

Japanese International Preschools

In the modern era, one of Japan's great focuses has been on the education of the nation's children. The beginnings of well-established schools and day cares for young children have been traced to the end of the Taishō Period.¹ Since then, the day cares and early schools have evolved into more distinct categories, branching out into such institutions as public, private, and international kindergartens and preschools. For many Japanese children, preschool is their first exposure to socialization outside of their immediate families and, depending on which school they attend, their experiences can be vastly different. Both public and private preschools are well documented and, indeed, their titles are indicative: the Japanese government funds public preschools and private institutions fund private preschools. International preschools, however, are less well documented and the title is much less indicative, leading to the question: What exactly *is* an international preschool?

An international school is loosely defined as a school with a "multinational and multilingual student body . . . an international curriculum . . . a transient and

¹ Kathleen Uno, Passages to Modernity: Motherhood, Childhood, and Social Reform in Early Twentieth Century Japan. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991) 11

multinational teacher population,” usually with English or bi-lingual instruction.²

An international preschool, then, is one that shares these characteristics, multilingual student body, multinational teachers, and, interestingly, English or bilingual instruction.

The intent of my study was to gain a better grasp of the international preschool system. I found myself curious as to how it was be possible (or if it was possible) to successfully instruct preschoolers in a language that was not their native tongue. Also of particular interest to me was how international preschools worked to integrate international students with native Japanese students and with foreign teachers. For the purposes of this paper, when I use the term “international preschool,” I am referring to the Japanese international preschool system, and will make a note to

There is plenty of research regarding traditional Japanese preschool system, but very little on its international equivalent. With that in mind, the intent of my study was, first, to define the international preschool in Japan, and, alongside that, to outline the strengths and weaknesses unique to the international preschool system in Japan.

² “How to define an 'International School'?” International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) Meeting Place. 30 September 2012
<<http://iaslonline.ning.com/group/regioninternationalschools/forum/topics/how-to-define-an-international>>.

The traditional Japanese preschool structure aims to shape students to properly integrate with Japanese society.

In order to gain an understanding of this system, I held an internship in one such school, Tamagawa International Preschool, in the Setagaya Ward of Tokyo, Japan. I went there with several questions foremost in my mind, hoping to comprehend the system better by obtaining the answers to these questions.

Firstly, how do such schools address the language barrier? Typically, international schools cater to international students and their families, though Japanese students are also welcomed. This opens up a unique set of possibilities to the families of children who attend these schools, for their children to become friends and interact with children who have a completely different perspective on life. However, it opens up situations in which a lack of cohesion between the foreign students and Japanese students, or even the presence of hostility between the two groups as they struggle to make sense of their worlds.

Another unique opportunity, and one that I was able to witness first hand, is provided by the presence of foreign teachers. Students are thus able to learn English from native speakers, an asset that they might not otherwise have access to, even in English classes in other preschools. However, the presence of obviously foreign teachers with what sometimes might be a very limited grasp of

their language can be stressful for preschoolers, often only used to their immediate family.

In both instances, there is also the possibility of cultural barriers that might hinder the creation of strong bonds between students and their peers and between the students and their teachers. How can an international school hope to run smoothly when there are that many variables involved? I was especially interested to see how English as the language of instruction would affect behavioral issues, considering how easily a misunderstanding could arise between two students, or from an improperly understood instruction.

I also sought to compare the international preschool in which I was working with the more traditional Japanese preschools that I had researched. Would the school stick to a purely international curriculum, or would the school attempt to combine the values of the Japanese system with the advantages of an international program?

Background on Japanese Preschools: Terms

In order to properly examine the international preschool, and to put my research into context, some background on the Japanese preschool is necessary. When discussing Japanese childhood, regardless of school, there are

several key terms that, when combined, offer a nuanced concept of early childhood in Japan.

The term that comes up most often in text about Japanese education is *amae*. *Amae* is defined as the “warmth, dependence, and informality that typically characterizes mother-child relations in Japan”³ or, alternatively, “indulgence.”⁴ This indulgence is a means to differentiate between the child’s in-group, or *uchi*, and his or her out-group, or *soto*.⁵ The concepts of in-group and out-group are intrinsic to Japanese society, both linguistically, as there are different grammatical patterns for both groups, but also socially. There are different expectations put on the relationships between the in-group and the out-group. Warmth, affection, and dependence are hallmarks of a healthy relationship with a child’s first in-group, his or her family.

In relation to his or her out-group, however, there are different expectations and different duties. One of the first lessons in relating to the out-group that students learn is that of how to interact within *shudan seikatsu*, or “life

³ Susan D. Holloway, *Contested Childhood: Diversity and Change in Japanese Preschools*. (London: Routledge, 2000). 21. A paraphrase of (Doi, 1989).

⁴ Hidetada Shimizu & Robert A. Levine, *Japanese Frames of Mind: Cultural Perspectives on Human Development*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 9

⁵ Lois Peak, “Learning to Become Part of the Group: The Japanese Child’s Transition to Preschool Life.” *Japanese Frames of Mind: Cultural Perspectives on Human Development*. Ed. Hidetada Shimizu & Robert A. Levine. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 143

in a group.” Specifically, “children must learn that their own desires and goals are secondary to those of the group . . . Children must develop a willingness to participate enthusiastically in group activities and must interact smoothly and harmoniously with others.”⁶ Intrinsic to harmonious life within a group is *enryo*, or expressive restraint, encouraging the students to curtail any opinion or desire that might jeopardize the synthesis of the group.⁷

Without *enryo*, a child could be said to be *wagamama*, or expecting his or her own way.⁸ *Amae* often leads to children who expect their own way all the time, used to being coddled at home; of course they would expect to be pampered at school as well.

However, Japanese preschool teachers have devised a clever way to circumvent this self-centeredness. Overreliance on teachers is a major concern in the traditional Japanese preschool system, so teachers seek to impart the traits of *jiritsu* (self-reliance) and *jishu* (independence) on their students, which is “fundamental to creating a distinction between the *amae*-based world of the home and the group life of the preschool.”⁹ These traits are often imparted during a “battle of perseverance” between the teacher and an unwilling student:

⁶ Peak 144

⁷ Peak 144, paraphrase of (Lebra, 1976)

⁸ Peak 156

⁹ Peak 160

Teachers maneuver themselves so that they do not appear to directly oppose the child, and speak in a sympathetically supportive manner. Indirectly, however, they thwart the child in such a way that he gains neither the satisfaction of victory nor a clear-cut glimpse of what is opposing him.¹⁰

The International Preschool

With all of this information and all of these assumptions about what my experience working at an international preschool would be like, I made my way up the steps of Tamagawa International Preschool, or “The Pink House,” as the children called it, due to its distinctive color, which stood out among all of the somewhat uniform apartment buildings that surrounded it. Little did I know that the appearance of the school was only the beginnings of an experience that shook up my expectations of international preschool, and, ultimately, of Japan itself.

Tamagawa International Preschool (TIPS) is a small, privately run preschool that caters mostly to upper- and upper-middle class Japanese families in the Setagaya Ward of Tokyo. I had not expected that the school would be predominately Japanese, but due to the Fukushima Incident of 2011, many

¹⁰ Peak, 164

foreign families in the area relocated, either to different areas of Japan, or merely deciding to return home.

The students range in age from approximately eighteen months to six years, and class sizes, in the summer, ranged from four students to fifteen. While that is indeed a wide age range for such a small school, the students are divided into two groups: toddlers and kindergarteners. The two groups did some activities together and some separately, especially when the class sizes grew. During the summer, there is a great variation in attendance, as parents can sign their children up for classes by the week while, during the school year, they must sign up by the term. Setting up the summer program in this way allowed parents who were curious about the school to send their children to the school for a trial period. This “by the week” practice also allowed for some older students who attended local kindergartens during the school year to attend Tamagawa International Preschool during their summer vacation. Indeed, several of these older students had graduated from the school the previous spring.

In the morning, the school schedule was fairly uniform. After the children arrived in the morning, they were allowed a time for free play, where they could interact with each other and with the teachers, especially the teachers who did not speak Japanese fluently. Afterwards, the children were instructed to clean up their toys to get ready for Morning Circle.

The foreign teachers, myself included, did not often find ourselves inconvenienced by our poor grasp of Japanese, though sometimes our obvious foreignness was stressful to newer children. In fact, more often than not, children came to us with their problems, despite our limited capacity to fix it efficiently.

During the Morning Circle, the children sat in the aforementioned circle, with the teachers leading them in several simple, vocabulary-heavy songs, helped by a student leader. The songs helped the students memorize simple phrases about such things as the weather and the days of the week. The student leader was encouraged to start the songs and to assist with roll call.

Roll call was an exercise in language acquisition and community building. The student leader would call out his or her classmates' names, and, after the appropriate child raised his or her hand, calling out "I'm here," they would make their way over to the magnet board where their names were held. On one side of the board, there was a depiction of the school, literally a pink house, and on the other, a jumble of the children's names. The child would pick their name from the jumble –sometimes with teacher assistance– and place it inside the house. This exercise encouraged students to recognize their own name when written out in roman letters and, for the older student leaders, assisted them with reading comprehension. It also gave the students (and instructors) a chance to become familiar with new students.

After a short bathroom break, the students started their morning activities. These usually took the form of a craft that corresponded to the week's theme. For instance, during the London Olympics themed week, students painted the Olympic rings and made double-decker buses out of shoeboxes.

On Wednesdays, though, the morning activity was a physical education class taught by a coach, one of the few male instructors the students were exposed to. During this class, students were encouraged to get up and move around and tested for basic markers of flexibility and activity. In general, the students greatly enjoyed this time in the week, especially those who had taken gymnastics or other athletic classes. During this time, the regular instructors were present to support the visiting instructor and to encourage the children to stand still and wait for their turn to participate.

After the morning activity, the students would prepare for lunch, washing their hands and retrieving their drink bottles and their lunches from the respective bins and returning to their tables. The student leader for the day would then wipe the table down and the children would take their seat. The leader would then begin the lunchtime song. In Japan, part of the lunchtime ritual is a quick, often murmured *itadakimasu*, or "I humbly receive," referring to their food. For the children, however, there was a song with a ritual involved, which made the children mindful of the beginning of the meal. The leader would wait for his or her

classmates to get out their lunches before, loudly and clearly, leading the children in this song, with accompanying clapping:

Let's sing our lunchtime song, let's sing nicely shall we?
[Yes]
One, two, three, four
Lunchtime, lunchtime, very happy
I am ready and how about you?
Let's get together and say grace for lunch!
Thank you mother [Thank you mother]
Thank you father [Thank you father]
Thank you teachers [Thank you teachers]
Thank you *everybody*
Sē no, itadakimasu

This song would also proceed all snack times, as, with “snack time” replacing “lunch time” where appropriate.

Weekday afternoons, however, hosted a large variety of activities that encouraged students, especially older students, to communicate in English while engaging in activities that held their interests.

Monday and Friday afternoons were dedicated to arts and crafts, the age of the students allowing for more involved projects with more substantial end products.

Tuesdays were reserved for music class. *Music Together*, the program that the school offered, is an American based, internationally acclaimed, music

program that asserts that “all children are musical. All children can learn to sing in tune, keep a beat, and participate with confidence.”¹¹

On Wednesday afternoons, the school hosted a cooking class, conducted in English, in which the students followed a very simple recipe to cook and bake everything from churros to paella to pizza. The children participated in every step of the process, save for the ones involving heat or very sharp implements. However, the messier aspects were what the children reveled in, they were delighted to crack eggs, to use their plastic knives to cut up vegetables, and to stir messy mixtures. The class also encouraged students to try foods that perhaps they did not originally prefer. For instance, during the week in which the children made paella, a boy who had a strong dislike of shrimp ate the dish eagerly, so delighted that he had made helped make the dish that he forgot he was supposed to hate the ingredient. The children were very excited to share what they made in cooking class with their parents and siblings and, sometimes, even their teachers.

My first day was a humbling experience. I admit that I overestimated my ability to cope with the tremendous time difference and the sheer distance between Tokyo and my hometown of Chattanooga. I began my internship less

¹¹ “About Music Together,” Music Together, 2012, Music Together LLC. 31 August 2012. <<http://www.musictogether.com/AboutUs>>.

than two full days after I arrived in Japan (despite my host family's suggestion that I might want a few days to rest), thoroughly jetlagged and utterly homesick, complemented by my nervousness at starting this new job, worried that my grasp of Japanese would be inadequate, armed only with my assumptions about how an international preschool was supposed to be run. The first day was, predictably, a disaster. I failed to properly engage with the children, and was likely, at that point, more of a nuisance than any sort of help. I returned to my host family's home discouraged and intimidated by the prospect of an entire summer spent as a burden and a bother to everyone.

Thankfully, the moment of self-doubt past and, after a decidedly rocky start, I began to acclimate to my situation, becoming used to the long day (in order to be at work on time, I left my host family's apartment at 7:30am and often didn't return until 7:30pm).

Originally, I had only intended to stay at the school from mid-June to the end of July, but the school requested I stay until mid-August, as the month of August was their busiest summer month, due to the summer holiday. Thus, while I stayed with my host family until the end of July, I moved into the apartment above the school for the remainder of my time there. As I was suddenly more conveniently located, some of my duties were expanded or altered somewhat.

My duties, as intern and assistant teacher started as soon as I arrived at

the school. Japanese businesses are very conscious of how their spaces appear to current and potential customers or clients. Thus, one of my first duties in the morning was to sweep the sidewalk and patio around the school, making the area surrounding the school tidy. Occasionally, I would be required to greet the children and their parents as they came in, assisting the children with their morning routine: putting their drink bottle in one bin, their lunch in another, hanging up their hand towel, and then putting their bag in their cubbies, before they would be allowed to play. Then, as I was one of three foreign teachers, I would supervise and involve myself with the children's free play, encouraging them to put away their toys before they took another one down from the shelf. Then, the teachers would encourage the students to clean their toys, and we would occasionally have to remind the children on which shelf their toy belonged.

During Morning Circle and the gym class, I, along with the other teacher(s) on duty at the time, would make sure that the children were comfortable, engaged, and focused, encouraging them to sit still and to interact when appropriate. Due to large age range represented by our students, the school had, at any given time, children in all stages of toilet training. Thus, depending on which group needed the most assistance, I would either help the kindergartners stay in a line for the bathroom or else, would help the toddlers with diapers and

potties, assisting in clean up and changing them into clean clothes when necessary.

During craft times, I was expected to help teach and supervise, occasionally leading the lesson, especially towards the end of my internship. The more comfortable I became with the children, the more engaged I became in the activity. Also, when necessary, I would be responsible for preparing, or helping to prepare crafts, whether something needed to be glued or painted or if a craft needed an exact number of googly eyes or seashells for each child.

Originally, for the cooking class, I merely assisted, but after I mention that I enjoyed and looked forward to the cooking class each week, the other teachers were glad to allow me to teach the class occasionally. When teaching the class, I was allowed to go at a rhythm that worked both for me and for the students, explaining each ingredient to them, allowing them to smell or touch certain ingredients before they added them to the dish. I also needed to be extra vigilant during days when we would cook with either raw meat or raw egg, and in any circumstance in which knives or heat were involved.

On Tuesday and Wednesday afternoon, two English classes were offered: grammar and conversation. The students in the grammar class were given worksheets and introduced to parts of speech, such as nouns and adjectives, also going through spelling lists and occasionally having spelling tests, and, at

the end of the class, they read part of a simple chapter book with their teacher.

The skill levels of the students in the grammar class varied wildly, so it was sometimes frustrating for children who had a small amount of difficulty with reading or writing to be placed with a student who had far less trouble doing so.

The conversation class, however, was less rigidly structured, and the concepts they were taught were much less complicated, things such as 'up and down' and 'hard and soft,' the main focus of this class to draw the students into being comfortable with speaking in English.

Some mornings or, if the weather was mild, some afternoons, we would deviate from the original schedule in order to go to the local playground or, when the weather became hotter, we would set up small wading pools in the garden so the children could splash around. For these days, there always needed to be two teachers with the children at all times, to make sure that the children did not run away or get hurt, and to make sure that they were engaged with their fellow students. For the days when we would take the students to the park, we would need to apply sunscreen and sometimes insect repellent, making sure that their heads were adequately covered by hats and that they all had safety vests so that we could identify them easily from a large crowd of other children in case of emergency. During water play days, extra time was given so that the students had time to change into their bathing suits, and to set out their towels.

During the summer, several teachers went on short vacations, sometimes a few days or a week. During those times, I would sometimes replace them. This meant that I had a chance to try out several different roles within the school, not just limited to being an intern. One week, I was even given the opportunity to teach the English classes that the school offered, so I prepared materials and practiced how I would teach with another instructor. Another week, I helped lead the morning activities. When I lived above the school, I was often called in on the early shift so that the other teachers did not have to come in as early as they might have needed to beforehand.

Conclusion:

While my experience with an international preschool was likely quite different from the norm, I did, indeed, discover that certain Japanese values do mesh well with international, especially American teaching styles. The imparting of the traits of independence and self-reliance seem to go hand-in-hand with a more American focus of individuality, even if that is an apparent contradiction to the importance of life in a group.

However, I did not find that the language barrier that existed between the foreign teachers and the Japanese students to be as much of an issue as I imagined that it would be.

Reflection:

During my summer internship, I have learned many important lessons, both within the context of this internship and outside of it. First of all, that when a knowledgeable person suggests a course of action, it is probably better to listen to their advice. I was too wrapped up in my need to feel useful that I did not stop to rest before I started work, which could have had significant consequences, especially in working with such young children. I have learned that, while attempting to have a little bit of background understanding of a situation is no bad thing, making broad assumptions only makes things difficult for everyone involved.

Perhaps most importantly, I have learned that speaking up is the best way to get results. It is a rewarding moment for child, parent, and teacher, when a child knows when to speak up when they require something, whether it is a toilet break, or a forgotten water bottle, or a missing puzzle piece. However, the lesson does not just apply to children. I spent my first few weeks at the school worrying

about being unnecessary, when all I had to do was ask how I could be a better worker, a better teacher, and a better intern.

The lowest point of my experience came at the beginning of my experience. I had not caught up on sleep yet, and I had caught a cold from one of the students, I was in a foreign country, half the world away from home. It was the most singularly lonely moments of my life.

However, the high point of my experience encompassed the final two weeks of my internship, when I had finally figured out where I fit best in the school, when every task seemed natural and even minor crises did not seem so significant.

I feel that this experience has only made me more enthusiastic about my career goals. This internship was exactly what I needed to experience, even if it was not what I had planned to find. I still wish to teach English as a Second Language, and I still wish to teach ESL to preschoolers and kindergarteners. I realized, while in Japan, what an asset English is. Even though my knowledge of Japanese was by no means advanced, being a native English speaker meant that I could easily navigate the public transport systems, or find the English interpretation of any important information in most restaurants and in train stations and shops. English is an invaluable tool, and one with which I wish to be able to equip others. I am thankful for this opportunity that I was given to explore

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Biehl Internship Report

what is truly my dream job, both for the grant that allowed me to travel to Japan in the first place, but also to the teachers and staff of Tamagawa International Preschool, and my host family, who, when they found that my interests lie in teaching English, have gone above and beyond in allowing me a chance to experience as many opportunities to do so as possible.