Exploring *kyōiku*: Children's educational experiences in Japanese kindergartens

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This study addresses children's *Kyōiku* (education) as it is explored by two kindergartens in Japan. It reports how the teachers, parents and children defined and experienced children's education and draws on the sociocultural concepts to understand their perspectives. Situated in the personal, educational, and sociocultural landscape of the educational environment, the analysis foregrounds a lens to identify the influences on children's education. The focus on children's education in this study enables the threads of different perspectives within the fabric of the kindergartens and Japanese contexts to be shared. The findings reveal that theorising about children's education invites scholarship that takes as axiomatic the complexity and distinctiveness of individual children, their families and the Japanese social and cultural dynamics.

Introduction

Over the past decades, early childhood education in Japan has gradually moved from homes to early childhood services and the national curriculum for kindergartens presents a clear view of education that focuses on play, learning activities and children's individual characteristics (Guo, Kuramochi & Huang, 2017; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan, 2008). While previous research has increasingly informed us of Japanese early childhood education (Burke, 2008; Chesty, 2011; Yamamoto, 2016), the knowledge has not been specifically gained from the collective accounts of children, families and teachers. To address this, a qualitative study was carried out in two Japanese kindergartens with four teachers, 113 parents and 24 children on their views of children's *kyōiku*, or educational experience, which consists of everything they see as part of children's learning and development. The study positions *kyōiku* in the context of the kindergartens by understanding the concept as an assemblage of individual, family and sociocultural discourses. The aims of the study were to:

- elicit Japanese kindergarten teachers, Japanese parents and Japanese young children's views of *kyōiku* in early childhood years;
- understand the role of young children as learners within individual, family and sociocultural discourses.

Background

Early childhood education in Japan concerns education and care of children aged from birth to six and it aims to create "a whole human being and human characteristics (Yamamoto, 2016, p.79). Young children's education and care came into focus during the

Meiji Era (1869-1912) when the first kindergarten was established under the influence of Frobel's idea of gifts and occupations (Burke, 2008). This was closely followed by the opening of a childcare centre. Since then, a series of foreign perspectives, including child-centred education from America, ideas of Dewey and Montessori, nursing theory from the Soviet Union, and the Reggio approach were adopted and adapted to conform with the Japanese context (Hellman, 2016). Burke (2008) saw the development of Japanese early childhood education as an example of actions that "reflect the prevailing social conditions" (p.138). Throughout this period, the dominant ideologies have regarded early childhood education as a core socialisation agent for young children, with an associated belief that it met the social needs of society.

The two main institutions of early childhood education, namely *yochien* (kindergarten) and *hoikuen* (childcare) were initially operated differently with kindergartens serving the needs of children's education and childcare centres providing childcare services (Chesty, 2011). In 1999, the Japanese Ministry of Education and Ministry of Welfare established a position that care and education were unified. The idea of *hoiku* (care and education) was adopted in early childhood education, and teaching practices and learning programs relied heavily on it (Chesty, 2011).

However, it has been argued that although it was the Japanese government who officialised *hoiku*, the predominant ideology underpinning early childhood programs has always been the integration of care and education (Chesty, 2011). This perspective has been reflected by the idea that "the focus in Japanese early education is on a robust vision of the whole child, where much is made of the educational experience as shaping the totality of the person" (Hoffman, 2000, p. 201). According to Yamamoto (2016), early childhood education in Japan "means everything, such as creating a whole human being and human characteristics" (p. 79). For this reason, it is understood that children's learning is a multifaceted concept with many possible ways to express it (Izumi-Taylor & Rogers, 2016).

This broad-minded approach to education, or in other words, a whole child idea, has been sustained by the longstanding tradition of *care* in Japan which tends to depict the image of children in favour of emphasising the social responsibilities of Japanese citizens (Hellman, 2016). The vision of *care* in Japanese early childhood education encompasses three facets: "take care of one self, take care of the preschool space and care for others" (p. 1693). The notion of care traditionally being positioned in the learning discourse of young Japanese children is also supported by the belief in "the good child identity which assumes that all children are basically good and should be given ample opportunities, both within the family and outside it, to reinforce this positive self-image" (Burke, 2008, p. 150). Learning to care is thought to be the primary means to achieve this image for young children.

Previous research has elucidated the way in which *care* underlies the socialisation in Japanese young children, demonstrating how "care [is discussed] in relation to respect and responsibility as well as in relation to showing concerns for other people's perspectives" (Hellman, 2016, p. 1696). Consistent with a care constructed learning theme, early childhood education in Japan privileges *respect* as a mode of learning, and on *responsibility* as

a means to promote the vision of a caring child (Chesky & Yochien, 2011; Hellman, 2016). In much the same way, Hayashi and Tobin (2015) reported a remarkable pedagogical approach they noticed in Japanese preschools: *mimamoru*, watching and guarding or "a low-intervention approach [of teaching] in children's dispute" (p.17) and explained this as teachers' intention to respect children and give children an opportunity to be responsible for their own problems.

More centrally, the key early childhood practice that supports the social aspect of children's development is a group-based curriculum (Izumi-Taylor, 2013). This comes from a belief that families "are raising their children in a social milieu that is increasingly anomic and that lacks opportunities for children to interact spontaneously with each other or with adults other than their parents" (Burke, 2008, p. 137). The classification of *uchi* and *soto*, *inside* and *outside* or *home* and *school/community* in English, provides another impetus for the ideas underling the importance of children's socialisation in out-of-home groups. In Japanese society, the distinction between *uchi* and *soto* has clear borders. As Burke (2008) described, "the home is the private, intimate arena in which one can relax… However, in the *soto* one must learn to assume a genial and cooperative public persona, in which individual feelings and desires must be subjugated to the harmony and activities of the group" (p. 140). On the back of group learning, children's ability to "live their lives cooperating with and helping one another" is particularly important (Aspinall, 2016, p.141; Hellman, 2016).

In addition, implicit in the recognition of *group* in the context of early childhood education is also an acknowledgment that young children do not have an inborn ability to play with others and participating in groups provides them with important learning experiences (Izumi-Taylor, 2013). According to Aspinall (2016), learning in groups has always been a central feature of Japanese early childhood education and this is one of the most remarkable ways that Japanese teachers teach children to learn. In doing so, a major goal is to "get children to adopt group norms in public spaces" (Hellman, 2016, p. 1698).

The commitment to children's play is another remarkable feature of Japanese early childhood education. According to researchers, play promotes a whole-child form of learning in two ways: first, "play is more as something that should be appreciated for what it is in the present, without regard for future-oriented aims or potential impact" (Izumi-Taylor & Rogers, 2016, p. 210); second, "play is all-encompassing and enhances all domains of development" (Hegde, Sugita, Crane-Mitchell & Averett, 2014, p. 307). The enjoyable dimension of play is therefore an essential component of its capacity to serve as a form of learning, thereby developing the ideal of a whole child.

Although young children are supported to learn through play, there is also a strong emphasis placed on effort. The development of this attribute, for Japanese, is both educational and pragmatic. On the educational side, it is believed that effort is a salient attitude to be explicitly shaped and taught through education (Hoffman, 2000). From a pragmatic viewpoint, "making a sincere effort to perform one's own role and master proper personal habits of daily life is one of the most important functions of *shūdan seikatsu/life in a group*" (Burke, 2008, p. 149).

Sociocultural underpinning of children's educational experiences

Early childhood scholars have shared some languages that are part of the conceptualisation of children's education. Terms such as learning context, cultural value, relationship, social condition and participation are commonly used to discuss children's learning and to explain early childhood programs (Durden, Escalante & Blitch, 2015; Tayler, 2015). The way that researchers tend to use to understand education involves a belief in the sociocultural underpinnings. People are unified by the conviction that children's education is a personal, social, cultural and contextual construct. How and what young children learn have been addressed quite heavily from the sociocultural perspectives. For example, Wood and Hedges (2016) claimed that at the surface level, what children learn and how they learn "are commonly viewed as the subject matter knowledge, skills, dispositions, understanding, and values" but at a more complex level, "they carry historical and socio-political influences, values, cultural beliefs and aspirations" (p. 389).

Two of the key questions which sociocultural theories seek to address are how learners develop in their learning environment, and the role of the environment in learners' learning. Theoretically, the perspectives begin with the premise that what children experience in their education is the result of their relationship with the environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Practically, the sociocultural perspectives demand that researchers consider what constitutes the social, cultural and contextual environment for children. One set of components located within a learning environment are sociocultural elements, such as cultural tools, mediation and social relationship. According to Cole and Gajdamaschko (2007), children's development of culturally mediated beliefs and practices via the use of cultural tools and social relationships is the key focus of education. Within the sociocultural framework, children's educational experience consists of a process of development of cultural modes of representation, or in other words, a distinctively cultural form of tool application and for this reason, members of the same cultural groups are "making sense of the world, in broadly similar ways" (Hall, 2003, p. 2).

The sociocultural theories provide the analytical framework to the current study involving the concepts of social relationship, cultural tools and mediation. Children's everyday lives are experienced through social and cultural encounters. As far as the relationship between Japanese children and their educational experiences, in understanding and conceptualising this relationship the sociocultural framework is always inspiring.

Method

The study aims to explore Japanese children's educational experiences with Japanese kindergarten teachers, young children and their parents in order to know the role of young Japanese children as learners within the individual, family and sociocultural contexts of their environment.

Participants and the research context

In order to fulfil this aim, the study was conducted with four Japanese kindergarten teachers, 113 Japanese parents and 24 Japanese young children in two kindergartens. The research team consisted of two researchers with one as a native Japanese educational professor and the other an Australian university academic. The team was formed with a purpose of exploring and understanding the topic from a collaboration, featuring Japanese and Western perspectives.

One kindergarten, addressed as *Kindergarten one* in this study, was affiliated to a university and served 60 children in two classrooms: four to five year olds and five to six year olds. The other kindergarten, *Kindergarten two* was a community based one and served 180 children in six classrooms: three to four year olds; four to five year olds and five to six year olds. Both kindergartens were located in middle-class residential areas serving the neighbourhood families and children. In both kindergartens, each classroom was managed by one teacher with the support of a teacher assistant. While in kindergarten one, almost all the mothers were housewives, about one third of the mothers were working professionals in kindergarten two. The fathers in both kindergartens were working professionals. Both kindergartens were sessional, running from 9 am to 1:30 pm from Monday to Friday. The choice of these two kindergartens was made based on the consideration of their closeness to the Japanese researcher's working place. Economically and geographically, they were similar. However, the main difference is the management system. Kindergarten one was managed by the university, whilst kindergarten two was a community based service.

The four participating teachers, three female and one male, came from the two kindergartens, with two from each setting. They were recommended by the kindergarten principals because they knew the kindergarten and their children well. The teachers all had more than ten years of experiences in kindergarten teaching and held early childhood degrees. The children, 12 boys and 12 girls were aged from five to six. Eight of them came from kindergarten one while the other 16 were from kindergarten two. These children were recommended by the teachers because they were confident and articulate. All the parents in the kindergartens were sent the questions and 113 replied, with 44 from kindergarten one, all of whom were fulltime mothers. The other 69 parents came from kindergarten two. Among them, five were fathers. Out of the 64 mothers, nine were working professionals.

Data collection

Data sources included individual interviews with the teachers, focus group discussions with the children, and questionnaires with the parents. The interviews with the teachers were individual, semi-structured and sought to gain information pertaining to the kindergarten programs, teachers' beliefs in children's learning, teaching practices and any other aspects of learning that were featured in the kindergarten. The children's interviews were conducted in the form of focus group discussions, three children in each group. The children were provided with pens and papers and the discussion started from them each

drawing a picture of a learning activity in the kindergarten. Based on each child's picture, the group sought to explore their thoughts on learning, play, teachers and peers in the kindergarten. Within the questionnaires from the parents, they were asked about their values and beliefs in children's learning and their parenting practices. Most questions were open ended so parents could give detailed answers. Specifically, the parents were requested to write about their values, goals and aspirations for children's learning, and children's family learning experiences.

All the interviews were carried out in Japanese by the two researchers and a research assistant. Each teacher interview was conducted for an hour and the discussions with each children's group ranged from 20 to 40 minutes in length. Children's drawings were not collected so could not be used for data analysis, because most children wanted to take them away. The interviews were audio recorded and then translated to English by a professional Japanese-English translator. The questionnaires were also presented in Japanese and translated into English by the translator.

Data analysis

Data analysis focused on identifying the meaning of education from the participants' views, their respective experiences with children's education, as well as the nature and extent of social and cultural influences on their views and experiences. This process of analysis was closely underpinned by the sociocultural theory, "a perspective in which there are not distinct boundaries between theory, method and practice" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 265). In practice, this involved the use of content analysis as described by Patton (2002). The two researchers collaborated in the analytical process. First, we engaged in open coding in which varied units of viewpoints were coded. We then conducted axial coding to converge similar data into general categories. This step of analysis was grounded and framed in the relevant literature sources and the sociocultural concepts. Participants did not always discuss children's education in terms of categories. As such, the way in which the categories were generated was influenced by the literature and theoretical information, for example, the notion of play or care.

Results

Participating teachers, children and parents brought a range of perspectives to children's education, along with descriptions of various family and kindergarten influences and how they created particular learning images for children, highlighting the importance of play, self-reflection, group experience, tasks and rules, self-recognition and stage development in children's early childhood education.

Play: Children as experiential learners

The perceived importance of play in children's education was uniform across the three groups. Play was considered to be the key form of education and children were viewed as experiential learners. The teachers were strong advocates of children's learning through play. They described play as a predominant part of children's experience in the

kindergarten. Typical perspectives are: 'Through play, children use their senses. That is real learning'; 'We make sure that children have lots of play time each day, inside and outside'. A teacher at Kindergarten two considered that the defining role of play in children's education was that children experienced real life events:

> In our class, we have many real life play activities such as growing eggplants. When children touch them, they realise they are stingy or soft. You touch and feel. It is learning.

For most children, play was the most significant aspect of their kindergarten experiences. In reply to the question, 'what is the most important thing to do in the kindergarten?' 17 out of 24 children said, 'play.' A girl stated very clearly, 'I just want to play.'

The parents also described the way in which children's free play was supported in the families and how important it was that children played in the kindergarten. Their common expression is: 'children need an environment/time where they can play freely'. Just like the teachers who related play with children's learning, some parents provided points about why play was important for children. The recognition of children's feelings during play was one such idea. A mother, for instance, noted that 'my daughter is so happy when she plays. That's learning.'

Self-reflection: Children as guided learners

In the interviews with the teachers, clear statements emerged that they saw their role in children's learning as one of providing guidance through which children made reflections. A teacher at Kindergarten one gave a detailed illustration in regards to this:

> In Japan, to put away a chair you sit [upon] is your responsibility but children tend to forget. We did the group checking today, 'what did you forget?' two things, three things?' We did a group competition. They wanted their group to be good so thought 'we have to tidy up.' They probably thought in this way. This is reflection. The questions helped children reflect.

There was also a chorus of parental voices looking at child reflections. What was interesting is that, by most standards, parents and older siblings were role models and they provided children with the examples: 'She has watched what her brother did as being good and what parents did as being good. So she thinks about it and learns from us'.

Some parents counted on teachers to guide children in the kindergarten. They however claimed that children needed to closely follow teacher instructions and this was central to children's reflections, 'children need to listen to teachers, understand what they say and reflect teachers' instructions on their own behaviours.'

When the teachers discussed their guiding practice with children, they also talked about how four year olds were guided and mentored by five year olds and how this experience helped all children learn and think about their learning together. They were feeling positive about this experience for children, stating, for example:

> For the five year old, when he is allocated to a young one, he might think 'what happened to me last year? What should I do? What was good? These questions make him reflect;
> When guided by an older peer, the four year old learns lots of things from a child's perspective.

Group experience: Children as social learners

Learning as a group was a very prominent theme in the teachers' data.

> Every day, we have and group activities. Preschool time is the time we guide children towards their life in society with others (Teacher/Kindergarten one).

The children's data also indicated that they clearly valued their learning experiences with each other and the importance of using appropriate social skills. This is demonstrated through their responses to the question of what is the most important thing to do in the kindergarten:

> To have friends;
> To play with others;
> To help each other and work together;
> Not hitting others;
> If my friend is running he falls. I would call school nurse immediately.

The point of group learning was also made frequently by the parents in relation to children's learning. Parents' typical expression is: 'Kindergarten is a place where he has to think how to behave in a group life'. In addition, as seen from the parents' data, what was highlighted in relation to children's group experience was their expectation that teachers provided support:

> I'd like teachers to lead my child to gain social skills through a group life;
> I want teachers to teach children the importance of group life;
> I want teachers to teach him to learn how to communicate with others and be patient in groups.

Tasks and rules: Children as responsible learners

There was a strong emphasis on learning as tasks and rules, and on children as responsible learners, evidenced by the fact that all the teachers, all the children and 89 parents spoke of rules and tasks as an important aspect of children's learning.

> Preschool is the place children learn group rules and tasks. It's not a park (Teacher / Kindergarten one).

The teachers stressed that although the rules and tasks were available in the kindergarten and children were expected to experience them:

> There is no force. If a child takes off his bag, he needs to put it back on. If they forget, we do it together. We tell them, 'you forget. Let's put it back.' If they say 'I don't want to do it.' We say 'ok. We take your bag.' Then we wait until they want to put their bag back. (Teacher / Kindergarten two).

What was important about tasks and rules was that they help with children's responsibilities. A teacher at Kindergarten one said, 'children have jobs, rosters, something which is helpful to others … They learn to be responsible.'

The children also talked about rules and tasks and the need to experience them. A boy said,

> You have to follow teachers' words. Tidy up properly. You have to eat up without leaving food. If you make a mistake in a paper, you cannot immediately throw it away. You should not break a promise.

Many other children also mentioned rules and tasks in the kindergarten, and highlighted the importance of caring for the group and taking responsibilities as evidenced in a statement such as 'Tidy up is important. Pack up fast. Put away the bag. Care for each other.'

Taking part in class tasks was highly important for the children, which emerged in points that stressed the need to put up with what they did not like to do,

Interviewer:	Is there anything that you do not feel like doing here?
Child:	Swimming.
Interviewer:	What do you do then?
Child:	When there is a swimming class, I put up with it.
Interviewer:	Why?
Child:	It is a task. It is important that I put up with it. I need to learn.

For the parents, following rules and undertaking class tasks were also a pervasive presence in children's kindergarten experiences.

> Children need to acquire rules in the kindergarten;
> Being able to understand the fact that they cannot do everything they want to do in groups;
> I want my children to learn the rules and manners in a group life.

Social-recognition: Children as respected learners

All the teachers and 102 parents placed a clear emphasis on children's individuality, differences and self-choices. This was predominately discussed in relation to children's thinking and behaviours and the ways in which adults respected children's choices.

> … every day there are times when kids can choose what to do, what to use and who to be with… When a child says, 'I don't…. I would not say, 'why do you not?' because this

> will make his experience of working miserable. I want them to be respected and are able to express themselves, make the choice (Teacher / Kindergarten two).

Parents provided similar points:

> We give him the choices. We tell him that parents are there when he fails or has a hard time;
> I respect my children's own interests;
> I make sure to support him so that he can think by himself and make his own decisions.

In addition, the expectation for children's self-choices was also cited as an aspect of learning that involved teachers' support. Describing this, a mother said,

> I want teachers to value children's individual differences. I want teachers to let children to work with autonomy rather than telling them off in a top-down manner.

Age and development: Children as staged learners

Another cluster of aspects described by the teachers were focused on children's ages and stages of learning. The teachers thought that what children learn should be in line with their years and class levels. A teacher at Kindergarten one stated:

> Four year olds are self-centred. But five year olds have more factual awareness. Five year olds can refer to the past experience. Four year olds haven't reached that stage.

In much the same way, a teacher at Kindergarten two discussed:

> When they are four we don't do many group jobs. They still think about themselves. When they are five, they start thinking for others. So we guide them for these experiences.

According to a teacher at Kindergarten one,

> Teachers consider children's stage of development. Four year olds learn different things from five year olds. We prepare the class that makes children achieve their learning that matches their stage of development.

Adding to this, preschool year as a stage of their learning was also described by a child.

> Interviewer: Why do you come to the preschool every day?
> Child: To grow up. To be an adult. Preschool is an important phase of development. I grow here so I can be an adult.

In the two kindergartens, the children were arranged into their respective classes based on their ages. Created in a way within their social and cultural traditions and expectations for children's learning experience, 'this traditional arrangement' (Teacher/Kindergarten one) is more than simply staging children or a mere matter of organising their learning

experiences. Rather, it represents a terrain of 'cultural practice that is both developmental and child-centred' (Teacher/Kindergarten two).

Separate experiences: The relaxed child and dedicated learner

Many parents stated that their children were relaxed, free and selfish at home. At the same time, they also talked about the focus on tasks, rules and children's learning at the kindergarten, providing an idea that children had separated experiences:

> At home, he tends to behave like a spoiled child by doing whatever he wants to do, but I want him to learn what he shouldn't do at the kindergarten;
> As she has to be patient at the kindergarten, she sometimes turns to be selfish at home. I think it's ok, better than the opposite case.

Parents' perspectives of the separate experiences of children between homes and the kindergarten are further shown in their discussions about how to work with the kindergarten teachers. An identifiable feature of parents' expectation for their children's teachers is the teachers' advice. For the parents, effective support to children occurs through relationships based on parents' respect for teachers' professionalism in ways that 'teachers give necessary information and they can be consulted'. Evidence is apparent that the parents 'do not think it is necessary to exchange much information about children. Teachers are professionals so they can tell us when they have concerns about our children'.

Discussion

As we looked across the analyses, several features about children's educational experiences were identified. These features were situated within the kindergarten environments, with their teachers, parents and peers as described in the above section. In this part of the article, these features are interrogated in light of the sociocultural concepts and evidence from research as a way to gain insights into the present study.

As shown in this study, children's experience in the kindergartens is an integrative topic dealing with play, individuals, teachers, peers, families, tasks, choices, ages and stages. The commitment to a multifaceted view of children as experimental, guided, social, responsible, respected and staged learners renders visible the role of the kindergartens in creating the whole child, where "much is made of the educational experience as shaping the totality of the person" (Hoffman, 2000, p. 201).

Education viewed as a totality of experience provides a way to speak about the relationship between learners and their learning environment (Hall, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). It concerns, as shown in this study, a process by which the sociocultural dynamic of the kindergartens has provided a relational space for the children as they experience their learning with teachers, peers and families through play, reflections, group activities, tasks and rules. This underlying focus in children's experiences reflects the concept of *hoiku*, a predominant ideology in Japanese early childhood education in which children's learning

means "creating a whole human being and human characteristics (Yamamoto, 2016, p. 216).

When the children were asked to talk about experiences, they discussed play, stage, groups, rules and tasks. Their views were consistent with those of the adults. In alignment with Hall's suggestion (2003) that members of the same cultural groups are "making sense of the world in broadly similar ways" (p. 2), the findings indicate that the children had built their sociocultural memberships in the kindergarten environment. In line with the concept of mediation, namely the development of culturally mediated beliefs and practices via the use of cultural tools and social relationships (Vygotsky, 1978), the findings identify the children's achievement in making sociocultural production and reproduction in the kindergartens and they did this through a range of cultural tools, such as play, peer relationships, rules and tasks (Cole & Gajdamaschko, 2007). Social positioning and responsibilities expressed within the children's group were related to their understanding of the values and practices in the kindergartens.

It has been found that the educational environment provided to children was a site of separate experience between their homes and the kindergartens. This site is distinct from what is described by the sociocultural theories that are characterised by the connection between people and places (McDonald, Le, Higgins & Podmore, 2005). The children's educational environment in this study is not a connected or continuous sociocultural space but distinct fields supporting their different educational needs.

In Japan, early childhood education is a core socialisation agent and is dominated by an emphasis on developing responsible Japanese citizens (Burke, 2008; Hellman, 2016). The strong emphasis on children's learning out of their families is in part a reflection of the increasing anomic social milieu in Japan where there is a lack of opportunities "for children to interact spontaneously with each other or with adults other than their parents" (Burke, 2008, p. 137). Preoccupations with children's social interactions could explain why the parents located experience at the kindergarten level and gave little consideration of what families could do accordingly.

The separation of children's home and kindergarten experience is not evident in the model of continuous and consistent learning of young children identified in other countries that emphasises parent and teacher equal partnerships (Hedges & Lee, 2010). Obviously the parents in this study saw themselves as comparatively less knowledgeable than the teachers and children's education as part of teachers' responsibility. The capacity of ideas from the parents and children, like 'listening to teachers', 'teachers to teach', 'teachers are professionals' and 'teachers get him to learn', has legitimised teachers' knowledge and expertise.

Obviously, children's experience in the participating kindergartens is bi-contextual in nature, a premise supported by the Japanese classification of *uchi* and *soto* (inside and outside). The parents' data revealed that children's education could be characterised as context specific. That is, children played different roles in different contexts and there was little connection between these roles and contexts.

There is however little evidence from the teachers for the existence of differences of children's learning between the kindergartens and their homes. The teachers did not mean to only teach but sought to respect children and provide children with the experience that 'everyday there were times when kids could choose what to do, what to use and who to be with.' Teachers took the view that in the kindergartens children had the freedom to do what they wanted for some parts of the day. Children's self-choice was also a matter of importance for the parents, 'children are expected to have the freedom of choice. We [parents] tell him that parents are there when he fails or has a hard time'. Such data confirm that the notion that children made free choices was accepted both in the kindergartens and in their families.

Even so, there is a difference as to what constitutes the basis for a free choice in children's experiences. In their families, the children could choose to do nothing, while in the kindergartens they had to choose to learn in a way. The former was a relaxed experience while the latter was a dedicated one. The analysis so far also implies that the contextual differentiation of children's experience by the participating parents is a function of the Japanese educational and family systems. The present findings can be regarded as evidence supporting the idea that "home is the private, intimate arena in which one can relax… However, in the *soto*/outside, one must learn to assume a genial and cooperative public persona" (Burke, 2008, p. 140).

It was found in the study that the underlying aim of children's education was to develop responsible citizens, and it seemed clear that the practices of tasks and rules were what the notion of responsibility subscribed to. It was further found that the tasks and rules in the kindergarten groups provoked children's understanding of both their roles and the role of their teachers. For example, when a child said that 'we have to keep what the teacher tells us to do', there is an indication of three elements: what is important in the kindergarten; the role of teacher in their learning; and the significance of working in group so the child used 'we' but not 'I'.

Several rules and tasks were enacted by the children to establish their role as responsible group members. Rules and tasks were not only conscripted for particular responsibilities for children, but they also suggested ideas about what learning behaviours they should develop. In her reply to 'what don't you like to do?, a girl said 'swimming' but she continued to say that 'It is a task. It is important that I put up with it. I need to learn.' This finding is in line with the earlier study by Burke (2008) which demonstrated that "making a sincere effort to perform one's own role and master proper personal habits of daily life is one of the most important functions of *shūdan seikatsu/life in a group*" (p. 149). The close association between the children's perspectives of their learning behaviours and the expectation of children's learning in Japanese society exemplifies the influence of the society on young children who have formed appropriate social and cultural knowledge about their learning.

The children appeared to be quite open about their experiences. They presented themselves as very positive, with a reflective attitude towards their learning and their teachers. Though a number of rules and tasks were described, the children clearly

indicated their willingness to experience them in their lives. In such an environment where children were mediated to learn, it is possible to infer that they were increasingly knowledgeable about their roles as learners. The values and goals of the kindergarten environments were accepted by the children; the children, parents and teachers shared an explicit consensus on the role of children in the environment. This is what Burke (2008, p. 150) described as the concept of "positive self-image" in which individual interests were incorporated into a common goal, with the development of what Hellman (2016) calls social responsibilities of Japanese citizens. It is such imperatives of social responsibilities, Izumi-Taylor and Rogers (2016) argued, which could have driven the parents, children and teachers to similar directions for children's learning in the kindergartens.

In this study, teachers have referred also to children's ages and stages of development, as in 'children achieve their learning that matches their stage of development.' The arrangement of different classes based on children's ages provides clear evidence about the importance of age and stage in children's learning. It has been found, for example, that four year old children do not participate in many group experiences until they turn five because 'four year olds are pretty self-centred.'

Apparently, this finding challenges the prevailing belief in the whole child approach. This staged approach which emphasises children's ages and stages is, in fact, the major theoretical idea which has dominated the developmental thinking (Hoffman, 2000). By contrast, the whole child approach stresses the overall being (Yamamoto, 2016). These two approaches are more than differences of emphasis. However, through using the sociocultural conception of learning, the educational traditions in Japan and the fact that children have cross-room peer relationships, it is possible to infer that the staged approach to learning only forms a dimension of children's total experiences. Hoffman (2000) has also given the explanation that, "although early childhood education in Japan can be characterized as highly progressive, at the same time it is not developmentalist and it envisions the self principally in terms of culturally valued qualities of personhood" (p. 193). Viewed from this point, the findings draw attention to the value of moving away from a Westernised developmental conception of children's learning, and using sociocultural theories, so that staged learning could be seen as a socioculturally constructed discourse which contributed to the constitution of the whole child landscape in the participating kindergartens.

Conclusion

It is important to note that while the study was conducted in two different kindergartens, similar findings were identified. Despite their sociocultural differences, it is interesting to see common perspectives and experiences of the teachers, children and parents in terms of children's learning. Even so, generalisations cannot be made reliably due to the narrow focus of the study and also wide variations in early childhood services in Japan (Holloway, 2000). The study was narrow in scope and exploratory in nature, though it does serve as a starting point for future research.

This study of children's education in the two Japanese kindergartens recognises that there are many beliefs, practices and approaches that constitute the children's experiences. Recognising multifaceted forms in our theorising about children's education invites scholarship that takes as axiomatic the complexity and distinctiveness of individual children, their families and the Japanese social and cultural dynamic. In contrast to Western notions of learning embedded in international policies and other prevailing early childhood discourses, the teachers, parents and children in the study constituted their own perspectives of whole child, the role of the family, and children's learning and development. These findings thus suggest the need for continuing research and consistent endeavour in exploring early childhood education that employs new conceptions of thinking beyond the dominant Western explanations.

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