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## **Komatsudani Then and Now: continuity and change in a Japanese preschool**

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**ABSTRACT** In this article the reflections of the teachers and directors of Komatsudani Hoikuen ('day-care center') on a video the authors recently made at their preschool are used to explore processes of continuity and change in Japanese preschool education over the course of a generation. The social changes that are associated with changing preschool practices in Japan include: a falling birth rate, women's changing attitudes about marriage and work, the social isolation of families, a putative decline in the quality of parenting, and a prevailing mood of national pessimism that is closely tied to a long period of economic decline. These factors are discussed in relation to Komatsudani's minimalist approach to curriculum, to its strategy for dealing with children's disputes, and to its development of a system of older children helping with the care of infants and toddlers.

Japanese society has changed dramatically in the last 20 years. Have Japanese preschools? In this article we attempt to answer this question by focusing on the continuity and change over the past generation at one Japanese *hoikuen* (day-care center), Komatsudani Hoikuen, in Kyoto. In the mid 1980s Komatsudani was the key field site for what became the book and video: *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China, and the United States* (Tobin et al, 1989). The book and video, though still available, are getting old. This is a problem, but also an opportunity, as it gives us a chance to do a sequel that adds a historical dimension to the original project's focus on cultural comparisons.

Cross-cultural studies of preschools are rare; comparative studies with a diachronic dimension much rarer.

As we argued in *Preschool in Three Cultures* (Tobin et al, 1989), preschools are institutions that both reflect and support the cultures of which they are a part. In this sense, preschools are inherently conservative institutions – institutions mandated to produce the kind of child the culture most values. However, preschools are social as well as cultural institutions, which means they are responsive to social pressures and change.

### Our Research Method

In March 2002 we returned to Komatsudani, showed the old and new directors of the preschool the video we had made there in 1985, and asked them to explain how their program had changed in the intervening years. In the second stage of this research, in July 2002, we returned again to Komatsudani with our cameras and made a new video. We used the same method as in the original *Preschool in Three Cultures* study. We edited our video of a typical day down to 20 minutes then showed it to the classroom teacher and asked her to explain the thinking behind her actions as captured on film. We also showed this video to the director, other teachers, and the children, and asked them all to comment on the typicality of the day as shown in our video and on their thoughts about the meanings and significance of the behavior of the teachers and children. We then showed the new Komatsudani video to preschool teachers and administrators and to early childhood education experts in other sites in Japan, and asked for their reactions. Finally, we showed the Komatsudani video to early childhood educators in China and the USA, and the videos we made of preschools in the USA and China to the staff of Komatsudani and to other early childhood educators in Japan. The result is what we call ‘video-cued multivocal ethnography’, a widening circle of voices commenting on the same visual text.

In this article we will use the comments of Japanese teachers, administrators, and early childhood education experts on the old and new videos we made of Komatsudani to analyze connections between continuity and change at Komatsudani and cultural continuity and social change in Japan over the past generation. We will also include a discussion of comments made by directors of other Japanese preschools and by Japanese early childhood education experts on the Komatsudani video. We will explore the following key social changes as being factors which impact on early childhood education in Japan: a falling birth rate, economic decline, changing gender relations and family structures, and something more ephemeral we call ‘national mood’, i.e. the change from a sense of social optimism in Japan in the 1980s to a sense of pervasive pessimism about the health and vitality of Japanese culture, the Japanese family, and Japanese social institutions, including preschools, at the beginning of the new millennium. In reality these are not separate causal factors, but rather interacting pieces of a system, which have complicated

effects on each other as well as on early childhood education. However, for heuristic reasons, we will deal with these factors one at a time, tying each to one or more changes in practice at Komatsudani.

### The School Bus and Demographic Change

In contrast to the video made in 1985, in our new Komatsudani video we see children arriving at school not just on foot or on the back of bicycles, but also by school bus. We see a small, brightly colored school bus pull up in front of the school and unload 20 young children and toddlers (Komatsudani, a *hoikuen* or 'day-care center', serves children aged three months to six). The bus makes two routes each morning.

When we showed them the video, the former director, Yoshizawa Hidenori, who retired last year) and the new director, his daughter-in-law Yoshizawa Norie, explained how the purchase of the school bus had been necessitated by Japan's changing demographics. Japan's birth rate is very low, approximately 1.2 births per family. Demographic change in Japan is not just the result of a low birth rate, but also of a rapidly aging population. Japan is not just aging as a nation, but is aging unevenly – much more rapidly in some neighborhoods than in others. Kumagai-sensei, the director of Senzan Yochien kindergarten (which is located just south of Komatsudani in the Higashiyama ward of Kyoto), pointed out to us that the problem her *yochien* and other preschools in Higashiyama-Ku face is not so much an overall declining population as a dramatic decline in families with young children who live in their particular ward of the city of Kyoto. During the real estate price boom of the 1980s, living in Kyoto became too expensive for young families, who moved out of town to the nearby suburbs, leaving inner-city programs like Senzan Yochien (kindergarten) and Komatsudani Hoikuen struggling to maintain their enrollments. Director Kumagai was cautiously optimistic that the economic downturn in Japan might, paradoxically, help their enrollment situation by leading to a decline in urban real estate prices, thereby allowing younger families to return to live in the city. Otherwise, neighborhoods such as Kyoto's Higashiyama ward risk becoming empty of children.

In the face of these demographic shifts, many preschools in Japan have gone out of business and most of the ones that remain have had to change their way of doing things to attract pupils. Like fishing boats that have to go further and further from their home port to fill their holds, many *yochien* and *hoikuen* are sending their brightly colored fleets of buses further and further out to fill their classes. This strategy of recruiting from outside their immediate neighborhood exacerbates the problem of competition as more and more preschools attempt to recruit from the same pool of children. For each child enrolled from outside their neighborhood, preschools risk losing a local child to another preschool that is also sending its buses further and further out. It could be argued that the increasing geographic range of *yochien* and *hoikuen* recruitment has the benefit of giving families increased choice. However, it

may also have the disadvantage of causing less well-funded programs, which cannot afford buses, to close down, with the net result of fewer preschools serving children in their local community and more children spending more time each day on buses. It also means that *hoikuen* like Komatsudani, which did not have or need buses 17 years ago, must now spend money on a bus service. As the recently retired director, Yoshizawa Hidenori, explained to us:

We didn't use to need buses because the children were all brought to school by their parents or grandparents. But these days, parents in the neighborhood are too busy to walk up the hill with their children in the morning or they live too far from school to bring their children, so to get enough children, we have to provide a bus service.

### **Falling Birth Rate and the Rise of 'Curricular Frills'**

As several preschool directors explained to us, another effect of the declining birth rate on preschools is that many preschools, and particularly private *yochien*, are distorting their curricula to woo prospective pupils. Some preschools with declining enrollments feel compelled to add 'trendy' programs of little educational or social value. In neighborhoods where ambitious, nervous young parents are seeking an academic fast start for their children, preschools increasingly give in to the temptation to do more explicit academic instruction than they would do otherwise (as we reported in our original study, most Japanese preschools do relatively little explicit teaching of reading, writing, or mathematics). Computer studies, tennis, swimming, and English conversation are among the enrichment activities being added to the standard *yochien* curricula to attract pupils. From the point of view of consumer rights, this can be viewed as a good thing, as increasing competition compels preschools to be more sensitive to the desires of their potential 'customers'. However, most of the Japanese early childhood experts and preschool directors we interviewed viewed the effects of such competition on the curricula as an unfortunate pressure, leading preschools to pander to the sometimes misguided desires of the families of their potential pupils and to lose sight of what is good for the children.

The teachers and directors at Komatsudani assured us that they were resisting such pressures to change or distort their curriculum. As their mission and mandate emphasize childcare over education, *hoikuen* ('day-care centers') are much less vulnerable than *yochien* ('preschools') to pressures to jazz up or otherwise distort their curricula.

It is unclear what this increased competition caused by the declining birth rate will mean in the long run for the quality of Japanese early childhood education. A Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest, or market-capitalism model would suggest that competition will improve quality, as weaker programs will naturally die out and stronger programs will become even stronger. Our preliminary hunch is that this will occur in some cases, as weak programs will close first and strong programs will not only survive, but will even grow.

However, we worry that in other cases very good preschools with a solid curriculum and experienced, caring staff, but without working capital or entrepreneurial leadership, will lose out to programs run by directors with more business sense than knowledge of young children. More than ever before preschool directors in Japan have to be good business people as well as good educators.

### **Women's Work and the Business of Preschool**

Economic decline has complex effects on the preschool workforce and on preschool enrollment. During a period of recession, as companies hire fewer university and junior college graduates, preschool teaching becomes a more attractive career option for some young women, potentially increasing the quality of the labor pool in early childhood education. Bad economic times may also mean that female preschool teachers are less likely to retire at the age of 24 for example, when they get married or have their first child, than they were 17 years ago. Such career decisions naturally reflect not just economic change but also changing attitudes towards family life and women's work. Today, more Japanese women are choosing to delay marriage, to not marry at all, or to not give up their job once they get married. The growing preference of female preschool teachers to hold on to their positions runs into conflict with the growing determination of the directors of private preschools to keep salaries down by having a staff that is relatively young and inexperienced (in Japan, the level of pay is closely tied to years of experience). As Professor Kyomi Akita of Tokyo University explained to us, the average age of teachers in public *yochien*, where teachers have more job security, is much higher than in private *yochien*, where the need to make a profit leads some directors to pressure teachers into retiring before their salaries increase. Akita believes that this practice contributes to substantial differences in the quality of teaching between public and private *yochien*.

In many countries an economic recession might lead parents to decide to pull their children out of preschool to save on tuition fees or to move their children from more expensive to less expensive preschools. However, we see no indications that this is happening in Japan, where preschool attendance remains nearly universal. It is possible that some parents who are struggling financially will decide to send their children to *yochien* for only two rather than three years. However, tough economic times seem, if anything, to be having the opposite effect, leading parents to invest even more heavily in their children's education. During tough economic times, mothers of young children are also more likely to be in the workforce. This means that more families enroll their children in preschools at the age of three rather than waiting until their children are aged four and that more families need the full-day schedule provided by *hoikuen* rather than the 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. schedule typical of *yochien*. Changing attitudes of young mothers towards their careers means that more and more of them want to keep their jobs after they have children. In order to

compete with *hoikuen* for children of parents who need or want full-day care, many *yochien* are offering after-school care and enrichment programs, which is blurring the boundary between *hoikuen* and *yochien*.

### **The Lack of Siblings and an Increased Emphasis on *Omoiyari* ('Empathy')**

In addition to leading some Japanese preschools to add 'curricular frills' and to encourage experienced teachers to retire before their salaries get too expensive, demographic change has also had some less linear effects on the Japanese preschool curriculum. For example, the fact that a growing percentage of children do not have younger siblings is making it increasingly imperative that Japanese preschools emphasize social relations and support the development of *omoiyari* ('empathy'). In a society where young children have few siblings or cousins and live in urban settings that provide few opportunities for them to interact with peers, Japanese early childhood educators believe that preschools have to provide for experiences that were once naturally occurring at home and in neighborhoods. In our original study, we found that much of the Chinese preschool curriculum was based on the need to give special attention to the problems of the single-child family. Unlike China, Japan has no enforced single-child family policy, and yet, because parents are having only one or two children by choice, it is facing many of the same problems in that children are being spoiled and are having fewer opportunities for spontaneous peer interaction. In the Japanese context, there is less concern over spoiling than over the need to help the only child to develop *omoiyari* ('empathy').

In the video we made in 1985 at Komatsudani, we see a few four- and five-year-old girls playing with babies in the morning, before the formal school day starts. In response to our queries, Assistant Director Higashino explained the rationale behind this informal practice:

We believe it is important for the older children because it gives them a chance to experience what it feels like to take care of another person. These days most of our children do not have younger siblings, and we feel this contact with babies and toddlers gives them a chance they might not otherwise have to develop empathy [*omoiyari*] and to learn to know and anticipate the needs of another [*ki ga tsuku*]. (Tobin et al, 1989, p. 35)

In our 1989 book we wrote:

Komatsudani was unusual among the preschools we visited in Japan in the amount of contact allowed and encouraged between older and younger children, but in all the *hoikuen* (day-care centers) and *yochien* (nursery schools) we visited, teachers and administrators stressed the importance of helping children develop compassion and empathy. (Tobin et al, 1989, pp. 35-36)

When we returned to Komatsudani in the summer of 2002, we discovered that what had once been an informal custom of allowing the older children to play with the babies and toddlers had evolved over the years into a formal system of mixed-aged interaction between the older and younger children. Now, when the babies' and toddlers' nap time ends, five of the children from the oldest class put on aprons and head downstairs to help care for them. Nozawa-sensei, the teacher of the five-year-olds (who was a student teacher at Komatsudani when we made the original video in 1985), explained to us that, each day five *toban* ('monitors' or 'helpers') from the oldest class visit the baby and toddler rooms after nap time to help the children change their clothes, use the bathroom, and eat their snacks. In the new video we see five-year-olds changing infants' and toddlers' shirts, feeding them snacks, and encouraging an 11-month-old child to take his first steps. Perhaps the cutest and most dramatic of these scenes is when a five-year-old boy gives a two-year-old boy a lesson on how to pee into and then flush a urinal. We see five-year-old Kenichi take two-year-old Nobuo to the bathroom. Positioning Nobuo in front of the urinal, Kenichi commands, 'Pee, please'. Noticing that Nobuo is oblivious to the position of the tail of his dangling pajama top, Kenichi reaches over and pulls up the top, keeping it clear of the stream of urine. 'Is it coming out?' asks Kenichi, and a few seconds later, 'Nothing left in your pee-pee?' Reaching up and pushing the button on top of the urinal, Kenichi says, 'Now I'm going to flush'. Noticing that the roar of the flush is both exciting and a bit scary to young Nobuo, Kenichi puts on a look of exaggerated surprise, opening his mouth wide and cupping his face in his hands. Nobuo, laughing, points at Kenichi's face. Kenichi, turning toward the camera, rolls his eyes in a gesture of mock irritation, suggesting amusement, affection, and intimate knowledge of the simple pleasures and concerns of two-year-olds.

Nozawa-sensei explained that the current practice of having *toban* care for the infants and toddlers on a rotating basis evolved gradually, based on his and the other teachers' observations of the children:

We noticed that the older children really like taking care of the younger ones, but that some of the children did this more than others. So I got the idea that we could get more of the children involved if we established a *toban* system – we already had children taking turns being *toban* for other classroom duties. We just added helping out with the small children to the responsibilities of the older ones. We don't make anyone do it who doesn't want to, but generally they all want to do it.

This is an interesting case of institutional change that, to borrow a term from Max Weber, can be described as 'routinization', as a once spontaneous practice that was recognized as fulfilling an important function has become institutionalized. The practice of the older children caring for the younger ones has evolved into an important part of the daily schedule at Komatsudani and an important feature of the curriculum.

There are several things to point out about the development of this practice. One is that it would have been less likely to develop in a preschool that has a more rapid turnover of staff and a less consistent institutional vision. There is now a new director at Komatsudani, but she was hand-picked and mentored by the old director, Yoshizawa Hidenori (in fact, she came to Komatsudani from another temple preschool where she taught not only as director but also, via an arranged marriage, as the wife of Yoshizawa's eldest son). Nozawa-sensei, now in his eighteenth year at Komatsudani, has had the chance to observe the children's spontaneous behavior over a long stretch of time and to initiate a dramatic and at the same time incremental innovation in the daily schedule based on his observations of the children. It is unlikely he could have been successful in launching this innovation were it not for the rapport he enjoys with the teachers in the infant and toddler rooms (over the years he has taught in each of the rooms at Komatsudani, working with each of the other teachers). It is also important that we emphasize that Komatsudani's contemporary approach to mixed-aged interactions is not found in most other Japanese preschools. As was the case in 1985, although Komatsudani's practice is not typical, the logic behind the practice is widely endorsed by Japanese early childhood education experts and by the teachers and directors of other Japanese preschools who have watched our new video. In *yochien*, which have no children under the age of three, there is no opportunity for the older children to interact with infants and toddlers. However, *yochien* staff who have watched our Komatsudani video have told us that they encourage spontaneous interactions between older and younger children in the playground. Many directors told us that they have instituted systematic interactions between older and younger classes (for example, having them collaborate on projects or assigning older children as 'older siblings' to younger ones). Other *hoikuen* directors reported that their older children often interact spontaneously with their babies and toddlers, and that, while they had not considered initiating a *toban* system for mixed-aged interaction before seeing our video, it was something they might now consider.

In the past few years *tatte-wari kyoiku* ('vertical' or 'mixed-age education') has become a popular concept in Japanese early childhood education (Ben-Ari, 1997, pp. 61, 81). *Tatte-wari kyoiku* usually does not, like at Komatsudani, take the form of having older children routinely care for infants and toddlers. It usually involves classes of different aged children (aged three, four and five) at *yochien* being brought together to do activities. Older children caring for infants in *hoikuen* and mixed-aged play in *yochien* are different practices, but the logic behind them is much the same.

In the evolution of Komatsudani's custom of having older children take turns in being caretakers of the little ones we can see a cycling back to a kind of childhood and a mode of child socialization that was, until very recently, characteristic of most human communities. We suspect that many adult viewers of the 'pee lesson' scene find it uncanny, like visiting a place for the first time but having a strong feeling of having been there before. The 'pee



lesson' only seems strange when looked at through a contemporary filter, in which we assume the separation of younger and older children and, in the case of the USA, in which fears of sexual abuse in childcare settings intrude on the scene's innocence. However, on a deeper level this scene is familiar. It is a memory from our own childhood and a collective cultural memory.

One of the key findings of the original study was that preschools are inherently conservative in that they are relatively new social institutions charged with making sure young children are taught traditional cultural values. Preschools are asked to compensate for the disappearance of the experiences children enjoyed in earlier eras in their families and communities. Komatsudani's innovative practice of having the older children take turns in serving as childminders brings the history of childcare full circle. As Bea Whiting & Carolyn Edwards explain in their book *Children of Different Worlds* (1988), until the last 100 years or so, while their parents worked most children in most of the world's cultures were cared for by other (older) children for most of the day. This is still the case in subsistence agricultural societies in many parts of the world. In industrialized societies, including contemporary Japan, China, and, to a lesser extent, the USA, older children minding younger ones is becoming a lost art, a vanishing experience, a forgotten form of knowledge. Komatsudani's radical new practice of having five-year-old children care for infants and toddlers can therefore be thought of as a rediscovery of a cultural practice and logic that has been lost in most modern societies.

### **Parenting, the Shrinking World of Childhood, and Dealing with Difficult Children**

Many of our Japanese informants complained of a decline over the past generation in the quality of parenting, a decline that makes their jobs more difficult. Many of the directors and teachers we have interviewed in the past year complained that young Japanese parents are selfish, ignorant about child development, and preoccupied with their careers and hobbies. Preschools, along with elementary schools and junior high schools, are reporting an increase in behavioral problems among their students, problems educators attribute to many causes (e.g. diet, television, and video games) but usually, in the end, blame on the parents.

We have no way of determining if the quality of parenting has, objectively, become worse in Japan since 1985, but, whatever the reality, the perception that parenting has deteriorated is having an impact on Japanese early childhood education. Japanese early childhood educators, believing that parents are unable or unwilling to teach children proper values at home, feel compelled to try to compensate.

The more thoughtful of the Japanese educators we spoke with, rather than blaming parents for their inadequacies, saw them also as victims of a breakdown in the fabric of Japanese society. Parents struggle because they are cut off from access to their own parents, grandparents, and other experienced

child rearers, and because they 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.

These causes for the decline in parenting and for the increase in behavioral problems in young children are the same ones that we heard a generation ago from Japanese early childhood educators and child development experts and that we cited in *Preschool in Three Cultures*:

Principal Yoshizawa was among those who told us that the world of the Japanese child has become too sheltered: 'Children's lives have become so narrow. Most of our children live in apartments, with just their parents, who tend to overindulge them and make things too easy for them'. Our informants often used the word *narrow* (*semai*) to describe the world of contemporary Japanese children. Several Japanese parents told us that they fear their children are missing out on the spontaneous, unsupervised interactions with other children that they recall experiencing when they were growing up in larger families surrounded by a friendly sea of cousins, family friends, and neighbors. (Tobin et al, 1989, p. 59)

Why do we hear today the same concerns about the deterioration of Japanese society, parenting, and childhood that we heard a generation ago? One possibility is that this discourse of decline is a typical malaise of modern and postmodern societies, which consistently believe that things are (even) worse than they were a generation ago, when things were already worse than they were a generation before that (cf. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* [1973]). Another possibility is that things really have become much worse and that the key problems that currently plague Japanese early childhood are exacerbations of the problems that the perspicacious social analyst Yoshizawa Hidenori spotted in their early stages a generation ago.

Whether or not Japanese children are objectively less socially adept and emotionally stable than they were a generation ago, the common perception that they are is guiding practice in Japanese preschools. Most of the Japanese early childhood educators we interviewed believed that, because the world of the child has grown narrow and because young parents are unable or unwilling to give their children what they need, young children come to preschool in dire need of basic social skills. Therefore, the core curriculum of the Japanese preschool is to provide children with the opportunity to experience a social complexity that is lacking at home and in the community, under the care of adults who are less nervous and preoccupied than their own parents (who tend to overprotect or neglect their children, or both).

The most dramatic example in our original video of Komatsudani Hoikuen's approach to encouraging young children to experience social complexity at preschool was a fight between two, four-year-old boys. In the original study, American and Chinese viewers of the video were most disturbed by the naughty behavior of four-year-old Hiroki and by what non-

Japanese viewers saw as the failure of his teacher, Fukui-sensei, to intervene when he hit Satoshi, stepped on his hand, and hit and abused other classmates.

In our new Komatsudani video we are once again presented with scenes of children fighting and of teachers' non-intervention. This time, however, the fighting children are a group of girls rather than a pair of boys. In our new video, the youngest child in the class, Yoko, struggles with other girls for possession of a teddy bear throughout the morning. In the key scene, we see Yoko and her classmates Midori, Reiko, and Keiko pulling and tugging on the teddy bear. With help from Midori and Keiko, Reiko eventually comes away with it. Yoko tries to grab it away from Reiko and her twin sister, Keiko, intervenes, pulling on the back of Yoko's dress. The three girls fall to the floor into a pile of twisting, pushing, and pulling bodies. From across the room we hear Morita-sensei call out, '*Kora, Kora!*' ('Hey!'), but she does not come over to break up the fight. Eventually, Reiko emerges from the pile with the bear and then crawls under a table, where it will be harder for Yoko to get at her. Keiko tells Yoko, 'Stop it. It's not yours, it's Reiko's.' The girls discuss what to do. Midori suggests that Reiko should give the bear to Yoko. Reiko pokes her head out from under the table and Yoko says to her, 'Give it me.' Keiko, Midori, and Nana discuss what to do. Nana says to Keiko, 'You should scold her!' Keiko admonishes Yoko, 'That's bad! You can't just grab the bear away like that!' Yoko responds, 'But I had it first.' Midori replies, 'But then you put it down, so your turn was over.' Yoko, pouting, is led away to the other side of the room by Midori, who says to her, 'You can't do that. Do you understand? Promise?' Linking little fingers with Yoko, the two girls swing their arms back and forth as they sing, 'Keep this promise, or swallow a thousand needles.' Midori then puts her arm around Yoko's shoulders and says to Yoko, 'Understand? Good.' Morita-sensei, who throughout this altercation has been walking back and forth near the fighting girls, tidying up after the morning's activity, then announces that it is time for lunch. Midori, her arm around Yoko, rubs her back and leads her to the line of children forming in the doorway.

Many viewers find this fight even more disturbing than the fighting in our original Komatsudani video, perhaps because physical fights seem more natural for boys than for girls, or perhaps because the aggression seems to come from a group rather than from an individual, which more strongly raises the specter of bullying. Indeed, one interpretation of the fight for the teddy bear would be that this is a group of older girls ganging up on the youngest one. However, we suggest that a more accurate and useful way to think about what is going on here is to view the teddy bear struggles as a group of older girls playing with and socializing their least mature classmate. We suggest that this second point of view is more accurate and useful because this is how Morita-sensei and the other staff members at Komatsudani view the situation. This point of view is also consistent with Japanese theories of child development, which would suggest that Yoko's behavior here, though babyish and seemingly counterproductive, is, in fact, pro-social, as is the older girls' response. The Japanese psychoanalyst Doi Takeo would see in Yoko's behavior a form of

*amae* ('dependency wish'), an appeal for attention and inclusion, which is presented awkwardly but in a form that the older girls intuitively understand and respond to. The response of the older girls is also pro-social: by fighting with and correcting Yoko they choose to include rather than ignore or ostracize her, which they could do by letting her have the bear, which, after all, means more to her than to them. Morita-sensei told us that the scenes we caught on video of the girls fighting over the bear go on, intermittently, throughout every day. Sometimes the older girls provoke Yoko by one of them beating her to the favorite bear at the beginning of a free-play period; more often Yoko is the initiator. Either way, we suggest it is more useful to think of this as the first move in a game everyone wants to play rather than as the first assault in a fight, with a victim and an aggressor. The appropriate question to ask here is not, 'who started the fight?' but 'who initiated the play and social interaction?' Whoever the initiator is, once the interaction begins the older girls' contribution is to block Yoko's selfish desire to keep the bear to herself, to correct her behavior, and then to comfort her. In order to make sense of the fight for the bear as caught on our video, we need to put it in context. The older girls sometimes provoke Yoko, but they rarely leave her frustrated. Midori joined the twins, Reiko and Keiko, in fighting with Yoko over the bear, but earlier in the morning also helped Yoko separate from her mother at the gate. Yoko is repeatedly scolded by the girls, but also frequently consoled. Indeed, it could be argued that the purpose of the scolding is to provide an opportunity for the consoling, and that the purpose of Yoko's misbehavior is to provide an opportunity to be scolded, and thereby also to be consoled. The girls are physically aggressive, but also physically affectionate.

We are well aware that Morita's strategic non-intervention in the girls' disputes might be misunderstood by viewers of the video as a failure or lack: as a lack of awareness of what is going on in her classroom, of concern for the children's well-being, and of attention to their social development. However, careful examination of the video, coupled with our interview with Morita, demonstrate that she is keenly aware of what is going on in her classroom. Her appearance of indifference to the girls' fighting is a performance, intended to encourage the girls to relate to each other and solve their own problems rather than to turn to her. Knowing the girls well enough to be able to anticipate when and where a situation has the potential to become dangerous or to spin out of control, she can give them time and space to work issues out on their own rather than adopting the strategy of pre-emptive intervention, which is favored by preschool teachers in the USA and China. In those rare cases where the children's fighting becomes dangerous, as when the girls scuffled over the bear too close to the sharp corner of the piano or when Yoko starts swinging her elbows wildly, Morita, monitoring even when she appears not to be, does intervene by calling out, 'that's dangerous' or, 'hey, stop' or occasionally suggesting that the girls settle their differences with *jun ken* ('paper, rock, scissors'). In these situations Morita's interventions are minimally disruptive to the children's interactions – she calls out from across the room, but does not

come over, or she suggests a simple solution, without mediating the dispute or assigning blame.

Morita reads signs of a gradual process of social development in the fights, both for Yoko and for the other girls. Yoko is having a difficult first few months in preschool, but she is making progress. Morita explained to us that Yoko entered Komatsudani at the beginning of the school year in April, not only as the youngest child in the class but also as one of the few students in the Dandelion class who were coming to the *hoikuen* for the first time. All but two of the students in the Dandelion class had been with Morita the year before in the three-year-olds' class. Yoko faced the additional challenge of entering preschool just three months after her younger sister had been born. Given these factors, Yoko's acts of selfishness and her relative lack of social skills are more understandable.

Most of the Chinese and American early childhood educators who watched this video were horrified by the girls' pushing, hitting, and rolling around on the floor, fighting over the bear. However, we would suggest that this reaction of horror to the girls' fighting is not just a non-Japanese view but also a non-child-centered view of the situation. More precisely, it is a view that is non-Japanese because it is insufficiently child-centered. This is not to suggest that all Japanese early childhood educators would do as Morita does and not intervene in the girls' fighting. What we are suggesting instead is that, compared to their Chinese and American counterparts, Japanese early childhood educators tend to give a higher value to and to have a higher tolerance for the childlike (*kodomo-rashii*) behavior of children. To many Japanese viewers, the girls are not so much out of control in these physical tussles as acting like four-year-old children – children who are not so much misbehaving as behaving pro-socially, but in an immature and childlike way. Just as Kenichi's instruction of Nobuo on how to 'pee' is a child's rather than an adult's version of pedagogy, the older girls' interactions with Yoko are how four-year-olds deal with a classmate's selfishness and babyishness. Their approach is less abstract, heavy, and logocentric, but more physical and cathartic than when adults try to teach immature four-year-olds the importance of sharing. The girls' pattern of interaction is intensely pro-social on all sides, in contrast to the break in the social flow and the sense of being a community of peers that occurs when the adult teacher feels compelled to break into the children's play space and mediate their disputes. As many of our Japanese informants told us, this, after all, is the main reason children in contemporary Japan need preschool – to have experiences of social complexity that are lacking at home. Adult intervention reduces this complexity. Contemporary Japanese children already get all they need, and more, of adult instruction on how to behave properly when they are at home. Children do not need more adult interventions when they come to preschool.

### Educational Reform and the Curriculum that Looks Like the Absence of a Curriculum

At Komatsudani and at Madoka, a *nobi nobi kyoiku* ('free-play education') *yochien*, where we also filmed in 2002, we had a hard time knowing what to video because the days seemed somewhat formless and less filled with explicit lessons or activities than the days we videoed in Chinese and American preschools. Much of the day at Komatsudani and Madoka is spent in transitions (taking toys out, cleaning up, changing clothes, moving inside and outside and back again) and in unstructured play in the playground and inside.

Some Japanese early childhood educators and a good many parents want preschools to provide more explicit instructional activities. There are a variety of Japanese preschools (see Holloway, 2000), including some that offer a curriculum that features academic preparation, so parents have a choice. However, the great majority of Japanese early childhood educators and parents believe that preschools should emphasize social, emotional, and cognitive development over academic preparation.

Some Japanese early childhood education experts are concerned that most preschool teachers are not doing enough to foster children's 'intellectual development'. Some of these experts have introduced the ideas of Reggio Emilia and other project-oriented curricular approaches that emphasize the importance of teachers arranging cognitively stimulating activities and asking questions that scaffold the intellectual development of young children. While we are in agreement with the goal of providing children with cognitively stimulating experiences in preschool, we are not convinced that Japanese early childhood education will be improved by becoming more like Reggio Emilia or by an increase in the attention given to intellectual development. We would argue that what might appear to be the non-curriculum of Komatsudani is already highly intellectually challenging in a way that reflects what we would call the 'idiosyncratic cultural logic' of Japanese early childhood education, a logic that has evolved rather than been invented. In the history of the development of the Japanese style of preschool education, with *nobi-nobi kyoiku*, high student-teacher ratios, and little teacher intervention, there is no equivalent founding figure to Montessori or Froebel, or a particularly celebrated preschool, such as Reggio Emilia, that can be credited with inventing this approach. The approach practiced at Komatsudani and Madoka and many other Japanese preschools of emphasizing free play and social interaction and of teachers holding back from intervening too quickly in children's disputes is an approach that is practiced widely in Japan without often being explicitly taught in pre-service classes, described in textbooks for preschool teachers, or advocated in the guidelines for teachers and caretakers that are issued periodically by the government (although the core values of this approach are implied in these guidelines, especially for readers who know how to read between the lines).

In 1998, Monbusho (now Monbukagakusho, The Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Culture) issued the *National Curriculum Standards for Kindergartens*. This document gives great emphasis to the social and emotional development of young children through play and social interaction. The document is consistent in emphasis and spirit with the *Education Reform Plan for the 21st Century* document (available at: <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/21plan/010301.htm>) issued in 2001 by Monbukagakusho for elementary and secondary education – a document that reflects a deep concern about the soul of Japanese society; that urges an appreciation for ‘education of the heart’, for critical thinking skills, and for creativity; and that calls for teachers to make classes more enjoyable, free of worry, and easy to understand. One could argue that this document is an example of ‘trickle-up’ curriculum reform, with Japanese elementary schools being encouraged to become more like *nobi-nobi kyoiku* preschools.

We would suggest that Komatsudani Hoikuen’s approach shares basic values and assumptions about children and child development with these curriculum reform documents, and that the day we videoed at Komatsudani is unusually rich in opportunities for children to develop socially, emotionally, and intellectually. The girls’ fighting over the teddy bear gave them the opportunity to experience complex emotions (the new kindergarten guidelines state that children should be ‘experiencing enjoyment and sadness together through establishing active relationships with friends’); to employ language to communicate their feelings and understand the feelings of others; and to progress in their understanding of the need for society to have rules (in this case, rules for sharing and taking turns). The curriculum guidelines for elementary and secondary schools urge teachers to create lessons employing role play and simulations that will give students an opportunity to develop socially. However, we would suggest that it would be impossible for teachers to construct lessons as rich, complex, and authentic as the girls’ struggles and negotiations over the sharing of the teddy bear. Furthermore, what teacher-constructed lesson could be more intellectually rich and stimulating for young children than the opportunity to care for infants and toddlers enjoyed by the older children at Komatsudani? When Kenichi teaches Nobuo to ‘pee’ and flush the urinal, he is not only developing his *omoiyari* (‘empathy’) but also his intellect. Indeed, empathy requires sophisticated working of the mind as well as the heart, because in order to feel what another is feeling and then act in a way that responds appropriately to another’s needs, one must observe, reflect, and plan. In the ‘pee lesson’ we see a five-year-old engaged in high-level intellectual activity, as he must take into account what the younger boy already knows and does not know about peeing into a urinal and the younger boy’s fears, pleasures, and his need for autonomy. No piece of computer software, educational toy, or teacher-orchestrated game can approach sorting out disagreements with classmates or caring for a baby or toddler in intellectual and emotional complexity. This is the core cultural logic of the curriculum of Komatsudani and many other Japanese preschools, a logic that requires great

restraint from teachers, coupled with careful observation, planning, and strategic interventions from teachers.

### **Conclusion: 'national mood' and the future direction of Japanese preschools**

The biggest and most profound difference we sense between Japanese society in 1985 and the present day reflects a combination of the above factors. It can be summed up in one word: pessimism. Where our study in 1985 found great optimism about Japanese early childhood education and Japanese society, in our current study we are hearing mostly pessimistic stories, stories of the effect of economic decline on preschools as businesses and on the problems caused by a decline in the quality of parenting and in the collective loss of core values. We are encountering a lot of finger pointing and assigning of blame and hearing a general sense of pessimism that is larger than a loss of faith in any one institution. There seems to be a loss of faith in the economy, parents, the government, politicians, educators, and, most profoundly, in the future – an absence of belief that things will be better.

The effects of this pessimism and anxiety include the decisions by preschools to close down, based on their judgment that the business climate for preschools is unlikely to improve. They include decisions by government agencies to institute relatively radical (by Japanese standards) curricular reforms and even restructuring in order to produce citizens who will be happier, better rounded, and more socially minded. They also include decisions by parents to delay parenting, to have only one child, or to never have children. The drop in the birth rate is both the cause and effect of this overall sense of pessimism. The drop in the Japanese birth rate, beyond being a cause of economic problems for Japanese preschools and for the rapidly aging Japanese society that faces labor shortages and a dwindling tax base, is also taken as a symptom and as a sign that there is something deeply wrong. Concerned educators and social analysts wonder what has happened to make us a society that does not seem to want or value children? What would we have to do or change to make young couples want to have more than a single child?

Preschools such as Komatsudani see themselves as having an important role to play in addressing these problems. Principal Yoshizawa told us that the decision to add a bus service was not so much a business strategy as a move to be of more service to young families. Having *hoikuen* that offer high-quality, affordable infant and child care is an important piece of the nation's strategy for encouraging young couples to have children and to thereby increase the overall birth rate. Monbukagakusho, no longer concerned only with education, is encouraging *yochien* directors to lengthen their hours and to become more responsive to the needs of working mothers in other ways. *Tatte-wari kyoiku* ('vertical' or 'mixed-age education') is being emphasized in both the *hoikuen* and *yochien* system as a strategy to address the problems of most children not having younger or older siblings. Both *hoikuen* and *yochien* are also taking very



seriously their role of serving not just children but also parents, and of thinking of young parents as their other 'clients', who also need education and support.

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