Reforming the Japanese Preschool System:
An Ethnographic Case Study of Policy Implementation

Akiko Hayashi
Meiji University
Japan

&

Joseph Tobin
University of Georgia
United States

Abstract: This is an ethnographic study of how two Japanese kindergartens are implementing the *yōhoichigenka* policy aimed at reforming the Japanese early childhood education system. The cases of these two kindergartens demonstrate what happens when a top-down mandate reaches the level of individual programs. The programs creatively find ways of responding to the reform mandate and to social change while maintaining what their administrators view as their pedagogical traditions. This paper also argues for the value of ethnographic methods to show how local programs are creative, resistant, and pragmatic in how they deal with top down pressures and directives.
Keywords: Japanese education; early childhood education; education reform; ethnographic case study

Reforma del sistema preescolar japonés: Un estudio de caso etnográfico de implementación de políticas
Resumen: Este es un estudio etnográfico de cómo dos escuelas de pre-escolar japonesas están implementando la política *yōhoichigenka* para reformar el sistema de educación infantil japonesa. Los casos de dos escuelas de pre-escolar muestran lo que sucede cuando un mandato de las autoridades llega al nivel de los programas individuales. Estos programas creativamente encuentran sus propias maneras de responder al mandato de reformar y de cambios sociales mientras mantienen sus tradiciones pedagógicas. Este artículo también discute el valor de la etnografía para mostrar cómo los programas locales son creativos, resistentes y pragmáticos en cómo responden las presiones y directivas de las autoridades.
Palabras clave: educación en Japón; educación pre-escolar; reforma educativa; estudio de caso etnográfico

Reforma do sistema preescolar japonês: Estudo de caso e implementação de políticas
Resumo: Este é um estudo enográfico de como as escolas de pré-escolar estão a implementar a política *yōhoichigenka* para reformar o sistema de educação pré-escolar japonesa. Os casos de duas escolas de pré-escolar mostram que se sucede quando o governo exige uma reforma e esta chega ao nível dos programas individuais. Estes programas criam as suas próprias funções de resposta ao mandato de reformas e de mudanças sociais e mantem as suas tradições pedagógicas. Este artigo também discute o valor da etnografia para mostrar como os programas locais são criativos, resistentes e pragmáticos para responder as exigências e diretivas das autoridades.
Palavras-chave: educação no Japão; educação pré-escolar; reforma educativa; estudo de caso etnográfico

Introduction

For over a century there have been two forms of provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Japan: *yōchien* (kindergartens for children ages 3-6 years old) and *hoikuen* (daycare centers for children ages 0-6). *Yōho Ichigenka* ("Kindergarten/Daycare Center Synthesis") is a policy that calls for combining these two institutions into a new kind of program to be called *kodomoen* (integrated child care and education centers), and placing both forms of early childhood education provision under one central governance structure. This policy, which was first suggested in 1963, over the next few decades was promoted periodically by the government, but with little progress toward a merger. One crucial obstacle was that daycare centers and kindergartens have long been governed by different government ministries, kindergartens by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (hereafter MEXT), and daycare centers by the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare (hereafter MHLW). The creation of a unified system of early childhood education and care therefore required not just compromise between these two huge and powerful bureaucracies, but also between two sectors of early childhood education with different histories, purposes, and constituencies.

This paper explores some of the challenges and possibilities of this reform from the point of view of one category of actors: *yōchien* (kindergarten) directors. Because policy is implemented not just from the top down but also from the bottom up, to understand the *kodomoen* reform, in addition to policy analyses of political wrangling and statistical analyses of the numbers of *hoikuen* and *yōchien* that have closed or been transformed into *kodomoen*, we

need nuanced case studies of how local programs are dealing with the new policy. As Mabrey McClaughlin (1987) argued:

> At each point in the policy process, a policy is transformed as individuals interpret and respond to it. What actually is delivered or provided under the aegis of a policy depends finally on the individual at the end of the line, or the "street level bureaucrat" (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). This perspective shifts the focus of analysis away from institutions and institutional goals to individuals and individual incentives, beliefs, and capacity. Organizations don't innovate or implement change, individuals do. Individuals responsible for carrying out a policy act not only from institutional incentives, but also from professional and personal motivation (p. 173-174).

Following McLaughlin, our focus in this paper is on how the *kodomoen* policy reform is being implemented in local settings. Our work here follows recent school-based studies of educational reforms in Japanese primary and secondary schools by Peter Cave (2016) and Chris Bjork (2016) that demonstrate that even in an educational system as vertical as Japan's, school administrators and teachers have considerable impact on policy implementation. Ryoko Tsuneyoshi (2004) has argued that educational reform in Japan is characterized by reactions to challenges that are often defined as "prospective crises." Reform of education in Japan at the primary and secondary level has focused on addressing perceived crises of children's moral development and academic preparation by making changes to curriculum and pedagogy (Cave, 2016; Lee, 2001). In contrast, reform at the early childhood education and care level has focused on addressing a perceived crisis stemming from demographic and social change, by making structural changes in program funding and provision, with little or no attention to questions of curriculum and pedagogy, which continue to be left mostly to the judgement of practitioners (Hayashi, 2011).

The Context of Japanese Early Childhood Education and Care Reform

By the middle of the 1990s, a decline in the number of preschool-aged children coupled with changes in the labor force and growing concerns about the cost of duplication of services led to a renewed determination by the central government and to increased pressure on MEXT and MHLW to implement a unified ECEC system. As a government committee reported in 1996: "As we have entered an era of declining birthrate, facilities of *yōchien* and *hoikuen* should be merged in order to serve the various needs of children and families." In 2006, the government issued the law titled "The Act on Advancement of Comprehensive Services Related to Education, Child Care, etc. of Preschool Children." This act formally mandated the creation of a merged system and introduced the concept of the *nintei kodomoen*, (literally, "an authorized children's garden"), a new type of institution that would combine the functions of *yōchien* and *hoikuen*. The Japanese *kodomoen* has analogues in the "Child Centers" and "Early Childhood Education and Care" programs that were created to merge the functions traditionally served by nursery schools (part-day programs for the richer classes) and daycare centers (full-day programs for the poorer) in the United States and other countries.

The *kodomoen* policy initiative was driven by two major social phenomena: a low birthrate and an increase in participation of women in the workforce. The birthrate in 2005 was 1.26, which is the lowest number on record in Japan and well below the figure of 2.07, which is generally considered a minimum birthrate to maintain the population. This low

birthrate combined with high longevity has led to an upside down demographic pyramid, with only 13.7 % of the population under 15 years old, 65.8% between 15 and 64, and 20.1% over 65.

One government response to this low birthrate has been to encourage young women to have children by expanding childcare services and extending parental leave under a policy dubbed "The Angel Plan" (Roberts, 2002). Reducing or even eliminating the cost to parents of early childhood education and care, as has recently been proposed (c.f. Koizumi, 2017), is seen as an investment in raising the birth rate, based on the logic that this will reduce one of the economic barriers parents face when making decisions about having children. More directly, free all-day care for infants and young children will allow more young women to stay in the workforce, which will ameliorate the decline in number of working adults and thereby increase the number of taxpayers. The logic for the *kodomoen* early childhood education and care reform therefore seems to be irrefutable. However, there is political resistance arising out of the demographics of Japanese politics: the predominance of post-reproductive voters in Japan's aging society leads to pressure on politicians to channel more government money to geriatric services rather than to early childhood services.

Even though the birthrate has been decreasing for many years, in many communities there are long waiting lists for childcare slots. In 2015, over 23,000 children were on waiting lists for childcare. As Yuki Imoto (2007) explains:

> *We have seen that the problem of taikijidou* [waiting lists] is not due to the lack of overall places in preschools, of which there should be a surplus in supply, but due to severe imbalances – firstly the imbalance in the demand for *youchien* and *hoikuen*; secondly the imbalance within the *hoikuen* that cater for infants and those that only take children over the age of three; and thirdly, the discrepancy between urban and rural regions (p. 96).

Another factor driving enrollments in daycare programs is that in contemporary Japan increasing numbers of young women do not want or cannot afford to interrupt employment when they have a baby. This factor is also related to changing attitudes about women's work, marriage, and family (Roberts, 1994).

For the past 30 years or so it has become increasingly clear to policy makers concerned about the inefficiency and cost of the nation running two parallel forms of ECEC that this split system is untenable. Policy makers repeatedly have laid out the logical rationale for reform and offered *hoikuen* and *yōchien* a variety of incentives to change, and yet the *kodomoen* merged system initiative has grown only slowly. To date, a decade after the formal introduction of "The Act on Advancement of Comprehensive Service Related to Education, Child Care, etc. of Preschool Children," fewer than 10% of the early childhood education and care programs in the nation were *kodomoen*. In 2015, there were 2,836 *kodomoen* (19,428 children) in Japan, as compared with 11,674 *yōchien* (1,557,461 children) and 23,533 *hoikuen* (2,330,658 children).

Many factors contribute to why the conversion of *hoikuen* and *yōchien* has proceeded so slowly. This paper addresses one piece of this story: the challenges the *kodomoen* policy reform presents to private *yōchien*. We focus on case studies of private rather than public *yōchien* for two reasons: private *yōchien* serve four times as many children than do public ones, and private programs have more latitude than do public programs in how they respond to social change and political and demographic pressures. We focus on *yōchien* rather than *hoikuen* because *hoikuen* are under less pressure to become *kodomoen* than are *yōchien*. Over the past two decades, the percentage of 4- and 5-year-old children in *yōchien* as compared with

hoikuen has steadily declined. *Hoikuen*, which have always provided all-day care for infants and toddlers as well as for 4-6 year olds, already are functioning in most respects like *kodomoen*, and therefore have little incentive to change (Poole, 2016). It is *yōchien* for whom the demographic changes represent an existential crisis, as the number of children ages 4-6 years old whose parents are looking for a part-day program has shrunk the most dramatically. For several decades *yōchien* in communities with declining numbers of young children have been adapting by extending their hours, taking children younger than age 3, and offering after-school care to primary school students.

This paper presents case studies of how two Japanese private *yōchien* are implementing the *yōho ichigenka* policy reform and pressure to become *kodomoen*. It describes the strategies these two *yōchien* are employing to balance government requirements, changing demographics, and parental needs and preferences with their resources and sense of purpose. These two cases show how these *yōchien* are creatively adapting to the policy reform in ways that allow them, to the degree possible, to maintain their traditions, philosophy, and client base. As *yōchien* are slowly evolving into *kodomoen*, case studies of the strategies ECEC programs are employing to adapt to the new governance structures can provide a nuanced understanding of intricacies of the *kodomoen* policy implementation.

The material used in this paper comes from interviews with administrators at two preschools: Midori Yōchien and Sakura Yōchien (pseudonyms). Midori Yōchien is a private kindergarten, run as a family business, in a bustling urban neighborhood of Tokyo. Located in a Buddhist temple in Kyoto, Sakura Yōchien is run by the family of a Buddhist priest. When we visited Midori and Sakura in the spring of 2016, both preschools had just completed the construction of new buildings and for the first time were enrolling infants and toddlers.

This is an ethnographic case study; we have worked with the staff at these schools for many years. Over the past five years when we visited these research sites and asked the directors how things are going, they showed us the new buildings under construction and told us about their plans to expand their services. This led us to decide to do some interviews with these directors focused on their responses to the *kodomoen* reform. We interviewed the pairs of retiring and new directors once each year from 2014-2017.

The Institutional Cultures of *Yōchien* and *Hoikuen*

The origins of ECEC in Japan, as in many other countries, began with a split between part-day programs for children of the higher classes, and full-day programs for children of the working classes. The late 19th century in Europe and the United States saw the development of kindergartens, which were conceived as part-day programs for 3- and 4-year-old children from middle class and wealthy families, and daycare centers, which were created to address the needs of working women, impoverished and immigrant families who were viewed as unable and even unfit to provide their infants and young children with a healthy start to life (Lissak, 1989). By the late 19th century, nursery schools and childcare centers began to appear in Japan, often set up by missionary organizations (Wollons, 2000). In Japan, as in Europe and the US, the two systems historically have served children from families of different social classes.

A century ago and still today, Japanese families that cannot afford to have mothers not working outside the home need a different kind of childcare than middle class and wealthy families with mothers who do not need to work outside the home. *Yōchien*, which have traditionally served stay-at-home mothers, are not set up to provide daycare for

children under 3 years old. Moreover, the traditional 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. schedule of the *yōchien* does not meet the needs of families where both parents are employed outside the home. *Hoikuen*, which are open from about 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. and serve infants through children ages 6 years old, are set up to meet the needs of working parents.

The divide is one of not just hours but also of purpose, social class, and status. *Yōchien* directors tend to view *hoikuen* as doing childcare and not knowing how to do education; *hoikuen* directors tend to view *yōchien* as not knowing how to serve the needs of working families and not knowing childcare (Poole, 2016). In *Preschool in Three Cultures*, Tobin et al. (1989) described how *yōchien* tend to view *hoikuen*:

> A sense of superiority and even smug condescension is apparent in *yōchien* teachers' and especially administrators' suggestion that what they do in their preschools cannot be compared to what is done in a *hoikuen*. When asked to compare her school to a *hoikuen*, an Osaka *yōchien* assistant principal said: "I think one really can't compare the two because they are so basically different in educational approach and goals and history…." (p. 45).

In 1947, The School Education Law defined *yōchien* as educational institutions and formally placed them under the control of the Ministry of Education; the Child Welfare Law, passed the same year, defined *hoikuen* as welfare facilities and placed them under the control of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. These two ministries consistently have resisted ceding control of their sectors of early childhood education and care. Schoppa (1991) has argued that a distinctive feature of educational reform in Japan is that the battles are fought less between political parties, among educators, or in the court of public opinion, than by government ministries, which wield much more power, vis-a-vis politicians, than do their counterparts in the US and the UK. While politicians call for removing the distinctions between yochien and *hoikuen*, MEXT bureaucrats have been a counterforce, one that protects the interests and is for the most part consistent with the perspectives of *yōchien* directors.

Midori Yōchien

Midori Yochien was founded in 1970 by Toshi Yamada, who worked with an architect to design a preschool building that would support his philosophy of "relaxed education" and "play-based curriculum." These remain Midori's guiding principles. In April of 2016 Midori added a *kodomoen* program in a new building constructed adjoining the Midori Yōchien playground. The director of Midori Yōchien, Katsu Yamada, is the son of the kindergarten's previous director and founder, Toshi Yamada. Katsu resisted his father's cautionary advice and spent a large amount of money to add a *kodomoen* program.

They have kept the name Midori Yōchien on the school entrance and in their daily conversation, but on their official documents have changed their name to the legalistically awkward: "A *yōhoichigen*-type accredited *kodomoen* Midori Yōchien." Having added the new program, they now serve three types of children. The first is *yōchien* children ages 3-6 who attend *yōchien* for 4-5 hours. The second group is *kodomoen* children ages 3-6 who attend for up to 11 hours each day, going to the *yōchien* program for 4-5 hours, from about 9:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. and spending the rest of the day in the *kodomoen* building. The third type is *kodomoen* children aged 0-2 who spend full days in the *kodomoen*.

Running a *kodomoen* program with the MHLW money means Midori cannot choose which children they enroll and families cannot choose Midori. It is the local district office

that decides which children in the community are selected for the *kodomoen* program. The district also sets the tuition and fees that can be charged for the full-day child care program.

  Midori's solution to the challenge of creating a *kodomoen* program is to have a partial segregation of the two populations: the *kodomoen* children spend part of the day with only *kodomoen* children in the *kodomoen* building; *yōchien* children spend their day only in the *yōchien* building. But the children over 3 years old are all together in their *yōchien* classrooms from 9 a.m.-2 p.m.

  In designing the new program, Katsu Yamada decided to have two entrances in the new *kodomoen* building, one for children to enter when they come from home in the morning, the other doorway for going back and forth between the *kodomoen* building and the *yōchien* building that is on the other side of the playground. Katsu explained how this architectural arrangement demarcates two sites at the school, each with a distinctive mood:

> This is the moment I feel the real difference between *yōchien* and *kodomoen*.
> Like a few minutes ago when we were in the *kodomoen* building, one child was
> hanging onto my leg. He was relaxed. I wasn't a distant figure to him to be
> treated with restraint or formality. This never happens on the *yōchien* side.
> There they know that I am the director and they know how to behave
> towards me with some restraint. If they are at school for the whole day,
> children need a space which feels family-like. It's good to have both settings
> in that sense, *yōchien* and *kodomoen*. So the children can begin the day in the
> *kodomoen*, then go to the *yōchien* for the morning and lunch, and then come
> back to the family feel of the *kodomoen* in the early afternoon, when the *yōchien*
> day ends.

Katsu's comment here speaks to the spatiality of culture, and how the architecture and routines work alongside cultural beliefs and practices in the design and function of the Midori *kodomoen* program. By having two separate buildings, which are home to two different programs, with different architectures and feelings and expectations for comportment, Midori gives the *kodomoen* children a combination of the family like warmth of a *hoikuen* with the structure of the kindergarten. This arrangement gives the *kodomoen* children a "pure" *yōchien* experience for six hours a day.

  Yamada senior and junior had a difference of opinion about whether or not to create a *kodomoen* program, as Toshi Yamada explained to us:

> Over time Katsu convinced me. I first disagreed with his idea to add a
> *kodomoen* program. I've been doing *yōchien* for many years, believing that this
> is best for children. I believe that ideally all children should get a *yōchien*
> education. But Katsu told me that there are two types of young women these
> days; ones who need to work for money and ones who want to have a career.
> I want to support those women who seek a career, so I eventually agreed
> with his idea. It's challenging, but in the end, I agreed with him and let him
> go ahead.

There is a suggestion here of a social class divide. Mothers who "work for money" are presumably the working-class mothers who have no choice but to work, and whom *hoikuen* have traditionally served. Unmentioned but implied in Toshi's comments is the type of middle class mother who stops working when she has a child and who has traditionally enrolled her child in *yōchien*. "Mothers who want to have a career" refers to a type of Japanese mothers who were once rare, and now a larger and growing segment of Japanese

society. These are the mothers who in terms of social class are the typical *yōchien* client, but whose career aspirations do not match with the *yōchien*'s traditional part-day hours.

We caught Midori in a moment of transition, not just shifting from a *yōchien* to a *kodomoen*, but also generationally, as a son was taking over from his father. Toshi Yamada decided that it was time for him to defer to Katsu's ideas. Katsu is committed to maintaining Midori's *yōchien* tradition while also positioning Midori to thrive as a business in the future. Just as 40 years ago Toshi Yamada hired an architect to design an ideal preschool, Katsu hired an architect to design the ideal *kodomoen*. Midori is still in the process of working out how best to integrate the two programs.

Sakura Yōchien

The Yagi family founded Sakura Yōchien in 1953, on the grounds of their temple on a hillside in Kyoto. The kindergarten's guiding principles from its founding have been based on Buddhist philosophy and the values of children being cheerful, honest, and friendly (*akaruku, tadashiku, nakayoku*). Four years ago, the vice-director of Sakura Yōchien, Maki Yagi, a granddaughter of the *yōchien*'s founder, decided to add a *hoikubu* (child care section). Sakura opened this service in April of 2016, at the same time as Midori opened their *kodomoen* program. Sakura is calling their under-3 program a *hoikubu*, and the new program is not officially a *kodomoen*, but instead a Kyoto-city accredited "small-scale childcare service." The program enrolls infants from 18 months to 2 years old, for eight hours per day. When the children in this program reach the age of 3, they move to the *yōchien*. As a service for children of parents who work full days, Sakura provides supervised care (*azukari hoiku*) for *yōchien* children from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Sakura spent 200 million yen (about two million dollars) of their own funds to build a new multi-story building to house their *hoikubu*, with the local government contributing 16 million yen (about $160,000). Of this expenditure the former director, Ryoko Yagi, explained: "We don't view this as taking a risk. We view it as an investment in our future." If Sakura had been willing to become an official *kodomoen* they could have received government funds to construct the building. Spending their own money was a strategy to preserve independence.

Sakura differs from Midori in the way they handle services for children ages 3-6 years old who need full day care. At Midori, these children spend from approximately 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. in the *yōchien* program, and move to the *kodomoen* building from 2 p.m. until they are picked up by their working parents. In contrast, at Sakura there is no official *hoiku* program for the 3-6 year olds to attend before and after their day in *yōchien*. Instead, these children are enrolled in the Sakura *yōchien* program, and then those who need full day care stay in the *yōchien* for extended day-care when their classmates go home at 2 p.m.

Another difference between the Sakura and Midori programs is that Sakura runs two parallel programs for children under two: one toddler program enrolls children through the local district office, whose parents pay on a sliding fee scale; the other toddler program serves families who pay tuition out of pocket. The children in these two programs do not mix. They are housed in the same building, but on floors, with different caretakers, schedules, and kinds of lunch.

Unlike *hoikuen*, Sakura's *hoikubu* program does not take babies under 18 months. The Yagis explained that this is because they do not see baby care as consistent with their tradition and mission, or as welcomed by their staff. There is a general reluctance of *yōchien* teachers to work with younger children. A survey suggests that 70% of preschool teachers

disagree with the *yōhoichigenka/kodomoen* policy (Shindo, 2008). As the Yagis explained, enrolling infants is a challenge for their teachers, whose training and experience is with older children:

> Ryoko Yagi: Caring for infants is very different work, and requires very different skills. We may gradually expand the program to serve children under eighteen months old. By doing so only gradually we can give our teachers time to get used to dealing with infants.
>
> Maki Yagi: For the new *hoikubu* program we have hired new teachers who have expertise in working with children under age 3. This doesn't mean that *yōchien* teachers won't eventually work in the *hoikubu* program. Some may shift to *hoikubu* next year. Whatever our backgrounds and training, we are still one team.

Most Japanese work places provide for one year of parental leave, which means that Sakura is not a feasible option for most working parents. Maki commented:

> I think, sure, many mothers work. But I believe that the future is for mothers to have more control over their work conditions so they can spend more time with their children. I want our *hoikubu* to serve women who want to have a balance between their work and parenting, especially when their children are little. It's difficult, for example, for a doctor to find such a balance. But even a doctor can cut back on work hours when her children are small. With this idea in mind, our program is designed to serve mothers who find a way to be home with their child for at least the first 18 months, and who after that want care for their child for eight rather than for 11 hours a day. As a result, the parents who enroll their toddlers here are parents who are very committed to their parenting, rather than for parents who just want to put their children in care as early and as long as possible. Because the district assigns children to daycare services, serving the right kind of parents is tricky.

Maki's comments here suggest that she has a vision of Sakura serving a very specific kind of working mother: a woman who values her career, but is not so career-oriented that she does not also value being an engaged mother. The implication is also that Sakura does not intend to serve women who cannot afford to cut back on working full time, and who therefore need full-time childcare, including infant care. We can speculate that not offering care for children under 18 months is a strategy to keep the most work-oriented mothers from enrolling their child at Sakura. This system has the effect of excluding the children of mothers who cannot afford to stay home with their infants. But as Maki explained, this is not the intent of the system, as Sakura has traditionally served the full range of social classes who live in their Kyoto neighborhood:

> For a long time there has been the image in Japan that *hoikuen* is the place where working-class parents put their children. However, these days, I think the social class barrier is getting less and less as more and more mothers are working. Because most of these mothers get only one year at most of parental leave after having a baby, this means that *hoikuen* are the best place for mothers who want or need infant care. What this means for us, as a traditional *yōchien* program, is that we only want to attract parents who are

giving a lot of thought about the need for a balance between work and childrearing.

Maki's comments suggest simultaneously both a continuation and a rethinking of a long-standing binary distinction between two types of mothers. One type, the type Sakura seeks to serve with their extended day program, is a mother who works outside the home, but still takes an active role in childrearing. The other type, the type best served by a *hoikuen* program, is a working woman who for reasons of choice or necessity places work before childrearing.

    Yuki Imoto (2007) argues that such contemporary discourses of motherhood and early childhood education can be traced back over a century, and specifically to the 1899 Imperial Ordinance on Elementary Education and Infant Training, whose regulations required:

> . . .limited kindergarten classroom time to five hours per day, ensuring that operating hours were too limited to permit the schools to care for children while their parents worked. It thus worked in consonance with the newly introduced concepts espoused by the MoE of *ryosai kenbo* ('good wife, wise mother') – a Confucian-tainted 'Japanized' rhetoric of the modern Western middle-class ideology of family domesticity, which rendered women as the homemakers marking a gendered division of labour within the family and transferring the responsibilities of childrearing to the mother (p. 92).

We are not suggesting that Ryoko and Maki Yagi, who, after all, are women who have combined motherhood with careers, are unsympathetic to contemporary pressures on working mothers. However, we can hear in their struggles to identify the types of mothers they seek to serve an echo of a much older discourse about women's roles, social class, and early childhood education. As Imoto (2007) writes:

> In the debates that take place within these reforms, the terms *kyouiku* and *hoiku* will continue to act as the key symbolic terms on which notions of motherhood and childhood are constructed. "Education" and "childcare," within the discourse pertaining to the preschool system, have acted as symbolic terms that sustain the 'cultural' differences of the *yōchien* and *hoikuen* as separate institutions" (p.88). . . . The question of what is *kyoiku* and what is *hoiku* thus remains unresolved. . . In fact, it is the very vagueness of these terms that makes them a powerful and instrumental rhetoric in defending particular views or interests" (p. 98).

As they are steering their program moving through the transition of adding services for toddlers and for children needing extended day care, the Yagis are both responding to and resisting the government's directives. Ryoko Yagi emphasized to us that as their program changes, Sakura continues to be guided by their commitment to children, one that she complains is not understood by many policy makers and bureaucrats:

> Our country still has a serious waiting list problem. People in the government who deal with this problem tend to focus on finding childcare slots for children. They are happy when they find any place for them. Their first priority is "putting those children somewhere." They give little thought to who will be caring for these children. I am worried that this national system encourages parents to have this idea of wanting "just to put their children

somewhere." For me, from my position, from children's perspective, there is
no children's voice in this policy. It's just like looking in a train station for a
place to leave their baggage (nimotsu o azukeru noto ishō).

In this statement Ryoko Yagi expresses her educational philosophy as well as her concern
that a preschool must be a place not where children are stored during the day, but a program
where they are cared for and nurtured. Suggesting that in the eyes of bureaucrats, young
children are like left baggage is telling, as the root of the word for the left luggage service in
train stations, *nimotsu o azukeru tokoro*, is also used in the *kodomoen* policy for after-school care,
which is officially called *azukari hoiku*.

Greg Poole (2016) suggests that this notion of childcare as a kind of child storage
service reflects an unfortunate increasing commercialization of daycare in Japan: "There is a
strong tendency to 'provide a service' for the customers—working parents. For a fee, these
working parents are provided with the service of "child-care"— this is a commercial
transaction focused on the needs of parents in the age of 'dual income' (p. 117)". We can
read Ryoko Yagi's comment about wanting to "attract parents who are giving a lot of
thought about the need for a balance between work and childrearing" as a rebuff to the
government bureaucrats who just want a place to put children, to cynical child-care
providers who market themselves in terms of providing a service to busy parents, and to the
parents who view child care this way. These are the parents Sakura does not want to attract
and the kind of service they want to make clear they do not provide. Parents who want this
kind of child-care should look elsewhere.

Responding to Challenges

While it was once the case that *yōchien* and *hoikuen* served very different kinds of
families and offered very different kinds of early childhood care and education, their
practices and missions have grown more similar over time (Imoto, 2007). Nevertheless, the
government has been trying to merge the two systems since the 1990s, with only modest
success to date.

MEXT and the MHLW have their own institutional cultures, which is one obvious
difficulty to combining the two institutions. The two case studies in this paper suggest that
there is resistance not just in the bureaucracies that oversee ECEC programs, but also at the
level of the local preschools. *Yōchien* like Midori and Sakura are moving in the direction of
kodomoen, but they are doing so on their own terms, based on their physical, economic, and
personnel resources, their understanding of the local communities and constituencies they
serve, and fidelity to their history and sense of purpose. Both schools put a high value on
maintaining their traditions of quality *yōchien* education and on their reputation as the leading
program in their community. And both are determined to continue to serve the kinds of
families they have in the past, while also expanding their client base.

For them to transform themselves fully from *yōchien* to *kodomoen* would require
overcoming several crucial challenges. One challenge is that they do not have expertise for
dealing with children under age 3. They have 50 years of experience doing one kind of early
childhood education, which is targeted to children ages 3-6 years old. If they were to become
kodomoen they would need to serve a more diverse set of families than they have served in the
past as *yōchien*. Working with this wider range of children and families will require a shift in
their sense of mission and hiring staff who have expertise in working with younger children.

This is related to a more subjective and existential fear, a fear that if they were to become a *kodomoen* they would lose something essential or even be contaminated. While the name *kodomoen* is new, a program that offers full-day care and education to children from birth to age 6 cannot escape the association the *hoikuen*'s history of serving working class families. Administrators at both *yōchien* referred to the importance of preserving their "way." Their identity and purpose are rooted in the belief that there is "a Midori way" and "a Sakura way." When speaking of their "way," they are referring to a combination of their implicit and explicit pedagogical practices, their identity, and their reputation, which they are endeavoring to pass down from one generation to the next.

Private *yōchien* like Midori and Sakura that have a long history, with continuous ownership, a low turnover of staff, and children whose parents are alumni, take care not to lose their strengths in a rush to become something they are not. They feel like they already know how to do something very well and that this is worth protecting. Whenever people ask someone to do something new, the risk is they will stop doing the thing that they do well. There are many businesses that are successful at small scale but fail if they grow too much or too quickly or change their focus. With such concerns in mind, the directors of these two preschools are being careful about how they make changes, and to do so on their own terms.

For these reasons, Midori and Sakura for many years resisted adding *hoiku* services. But in the past several years increased pressure from the government coupled with generational changes in the leadership of both schools led both of these *yōchien* to proceed on a path of change. For the last 20 years, the older generation of leadership at both preschools resisted the government's call to remake themselves as *kodomoen*. An interesting similarity is that both programs are making the transition towards being more like a *kodomoen* at the same time that they are in the midst of transferring leadership from one generation to the next (Toshi to Katsu, Ryoko to Maki). At both *yōchien*s, it is the new generation of leaders who are pushing for and figuring out how to implement the *yōhoichigenka* policy. The younger generation of leaders at each school have made calculations based on their reading of what it will take for them to remain successful in the long term. The impetus to change is not just from above, but also from an urgency that the directors of Midori and Sakura feel to expand their client pool in a time of shrinking birth rate and changing women's labor force participation. The new generation of leaders at these preschools are not afraid of change, but they have concerns. Their challenge is to make changes while protecting their sense of who they are and their reputation.

As Hayashi (2011) argued in an analysis of Japan's early childhood education curriculum guidelines, a low-intervention, hands-off approach is typical of how MEXT has historically dealt with *yōchien*. MEXT proscribes "hardware" such as ratios and hygiene, but gives great latitude to *yōchien* on "software" such as schedule, curriculum, and pedagogy. This suggests that for *yōchien*, it is not a matter of just following directives from above on how to convert themselves into a *kodomoen*, but finding their own way.

Sakura and Midori are making changes at the same time, in response to similar pressures, and with similar concerns about the future of their schools, but with different strategies and solutions. Sakura's solution is to start a h*oikubu* program, but not take government money. In this way they can attract young children of working mothers without having to deal with the *kodomoen* bureaucracy. This course is risky financially. Their sense of how burdensome they would find government restrictions is so strong that they are willing to spend a huge amount of their own money. They are protecting their identity and legacy by building a wall between themselves and the *kodomoen* bureaucracy. Another kind of wall they are building is between the two kinds of young children they are serving in their *hoiku*

programs. One group are children whose tuition is paid by welfare funds from their district; the other group are children whose parents pay tuition. These two groups of children are in the same building, but they interact only minimally, as they have their own classrooms, playgrounds, and food.

Midori's solution is to add a *kodomoen* program and then mix the *kodomoen* and *yōchien* children during the day. Children ages 3 – 6 years old with working parents arrive at the *kodomoen* building early in the morning, then at 9 a.m. move to the adjoining *yōchien*. At 2 p.m. when many of their classmates go home, they go back to the *kodomoen*, saying *tadaima* (I'm home) as they enter.

Conclusion

After more than 20 years of struggle to create a unified system of early childhood education and care, Japan seems to be on the verge of doing so. This paper has presented the cases of two *yōchien* that seem to be responding successfully to the *kodomoen* reform and, more generally, to the demographic and social changes that are rationale for the reform. They have added programs for infants and for children needing full-day care in ways that they feel have allowed them to maintain their core values and retain an adequate level of autonomy.

Midori and Sakura are *yōchien* with excellent reputations in their communities, in neighborhoods with relatively stable populations, that have been successful businesses for many years, and that are run by thoughtful, forward thinking directors. The fact that even programs like these with significant strengths and advantages are struggling to implement the *kodomoen* reform and have only done so by carefully balancing risks and rewards suggests that this reform may be more problematic for existing *yōchien* that are less well positioned than Midori and Sakura. We need research on the impacts of the *kodomoen* reform on *yōchien* of varying quality and resources, in rural as well as urban neighborhoods. There is also a need for research, like Greg Poole's study of preschool education and care in a rural area of Japan (2016), on the impacts of the reform on various types of *hoikuen*.

One implication of our study is that well intended reforms that address pressing social problems can sometimes be counterproductive. For example, new bureaucratic demands and regulations and a change in the clients they serve can lead a successful ECEC program to lose its way. Moreover, the uncertainty caused by the call to create a new type of childcare institution can create market pressures that may supplant existing well-functioning programs and destabilize a system that for many decades overall has well served the needs of children, families, and the society.

The *kodomoen* reform may have unintended implications on social class division in Japanese society. Japan's bifurcated ECEC system was constructed over a century ago based on an economic model of haves and have nots, with *hoikuen* serving children of working class families and *yōchien* children from the middle class. In calling for the creation of single, unified system of ECEC services, the *kodomoen* policy does not have an explicit intent of reducing the class divide. But it can be argued that, like the effects on a society of public primary and secondary education, a unified ECEC system that provides local preschools for all residents of a community can have a democratizing, class-leveling effect. This may be one important, but unintended impact of the *kodomoen* reform as Midori and Sakura and other *yōchien*, by extending their age range and hours, come to serve more working class children than they have in the past. On the other hand, an unintended and unwanted effect of the reform may be more class segregation. Wealthier parents needing under-3 and full day care

who currently enroll their children in *hoikuen* may, post-reform, enroll their children in *kodomoen* like Midori and Sakura that were once *yōchien*, leaving their less wealthy counterparts behind in more segregated *hoikuen*. This may eventually undermine the *hoikuen* system by reallocating government funds away from *hoikuen* and towards programs serving the middle class, thereby exacerbating the social class divide in Japan. This problem is akin to the tensions in the United States and other countries that are transitioning from needs-based to universal ECEC services (Fuller, 2008). With government funding already tight and contested in Japan and the largest share of the public budget going towards the elderly, reforms that shift financial assistance to all families for early childhood education and care may work to support the portion going to working class families. In practical terms this may occur if the portion of the budget for ECEC allocated to the Ministry of Education, which has a universal mission, is increased, and the portion going to the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, which has a needs-based mission, is proportionally decreased.

The case studies presented in this paper are of two programs caught in a moment of transformation. In this sense, this is an ideal time to study them, before they or we know exactly what the future holds for them. Five years or so ago the new generation of directors at these programs, Katsu Yagata and Maki Yagi, read the situation in a similar way and decided it was time to make a new investment and change their programs. They did not yet need to do so – their enrollments for time being are good. But it is clear that more of their parents want full-day care and both programs take pride in being responsive to family needs. They also want to be pro-active in preparing themselves for an uncertain future. The directors of both *yōchien* emphasized the need to be flexible in the face of changing conditions.

In this paper, we have analyzed the thoughtfulness and the implicit cultural beliefs these two *yōchien* are bringing to their engagement with the *kodomoen* policy. This kind of analysis can show what happens when a top-down mandate, with some force behind it, reaches the level of individual programs. This paper is also an argument for the need for more such case studies of how government policies get implemented at the level of individual schools. Policies are not just passed and implemented, but rather, local programs are creative, resistant, and pragmatic in how they deal with such top down pressures and directives.

Acknowledgements

References

Bjork, C. (2016). *High Stakes Schooling*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cave, P. (2016). *Schooling Selves: Autonomy, Interdependence, and Reform In Japanese Junior High Education*. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226368054.001.0001

Fuller, B. (2008). *Standardized childhood: The political and cultural struggle over early education*. Stanford University Press.

Hayashi, A. (2011). The Japanese Hands-Off Approach to Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education as a Form of Cultural Practice. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Research in early childhood education, 5*(2), 107-123.

Imoto, Y. (2007). The Japanese Preschool System in Transition. *Research in Comparative and*

International Education, 2(2), 88-101. https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2007.2.2.88

Koizumi, S. (2017). Weren't You Children Once? *Sankei Shimbun*.
    http://www.sankei.com/premium/news/170509/prm1705090005-n1.html.

Lee, J. (2001). School Reform Initiatives as Balancing Acts: Policy Variation and Educational
    Convergence among Japan, Korea, England and the United States. *Educational Policy
    Analysis Archives, 9*(13). https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v9n13.2001

Lissak, R. (1989). *Pluralism and Progressives: Hull House and the New Immigrants, 1890-1919*.
    Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McLaughlin, M. (1987). Learning From Experience: Lessons From Policy Implementation.
    Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis Summer, 9(2), 171-178.

Ministry of Health, Labour, & Welfare (2015). Hakusyo. [Report].
    http://www.mhlw.go.jp

Ministry of Health, Labour, & Welfare (2016). Database. Retrieved from
    http://www.mhlw.go.jp).

Poole, G. (2016). Creating Community at Daycare: Deflecting the Power of the State. In G.
    Stell (Ed.), *Power in Contemporary Japan* (pp. 109- 122). Springer Nature.
    https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59193-7_7

Roberts, G. S. (1994). *Staying on the line: Blue-collar women in contemporary Japan*. University of
    Hawaii Press.

Roberts, G. S. (2002). Pinning Hopes on Angels: Reflections from an Aging Japan's Urban
    Landscape. In R. Goodman (Ed.), *Family and Social Policy in Japan: Anthropological
    Perspectives* (pp. 54-91). https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511806551.004

Schoppa, L. (1991). *Education Reform in Japan: A Case of Immobilist Politics*. London: Routledge.
    https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203303467

Shindo, K. (2008). Actual Condition and Subject of the Integrated Institution of
    Kindergarten and Nursery School: The Review of Studies on the 'Nintei Kodomo
    En.' *Niimi College Journal*, 181-188.

Tobin, J. J., Wu, D. Y., & Davidson, D. H. (1989). *Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China, and
    the United States*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press.

Tsuneyoshi, R. (2004). The new Japanese educational reforms and the achievement "crisis"
    debate. *Educational Policy, 18*(2), 364-394.
    https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904803262147

Weatherley, R., & Lipsky, M. (1977). Street Level Bureaucrats and Institutional Innovation:
    Implementing Special-Education Reform, *Harvard Educational Review, 47*(2), 171-97.
    https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.47.2.v870r1v16786270x

Wollons, R. (2000). The Missionary kindergarten in Japan. In R. Wollons (Ed.), *Kindergartens
    and Cultures: The Global Diffusion of an Idea*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

About the Authors

Akiko Hayashi
Meiji University
jn15001@meiji.ac.jp
Akiko Hayashi is the assistant lecturer of Graduate School of Governance Studies at
Meiji University.

Joseph Tobin
University of Georgia
joetobin@uga.edu
Joseph Tobin is the Hall Professor of Education at the University of Georgia.

Please send errata notes to Audrey Amrein-Beardsley at audrey.beardsley@asu.edu

Join EPAA's Facebook community at https://www.facebook.com/EPAAAAPE and
Twitter feed @epaa_aape.