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Lessons from China and Japan for Preschool Practice in the United States

by Yi Che, Akiko Hayashi, and Joseph Tobin

For the past six years we have been working together on a major study of early childhood education in China, Japan, and the United States. This study, "Continuity and Change in Preschools in Three Cultures," is a sequel to *Preschools in Three Cultures*, a book by Joseph Tobin, David Wu, and Dana Davidson that was published in 1989. In the new study, as in the original one, we have found major differences in how these three countries approach the education and care of young children. In this paper we present examples of preschool practices from China and Japan that we suggest can be used to improve early childhood education in the US. We call these examples lessons for the US, but we are not suggesting that American early childhood educators should copy these approaches. It rarely works to take an educational practice from one context and stick it into another without adapting it. Our belief is that understanding how educators in other cultures handle familiar educational situations in different ways can improve our practice by challenging assumptions that are often taken for granted and expand our thinking about what is possible and desirable to do with young children in preschools.

The method of the *Preschool in Three Cultures* studies is straightforward: we shoot videotape of typical days in preschool classrooms in three countries, edit these videos down to twenty minutes, and then show the videos to the classroom teachers where the video was made, asking them to explain the thinking behind their practices. We then show the video we made, for example, in Kyoto to early childhood educators in other cities in Japan, and then in China and the US. Each showing of the videotapes is followed by a focus-group discussion, in which we ask teachers to reflect on what they like and don't like about the approaches seen in the video and why.

In this paper we present three examples from China and three from Japan of practices in preschool classrooms that differ from American notions of best practice. The practices we discuss include approaches to dealing with fighting, self-esteem, mixed-age play, fantasy play (including policeman armed with toy guns), and the use of materials and toys in the classroom.

China

We present three scenes from a day we videotaped at Sinan Road Kindergarten in Shanghai:

Giving and Accepting Critical Feedback

After lunch the twenty-two four-year olds gather on the floor for a story-telling activity named "Story King." One boy, Ziyu, stands in front of his classmates and tells them a rambling story about some animals and a strange noise from a pond. After Ziyu finishes his story, one of the two classroom teachers, Ms. Wang,

asks the children questions about what they heard, and she makes some comments on the descriptive words Ziyu used in his story. Ms. Wang then asks the class whether Ziyu should be given the title of "Story King." Some children call out "yes," others "no." The children then vote by raising their hands, with eighteen of twenty-two children voting yes. "Great. We'll make him the Story King today," says Ms. Wang. "However, some children didn't raise their hands. Let's hear what they have to say." A child remarks, "Some words I could hear, but some I couldn't." "I don't think his voice was loud enough," says another child. Ms. Wang turns to Ziyu and asks if he agrees with the critiques and he nods in agreement. Ms. Wang then says, "Next time, he will be loud and clear." The lesson ends with Ziyu selecting the next day's storyteller.

What Americans find most striking about this scene is the teacher's encouragement of children giving critical feedback to a peer. Early childhood educators in the US emphasize protecting and promoting children's self-esteem, believing that it is essential to create a positive and supportive atmosphere in the classroom and to avoid situations in which children are subjected to criticism. Most American preschool teachers do not correct children's mistakes, especially during such "self-expressive" activities as painting, story telling, and dramatic play. In the language of the guidelines of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, it would be developmentally inappropriate for a teacher to put a child "on the spot" by subjecting him to peer criticism, as we see in this Story King activity. After watching the Chinese preschool video, some American teachers were disturbed and made comments like "I didn't like letting the children critique each other," "They seemed kind of young for that kind of thing," and "I'm amazed how well that boy handled the criticism. I'm an adult and I think I would cry if people criticized me like that in front of a group!"

When our research team went back to Sinan Road preschool to show the two classroom teachers the edited version of the videotape, we asked them to explain more about the genesis and goal of Story King activity. Teacher Wang went first:

People may think that four-year-olds are not capable of giving criticism. So when we first started the Story King activity, one child each day would just tell a story and the others would just listen. But there were several children who couldn't help but comment on what they liked and didn't like about their classmates' stories. Gradually, more children got involved, and we let them express their opinions. I often found the children's critical comments to be unexpectedly accurate.

We followed up by asking, “Are you at all concerned about the activity hurting children’s feelings or lowering their self-esteem?” Ms. Chen replied,

In our class, it’s very unlikely to happen that way. We’re now into the second time going around the class. Everyone has had a turn and so far none of the children have expressed or shown any discomfort. They learn from each other. If one child sees that the previous story teller made a mistake such as saying ‘and then, and then’ throughout his story, she will be careful to not make this mistake when it is her turn. She will try her best to tell her story more smoothly.

Ms. Chen emphasized how criticism from peers can work to improve children’s ability and performance. As some of the American teachers who watched the video also pointed out, those children’s comments were “constructive criticisms” that were on topic, fair, said matter-of-factly, and therefore not likely to be detrimental to children’s self-esteem. As Ms. Wang pointed out, the idea of offering critical feedback came originally from the children themselves and for the most part the comments were accurate, so that the story tellers took their classmates critiques as well-intended constructive advice. Many American teachers, although disturbed by the criticism, were impressed by the “language development aspect of [this activity]” and the fact that those children “were so able to clearly explain themselves” with “a lot more logic than I expected.”

The Chinese teachers’ comments suggest that young children’s self-esteem may not be as fragile as US educators assume. This perspective can serve as a constructive criticism for American educators, and push them to consider that rather than giving empty praise and avoiding any critique of their young students’ performance, teachers ought to encourage children to think critically and react to critique undefensively. Young children can be encouraged to listen to their classmates’ feedback, even if it is not all complimentary. Teachers can help young children develop true self-esteem not by being praised, but by accomplishing things and improving through a process of giving and accepting critical feedback. Consistent with the Chinese approach, some American educational researchers have viewed self-esteem as an outcome rather than a cause of successful performance (Twenge, 2006). Merely boosting children’s self-esteem does not lead to improved school performance. Instead, good school performance leads to higher self-esteem (Baumeister, 2005; Seligman, 1996). Self-esteem built on empty praise is an illusion that can easily be shattered. Chinese educators suggest that it is better to push young children to develop their full potential so that more robust self-esteem, based on actual accomplishments and abilities, can develop.

Avoiding Conflict

At 10 a.m., Ms. Chen leads a group of children to play outside. After a while, one boy, Keke, comes up to Ms. Chen, asking for help because his play partner, Ziyu, has refused to play ball with him. Ms. Chen turns to Ziyu and says, “Keke wants to play with

you. Why don’t you want to play with him?” Ziyu answers, grumpily, “He kept snatching my ball and when I fell down, he laughed at me.” “No, I didn’t laugh at him. Never!” Keke retorts. Ms. Chen repeats Keke’s words to Ziyu, but Ziyu, not satisfied, insists that Keke had laughed at him, “I’ve remembered that in my head.” Ms. Chen replied, “Then, have you forgotten it? Forget it and you will be OK.” She turns back to Keke, “Okay, he seems to need a little while to forget. While you wait for him to forget, can you play with me for a bit?” Ms. Chen plays with the ball with Keke for few minutes. Then she suggests to Keke that he invite Ziyu to play again.

Some American teachers who watched the video criticized the teacher for failing to address not only the conflict but also the children’s feelings. As one teacher from Tennessee commented, “She didn’t go to bat for [the boy who thought his friend was laughing at him] at all. It was ‘No, you’re fine.’” Generally, American early childhood educators favor an approach to dealing with children’s disagreements in which they mediate, urging first one and then the other to express their feelings in words and to negotiate a solution.

We wondered how Ms. Chen would explain her approach to dealing with the boys’ conflict and secondly what other Chinese early childhood educators who watched the videotape would say about Ms. Chen’s approach. When we asked her, “Is this your usual way of dealing with children’s conflicts?” Ms. Chen responded, “Usually that’s how children’s conflicts go.” To interpret Ms. Chen’s short, limited, and incomplete response, we need to pay attention not only to what she says but also to how she says it and to the things she leaves out of her response. Of all the activities captured on our videotape, Ms. Chen regarded this conflict as among the least significant. Her response suggests that she tries to ignore or downplay such conflicts among children and instead to emphasize the value of harmonious relationships. To fully understand her perspective, we need to see it in the context of Chinese culture and society.

Scholars evoke Confucianism to argue that valued Chinese social practices such as filial piety, friendship, and superior-subordinate relationships are key components of social harmony (Hsu, 1981; Ho, 1994; Yang, 1997). From this perspective, maintaining social harmony becomes an essential task of child socialization and interpersonal conflicts are to be avoided. Teachers strive to avoid interpersonal conflicts by downplaying them. Unlike American early childhood educators, they generally do not view such conflicts as “teachable moments.” Chinese teachers discourage children’s conflicts by treating arguments and fights as “trivial” and “insignificant” behaviors where no one is right or wrong. What matters is to teach children how to get along with each other, “to be friendly to people,” and “to love their parents, their teacher and peers, their hometown, and their motherland” (as stated explicitly in the 2001’s Chinese Governmental Guidelines for Preschool Education). In this approach, compromise solutions are preferred to judgments on behalf of either side, and angry emotions and bad feelings are ignored, or, more precisely, discouraged by being ignored.

Ms. Chen’s approach to dealing with children’s conflicts was endorsed by Professor Zhu from East China Normal University.

After watching how Ms. Chen dealt with the two boys, Prof. Zhu paused the video and commented

There was a conflict between two children. It is not necessary to argue about who is right and who is wrong in such conflicts. Everyone should concede a little bit. Then there's nothing serious if you forgive it. That's how things happen between human beings. If you insist to find out the reasons, the right and wrong ones, you can't find anything out in the end. So I like how the teacher dealt with this situation. She ignored the conflict and redirected it.

Finding out who is right and who is wrong in any interpersonal conflict emphasizes black and white thinking, lacks moral complexity, and risks making a big deal out of small things. Do American educators have too much faith in the positive effects of confrontation between people and the expression of heated feelings?

Playing Policemen

After lunch, children arrange the classroom for dramatic play. With some help from the teachers, they rearrange tables and take props out of boxes to create centers such as a hospital, a MacDonald's, and a hair salon. In the hallway, two boys play policemen with police caps on their heads and toy pistols in their hands. Several minutes into this extended dramatic play activity, one of the policemen is called to the hair salon to deal with a dispute between the hair stylist and the hair washer. The hair washer is crying because the stylist did not let her comb the customer's hair and then squeezed her wrist when they were struggling for the control of the comb. The policeman decides to fetch his partner, who comes over and asks the hair salon employees about what has transpired. He then commands the hair stylist, "Give her the comb, or we will arrest you." Although the tension is still high, the two policemen seem satisfied that they have gotten their message across and they compare guns as they leave the hair salon.

Although generally impressed by the complexity of these children's dramatic play, many of the US educators who watched our video expressed surprise and disapproval of the presence of the toy guns in the classroom. In US preschools, worried that play with guns in childhood will make violence more likely in later life, teachers tell children that guns hurt people and that even pretend guns (including pointed fingers and banana and Lego guns) are not allowed at school.

Why are Chinese teachers not concerned with children's gun play? When we told Ms. Chen and Ms. Wang about the American concern and asked them why they allow toy guns, Ms. Wang replied, "It seems, for the children, that carrying guns is just like playing with any other toys. It's a prop for the policeman. They are fighting with bad guys and they feel proud of their role." Ms. Chen added, "Boys, especially, like toy guns. They know the guns are not real. They are just toys." After pondering for a few more seconds, Ms. Chen spoke up again, "In Chinese society, there's no place they can get real guns after they grow up."

Ms. Chen's final comment reveals an irony. In China, children can play with toy guns but adults (other than the army and police) are prohibited from possessing real guns. In the US, children in preschools are not allowed to play with toy guns but adults have easy access to real guns in the real world! Apparently, it is not the toy guns per se that makes American parents and teachers nervous and scared; it is the larger social context in which we live. Is the banning of children's toy gun play an overreaction to real world violence? As Sutton-Smith (1988) and other play researchers have found in their research, young children do indeed know the difference between pretend and real aggression. On the other hand, adults are generally more likely to feel anxiety when we see our children having fun with something that we deplore (Jones, 2002).

In his book *Killing Monsters*, Gerard Jones calls for a more benign view of make-believe aggression, which he views as an essential tool for children to work out their fears and frustrations and to feel powerful in a scary and uncontrollable world, and he appeals to us "to look beyond our adult expectations and interpretations and see them through our children's eyes" (Jones, 2002). We suggest that the Chinese teachers' attitude towards children's gun play is a good example of what Jones would call "seeing things through children's eyes." When we told a group of Chinese preschool teachers that many American educators were critical of the toy guns in the classroom at Sinan Road, one teacher responded, "The children know that real policeman and real soldiers carry guns. And policeman and soldiers are good forces in society, so what's wrong with children wanting to emulate them?" We are not suggesting that we should introduce pretend gun play into the US preschool curriculum. But the Chinese case suggests that playing with toy guns does not necessarily lead to making children violent and in some cases can be a form of pro-social development.

Japan

The Japanese examples come from Komatsudani Hoiken (daycare center) in Kyoto.

Non-intervention in Children's Disputes

One of the key scenes in our video shows Mao, the youngest girl in the class, fighting over a teddy bear with three other girls. The teacher, Morita-sensei, is in the room but does nothing to stop the fight other than at one point to call out, "Kora, kora" ("Hey"). When we showed the videotape to Morita-sensei and asked her about the fight scene, her comments suggest that fights have value for children and that teachers should hesitate to intervene. Not intervening does not mean being negligent. She carefully observes children's fighting, watching for indications of whether it is necessary for her to intervene, and even then, to the least degree necessary:

When there's a fight among children, I watch and try to decide if they are really attempting to hurt each other, or if it is just rough play. Sometimes it is hard to tell. If it looks like it's getting too rough or might get out of control, I tell them to be less rough, but I don't tell them to stop.

This approach requires skill. Morita needs to know the children well enough to anticipate when and where a situation has the potential to become dangerous or to spin out of control. Morita emphasized that by not intervening, she gives children time and space to work issues out on their own. Fighting is part of social development. If teachers intervene too readily in their children's fighting, children lose the chance to experience social complexity and learn valuable social lessons. Fights give children the opportunity to experience a range of emotions, to empathize, and to learn to function as members of a group:

The person who does something and the person who has something done to her are always changing. One day, one girl might hit somebody, but on another day, the girl might be hit by somebody. During this process, children change their positions, and come to know a range of feelings. People can't understand these feelings without having direct experience.

Morita emphasized that many children these days lack the opportunity to experience social complexity and to develop empathy at home:

These days, many children don't have siblings and they don't have the chance to play with other children in their neighborhood. As a result, they don't know how to interact physically with other children. Sometimes, they hit other children too hard because they don't realize what it feels like.

Another Komatsudani teacher, Nogami-sensei, added, "Children learn about pain when they fall down. Children know when something hurts them and they show it. If they feel sad, they cry." Intervening too quickly robs children of the chance to experience these feelings. As Morita-sensei explained,

If I intervene and tell the children to do this or not do that, it would be easy and quick. But it's important for children to think by themselves. Children create their own rules during interactions in fights. For example, one girl says OK, "I'll let you have this today, and you let me have it tomorrow." The important thing here is not "Who started the fight?" "Who is right?" but how to solve the problem on their own.

Morita-sensei emphasized that developing the ability to solve social problems is one of the most important things for children to learn in preschool. Teacher non-intervention in children's fights gives children a chance to develop this skill.

We are not suggesting that American teachers switch to a non-intervention strategy in children's disputes. There are good reasons American teachers follow a strategy of intervening in disputes and helping children express their feelings with words rather than with hitting. The art of teaching preschool in Japan, as well as in the US,

lies in deciding when to intervene and when to hold back and see if the children can work a problem out on their own. When faced with a situation where children are beginning to argue over a toy, American teachers might benefit from asking themselves two questions raised by the Japanese approach: Is my intervention here necessary? And, if I intervene, what opportunities will be lost for children to work problems out on their own?

Mixed-age play in preschool

Each day at Komatsudani, when naptime ends, five of the children in the oldest class put on aprons and head downstairs to help care for the infants and toddlers. In our video, we see five-year-olds changing infants' and toddlers' shirts, feeding them snacks, encouraging an eleven-month-old 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 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 simple pleasures and concerns of two-year-olds.

Nozawa-sensei, the teacher of the five-year-old class, explained that the practice at Komatsudani of having older children care for the toddlers and infants 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* (monitor or helper) 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.

Komatsudani's Assistant Director, Higashino-sensei, emphasized that Japan's falling birthrate makes it critically important that older children get a chance to care for younger ones at preschool:

This activity is especially valuable for the older children, most of whom don't have younger siblings, because it gives them a chance they might not otherwise have to develop

empathy [*omoiyari*] and to learn how to know and anticipate the needs of another [*ki ga tsuku*].

Higashino's logic here suggests that children who grow up without younger siblings and without opportunities to care for infants and toddlers are at risk of failing to develop empathy. In human societies for thousands of years for much of the day little children were cared for by older ones. This tradition has disappeared with modernization. Children are highly age-segregated in modern school systems. And in countries with a very low birthrate, the majority of children do not have younger siblings who they can help care for at home.

The birthrate in the US isn't as low as it is in Japan or in China. But many American children do not have younger siblings and all American children could benefit from increased opportunities to develop empathy. Many American teachers who watched the Komatsudani videotape said that their favorite scene was the pee lesson and that they wished the children in their preschool could have such experiences. They then quickly added that couldn't allow older children to care for younger ones in this way out of fear of liability and litigation. They also pointed out that few early childhood settings in the US have children aged zero to three as well as older children. For these reasons, four- and five-year-old children caring for infants and toddlers is unlikely to happen in US preschools. But the Japanese example here can push us to work harder to give children experiences of mixed aged play including, perhaps, some supervised experiences caring for infants and toddlers.

Reducing the number of toys

At Komatsudani Hoikuen, we see very few toys either in the classroom or on the playground. In our video there is the big fight among the girls over the teddy bear and in the afternoon two others girls pull and push over a shovel in the sand box. We could speculate that these fights could have been avoided if there were more bears in the classroom and shovels in the sandbox. Principal Yoshizawa agreed with this logic, but turned it around, explaining to us that at Komatsudani they provide few toys in order to give children ample opportunity to experience and work out conflicts. If there are enough toys to go around, children do not need to communicate with each other. They can engage in solitary play, as they often do at home. But the purpose of preschool is to give children experiences they cannot have at home. It is through experiencing conflicts with peers that children develop social skills, individually and collectively. In our video, we see the girls who pull and push over the shovel have a long conversation and then eventually resolve their dispute by doing *junken* ("rock-paper-scissors") to solve their problem.

Principal Yoshizawa also offered another rationale for not having many toys: Japanese children are growing up in a society of rampant materialism and preschools should provide an alternative experience. After watching the videotape we made in an American preschool that had large rooms full of a variety of toys and learning materials, Principal Yoshizawa (who is also a Buddhist priest) said to us

American is so rich! The children are fortunate to have such a wonderful place to play. . . . They have so much space, and so many things for children to do. But that's not necessarily good for children, is it? We Japanese have grown rich, too, just like Americans. But children these days don't appreciate what they have. They lose their ability to play on their own without special things to play with, like in the old days. The more you have the more you waste and the less you appreciate it. (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p.157)

Principal Yoshizawa said this to us fifteen years ago, when we conducted the original *Preschool in Three Cultures* study. But if anything, his point about materialism has become even more true, and more widely shared among Japanese early childhood educators. For example, a preschool teacher from Tokyo commented critically on a scene in our American video tape where boys in the dramatic play area put on police and fire fighters hats and girls cook on a wooden stove: "Don't they have imaginations? Can't you pretend to be cooking without having a stove?"

The most dramatic example we saw of this logic came on a rainy day in Kyoto, when Director Yoshizawa took the children and teachers to an empty, muddy lot to do their morning exercises. After the children completed their exercises, without the benefit of the usual recorded music, they stood there, wondering what to do next. Yoshizawa said simply, "Play." Gradually, children found things to do. Several boys discovered empty soda cans and filled with muddy water. Other children then joined in throwing rocks and sticks at these cans. Some children started a game of jumping across a muddy puddle, many failing to make it to the other side, and splashing in the muddy water. Later that day, Yoshizawa explained the morning activity:

These days children only know how to play if they are given special toys and playground equipment. I took them to that field so they could learn how to play without special equipment. The idea was for them to discover that they can have fun even on an empty lot.

Conclusion

These examples from Chinese and Japanese preschools challenge American taken-for-granted assumptions about the education of young children. Core American beliefs about self-esteem, toys, children's disputes, mixed-age interaction, and dramatic play are challenged by the Chinese and Japanese approaches. We're not suggesting that American teachers should imitate these approaches. Instead, we are hoping that American teachers who have read this paper and had the opportunity to reflect on the logic of the Chinese and Japanese approaches, will find that they have a new way of thinking about their practice. We hope that the next time these teachers find themselves having to deal with a situation such as a classroom dispute, a question of how to promote children's self-esteem, or a decision about how many toys to have in their classroom,

that they will consider the Chinese and Japanese perspectives and perhaps adjust their response. Good teachers get even better as they are exposed to new ways of thinking about their teaching. For the past ten years many new ideas on early childhood education have been coming from the Reggio Emilia preschools in Italy. We believe that in the contemporary field of early childhood education, there are also excellent new ideas to be found in China and Japan.

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