things.

As can be seen from Table I, the study and play rooms are well organized and children seem to be very happy but disciplined over there. Table I summarises the infrastructure in different public and private day care nurseries and kindergartens. In general, all the nurseries have well maintained rooms with plenty of activity material.

The rooms are spacious enough so that children can enjoy their learning and other activities. The presence of large cooking area (on average 35 m²), which is highly clean and disinfected on routine basis, is observed. Other basic facilities such as play rooms, book corners, and small gardens for kids where they try to cultivate the things along with adequate number of toilets are available in all schools. The basic facilities to counter the adverse weather conditions such as air conditioners, shades etc. are available. Besides this, nap room with very clean bedding, which is

generally disinfected by the staff on routine basis is available.

TABLE I DIFFERENT INFRASTRUCTURAL COMPONENTS OF KINDERGARTENS CONSIDERED FOR THIS STUDY

	Public		Private	
	School-1	School-2	School-1	School-2
Number of Pupils	100	220	152	160
Total Area (m ²)	1106	1911	1192	1447
Total Floor area (m ²)	584	1547	1152	1108
Cooking Room Area (m ²)	30	35	37	42
Number/Area of Play Rooms (m ²)	04/182	06/350	06/369	05/355
Baby room available	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Book Corner available	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outdoor play area (m ²)	380	350	364	270
No. of Toilets	02	05	07	04
Multipurpose hall	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table I shows the comparison of number of students, teachers and student teacher ratio observed in different schools along with the national average student-teacher ratio. Lower child-staff ratio, referring to a smaller number of children per staff, have been established to enhance the quality of ECEC quality, which promotes the all-around developmental of children (Huntsman, 2008 & Torquati et al., 2007).

In the study, the child-teacher ratio is found to lie close to 8, which is very much in line with the national average in Japan and average of OECD countries (Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2012). However, it is observed that for the children aged below 3 years, the student teacher-ratio depends on the age of children and is far better than that is observed in case of children between 3- 5 years of age (Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2012). For example, for children of 1 years of age, a student-teacher ratio of 3 is observed, which increases with the age of children. Beside the child-minders, to accomplish the provision of food, on average 01 cook/ 25 children was recruited, whose main responsibility is cook food/snacks as per the school menu. The other staffs is the temporary doctor in each kindergarten, who visits the kindergarten daily for a specific period of time and on specific days for complete health check-up of children and remains available on call from the school authorities.

C. Daily Schedule of Kindergartens

Not only all of the visited kindergartens, in general almost all of the kindergartens in Fukuoka, follow more or less similar daily routine, however there may be an interchange of timings between different activities. The day at most of

the kindergartens starts at 7.00 with sequential entry and exchange of greetings between children and care takers. Most of the children greet the staff and almost all of the children between 1-3 years respond to the greetings of the staff. Such exchange of greetings establishes a healthy teacher-child relationship, which has been shown to have positives effects on child learning and growth (Chong, Huan, Quek, Yeo, & Ang, 2010). This also enhances teacher-child interaction needed for imparting best of the opportunities available at the kindergarten to children. The children follow the concept of sequential entry into the school that not only make them disciplined but also imbibe them with the habit to follow rules. It is natural to assume that such habits goes life long and the Japanese adults have been observed to break rules and customs at public places, very rarely. Morning greetings and sequential entry is followed by health check-up, after which, the children are provided free time to play with their peers as per their age. In some institutions, health check is being scheduled later in the evening. Daily health check and hygiene habits among children itself speaks about children's care in Japan.

A general morning gathering is scheduled around 9.00. Between 9.00 and 10.00, depending on the age of children, different play activities such as gymnastics, athletics, rhythm play, touching play, hand playing, and outdoor play of choice of children are scheduled. During the same period, the younger children, below 3 years of age, are provided with basic skills about life-style habits that include but are not limited to personal hygiene, toilet habits and hand washing, wearing clothes, wearing and keeping shoes at appropriate places etc. The kids above 3 years of age are taught moral values during the same period. The childhood is the most important phase of life. Different play activities help in developing motor skills, physical development and of course cognitive development via play. The acceptance of basic life-style habits by children is visible beyond school. Children use to keep their shoes in a proper way even when they visit their friend's home. Even at home, children use to wash hands before and after meal even when their parent doesn't ask them to do so. Further they avoid bare hands to touch the food. It is thought that with such a imbue ment of hygiene habits in their children, Japan has managed to be among highly hygienic countries around the globe despite of its high population density (Martineau, 2018).

After 10.00 hrs, childcare according to the age is provided, whereas a meal is prepared and served to the children between 11.00 hrs to 12.00 noon. This is followed by handwashing and changing of clothes and kids below 3 years of age are set for a nap for until 14.30 hrs. During the lunch time, every child is being cared and taught eating manners. Even if some children don't take lunch appropriately, they are provided with some school made snacks later, if available. The care of children is the foremost priority in Japanese ECCE. The following conversation between school staff and one of the friends of author will shed light on this. One day, Mr. X (father of a

child going to kindergarten in Fukuoka) got a call from school staff around 15.00 hrs. The staff said, “Your child is saying ‘Mujhe Khana Chahiye’ (I want to eat something), we can’t understand what he wants to say? Mr. X replied, “He is asking for food”. In reply, school staff said, “Your child did not take lunch and snacks today despite being asked many times to take it along with other children, why? Mr. X replied, “He took a heavy breakfast at home, and this might be the reason for his refusal to lunch”. The school staff got the point and said, “Well, we cook fresh food and snacks for kids and now we can’t provide him fresh food, so you please take your ward home and let him eat so that he must not remain hungry for a long time”. It was an amazing experience of care of a child for Mr. X.

During the same time *i.e.* between 12.00 to 14.30 hrs, an appropriate child care is provided to children aged above 3 years. All the children are provided with snacks around 15.00 hrs followed by hand washing. Around 16.00 hrs, return gatherings are concluded and health check-ups are made. After that children are involved in free play, singing, reading picture-story books, picture books, and outdoor play followed by a sequential pick up at 18.00 hrs by their parents/guardians. The nurseries which provide extended day care of one hour to children provide extra snacks to children and keep them engaged in learning while playing. Extended day care is provided on request by the parents when the work timings of both father and mother go beyond the normal timings of school.

D. Activity materials and Outdoor Equipment

Both indoor and outdoor activities are performed at kindergartens for all-round development of children. The indoor activities include free-hand drawing and colouring, painting without the use of any support measures such as stencils or other tools. This practice increases the hand-eye-brain coordination of children. For cognitive development, various other activities such as colour recognition with balloons, and number recognition via different fun games that involve snacks and other eatables as rewards for winning, are organized. Children use to know about modes of transport via indoor activities whereas they are taken out of school for real-time experiences by the school staff. On the route, they are made aware about the rules to cross the traffic signals.

Children younger than the age of 2 are used to taken out in hand-driven lorry. Children indulge in various creative activities such as paper craft, craft from trash and stacking boxes along with participation in problem solving activities such as puzzles etc. Such type of activities certainly supports the cognitive health of children. Besides this, certain indoor gross-motor activities for children are organized.

The outdoor activities involve the catching of ball, touch play, children friendly wall-climbing, sliders and climb and walk on the net. This not only helps in physical

development of children but at the same time take care of their cognitive skills. It is important to mention that some small nurseries, that are not having enough outdoor space, use to take the children out in the public children parks having a variety of equipment for physical activity. Besides this, a variety of other activities, in close association with nature, are arranged for the children. These activities include but are not limited to mountain climbing, contact with local people, (Fureai Salon), pool play, seeing of migratory birds and sea side creatures, puppet show, gardening (sowing and digging of potatoes), different exercise programme for children as per their age, walking through parks in search of good things and drum playing etc. At the beginning of session, each kindergarten displays the activity schedule for the session. Major activities are mentioned to be performed in different months. Importantly, children are being taught with the evacuation procedures in time of emergency by organizing evacuation drills from time to time.

E. Curriculum

The curriculum for pre-primary education in Japan has remained under continuous upgradation as per the needs starting from the beginning of Meiji era (1862) (Nanakida, 2014). The Heisei Period (1989–) has witnessed many upgradations to curriculum for pre-primary education. “Nursery Childcare Guidance” (1999) clarified childcare functions as forms of the support of child rearing: “In view of the environmental changes surrounding children, nurseries should be combined in consultation with a discussion of childcare problems for better the support of child rearing so as to meet current social demands with more guidance” (as prescribed in Chap. 1: General Provisions: Preamble). Going with this, the curriculum described in the form of “Kindergarten Education Essentials (MEXT, 2008) and “Nursery Childcare Guidance” was revised for the fourth and third time, respectively. Despite the drastic changes in the newly added contents compared with previous versions, the text still retained the same primary childcare content fields and the “integration of care and education” in terms of childcare and development theory.

In general, for the children between 0-3 years of age, there is no fixed area for care and education. However, both intellectual development and emotional/social development of the children is emphasized along with their physical development. On the other hand, health, human-relationships, environment, language, and expression are prescribed for 4 to 6 year-olds. Besides this, kindergarten education includes play, singing songs, observation, hearing and speaking, handicrafts, and so on, so that every kindergarten could decide its own educational content and practices. These subjects were treated like subjects in primary schools in some kindergartens. The special instruction aimed at the acquisition of literacy or numeracy is rarely seen, but such competencies are developed through play or activities with peers on the basis of the emotional

stability of the group (NIER 2011). Emphasis is also given to independence in basic and necessary life habits. Teachers give instruction not only for specific activities but also during children's playtime and in other aspects of their lives. However, instruction is not provided in the form of order from above; rather, suggestions and advice are given in order to foster the children's initiative, and materials are placed in the room so that children will naturally want to play.

With respect to basic life skills, the children learn how to brush their teeth after lunch, development of toilet habits and change their clothes. The classroom activities increase with increase in age of children. Many kindergartens provide English lessons via a native English-speaker (one/week for 04 and 05 years old). During the school festival, the children perform plays in English. Besides this, for the children between 4 and 5 years of age, one dance lesson per week and a brass band class once a month is scheduled. In addition to this, computed skills are provided to 5 year old children.

In Japan, educational content and teaching methods differ greatly in early childhood education and in primary school education. First grade children often have trouble coping with change and gaps at the beginning of their school life, cannot concentrate on learning, and have difficulty listening to instructions. It has been called the "first grader problem" in Japan, and primary schools, day nurseries, and kindergartens need to work together to ensure consistency in education, and need to gain a deeper understanding of teaching methods and the performance of pre-schoolers and school children.

The new "Fundamental Law of Education" (2006) stipulated the importance of ECEC and supporting parents, and the amendment of the "School Education Law" (2007) positioned ECEC at the first stage of organized national schooling for the first time (MEXT, 2007). According to these laws, the Division of Kindergarten Education in MEXT was reorganized to be the Division of ECE (Early Childhood Education), for the purpose of bearing the responsibility of nationwide early childhood education from ages 3 to 5.

The new ECEC Curriculum Standards were also published after the overall coordination, at the same time in 2008 by MEXT and MHWL respectively ("National Curriculum Standards for Kindergartens" and "Guidelines for Nursery Care at Day care Centers"), guaranteeing that all pre-schoolers ages 3 to 5 shall enjoy the same quality of education in order to make good foundation for lifelong learning.

F. Challenges and Futuristic Provisions of ECCE in Japan

The ECCE system in Japan seems to be of high quality. However, with the passage of time and socio-economical changes, the system faces challenges which must be

responded to maintain the quality of ECCE. Japan has transformed from an agrarian society to information society via industrial society, having participation of both parents in work. This reduces the time that parents may interact with their children. Therefore, ECCE system must be amended in relation to family education capacity and regional social education capacity. Another problem is reduced birth rate despite the efforts by the government to support child rearing in terms of finances, vaccination and other support, and hence for "the healthy growth of future children", it is necessary to fundamentally adjust the entire development orientation of kindergarten education. The ECCE education system may be upgraded as modern facility based institutions in close association with parents, family's education capacity, regional society, and kindergartens. The functions of society and parents to assist children in their initial development should be further upgraded as an educational model based on exemplary demonstration.

V. CONCLUSION

The kindergartens are located in safe and healthy environment with adequate indoor and outdoor space. The activity materials inside the rooms are age appropriate and outdoor play gardens are well maintained with a facility of toilet and nap. The student-staff ratio falls around 8, which is very close to the national average. Well qualified staff as per the national laws and policies is recruited, who rate their work as most important. The nursery teacher maintains a contact book and meets parents of every child each day for a while in order to know the physical and mental state of mind at home and also observed carefully the respective state of child at nursery and keep the record in contact book. Issues about family raising and troubles at home are also discussed. Childcare and education is provided as per the age of children where young children are let to learn through group experience, life play, vegetable harvesting and excursions etc. Net knitting at the sea side is an example where children involve themselves physically and mentally required for their growth. Throughout the year, various events for kids such as athletic meets, birthday parties, competitions, are organized for children. The children are provided with the adequate knowledge about cleanliness, hygiene, changing clothes, and toileting etc. Eating habits nurtured in children don't only include holding the chopsticks, and using handkerchiefs, however gratitude towards food is developed among children. The basic menu of school is fixed every month as per the availability of the fresh vegetables and other stuff available during that time and care is being taken to provide food to children who have allergic complaints. During snacks, generally handmade snacks are provided considering the nutritional value. Small cooking classes are arranged to develop children's interest in food. Besides the general child care, extended childcare and childcare for disabled children is also provided in most of the nurseries. It is important to

mention that the fee for nursery is not fixed by the school however it is fixed by the concerned municipality depending on the income of the family, number of siblings and number of sibling obtaining education.

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