

Inclusive Education and Communication Impairment in Early Childhood: A Perspective from Japan

Stephanie Yagata¹⁾

University of Georgia

Abstract

In this article I argue that notions from special education research in the West, such as individualized education and early intervention, are increasingly globally pervasive but may not be taken up in expected ways. I share a close read of an interview I conducted with a preschool director in Japan, exploring her perspectives on intervention for children with mild communication impairments. In an analysis of our conversation, I explore themes of purposeful restraint from intervention, implementation of direct interventions, and individualizing education through whole-class activities. I will use our conversation as a starting point for proposing how we—early childhood educators, teacher educators, and researchers across the globe might draw from diverse philosophies and practices in education and special education to challenge increasingly standardized notions of intervention and (dis)ability in early childhood education and care. I suggest that the perspectives on intervention discussed by this preschool center director in Japan are useful in provoking questions about novel ways intervention might be conceptualized.

Key words : Early childhood education, special education, inclusive education, Japan

Corresponding author, ¹⁾ stephanie.yagata@gmail.com

Educational research based on models from the United States and Europe, such as individualized and inclusive education for students with disabilities, has greatly shaped global discourses and policy in early childhood education and care (ECEC). One mechanism for this may be through the work of trends, such as the increasing numbers of nations ratifying the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, alongside international efforts to adopt basic standards in ECEC (Brown & Guralnick, 2012). Nations such as Japan share similar language of individualization and inclusion in their educational policy to that found in these international policy recommendations. However, my experiences teaching in public and private schools in Japan and providing intervention in schools as a speech-language pathologist in the United States have shown me that the philosophies and approaches taken up under the same names might be quite different. For example, many children who would have likely been diagnosed with a communication impairment and placed on my caseload in the U.S. for language delay or social communication differences were not ostensibly provided intervention at school in Japan, yet I knew from working closely with Japanese colleagues in those schools that many teachers considered individual students and their needs with great care in their lesson planning. Experiencing this diversity of approach toward what is nominally the same practice, individualized education, led to my interest in exploring diverse practices in working with young children with communication differences and impairments.

Under current international pressures from groups, such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization, to increasingly universalize ECEC standards, the language of best practices in education appears to be already increasingly shared at policy levels globally. In response to these unifying and standardizing forces, I propose that it is worthwhile to consider what might be gained from exploring the diversity of how notions, such as individualized education and inclusive education, are being theorized and practiced in context. There is potential in this pursuit to challenge the current trend in the flow of policy and best practice recommendations from largely European and Anglophone centers of research to a more multidirectional flow of educational practice models.

In this article I suggest ways in which early intervention for mild communication impairments may be (re)conceptualized based on a close read of an interview with an

experienced Japanese *hoikuen* (daycare/preschool center) director. However, it is necessary to clarify that this article is not a wholesale critique of the notion of early intervention or of speech-language pathology or special education as fields of practice in the U.S. or other nations whose research and policy have shaped current global discourses. I believe interventions provided by teachers, specialists, and families do have the potential to positively impact young children's communication at school and in their communities and that earlier interventions are often more beneficial than those provided later. Instead, I argue that the models often invoked as best practices for global ECEC standards might be fruitfully challenged and added to by research exploring diverse educational approaches and practices. While the experience and perspective shared by one Japanese educator cannot be generalized to the perspectives on ECEC in Japan more broadly, I am suggesting that the philosophy of intervention discussed by this *hoikuen* (preschool/daycare center) director in Japan might provoke important questions that could add to discussions of special education practices in ECEC in Japan and globally.

Background: Special Education in Japan

Japan is certainly part of the globally circulating system of educational (and other) ideas. In the 1980s during their economic boom Japan was held up as a point of comparison for the U.S. and other nations (Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Takayama, 2011). Although Japan is both powerful economically and can tend toward being proud of their own unique ways of doing things, throughout modern history Japan has imported (and sometimes been compelled to import) concepts and policies in education. This is not to say that Japan has completely replaced their own theories and theorists, but rather that Japan is a site of tension among pride in their own ways of doing things, *akogare* (looking up) to “the West” (which I will leave purposefully vaguely defined) for the newest theoretical innovations, and pressure from globally circulating educational and political ideas through programs of standardization and testing such as the Programme for International Student Assessment.

The domain of ECEC is a little different from compulsory education, however. Daycare/preschool (*hoikuen*) centers like the site of the interview discussed in this article

are not governed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) like primary and secondary school, but rather ECEC policy for these centers is guided by the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare and more local prefectural and city authorities. As such these ECEC centers are not compelled to import ideas in the same ways and are somewhat more insulated from direct policy influence. Nevertheless, Japanese ECEC is positioned as downstream and peripheral to Western-dominated theories of education, such as theories of child development and learning (e.g., figures such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Dewey). In this sense, even in the less directly influenced field of ECEC, Japan is not an equal player in these cultural and intellectual domains that are dominated by European and North American figures and ideas. While this is the case, Japanese educators seem to simultaneously worry about the slow but inevitable erosion of their emic beliefs and practices.

According to the most recent count provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2016), only 3.3% of school-aged children in Japan were served in special education in 2014. These statistics do not include preschool aged children, as early intervention is not mandated in preschools in Japan. By comparison, according to the U.S. Department of Education, in the 2015-2016 school year 13% of students between ages 3 and 21 received special education services (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2018). Policy in the U.S. mandates special education services for preschool and school-aged students who are found eligible. Japan does not have specific special education policies related to ECEC. However, many preschools provide some accommodations for children with mild impairments, and there are preschools specifically for students with more significant physical and developmental disabilities (Ohta, 2000). There is some evidence that the diagnosis of developmental disabilities is rising in Japan (Mithout, 2016), perhaps as an indirect result the medicalization of difference leading to diagnosis (Kimura, 2006; Mithout, 2016), and, therefore, special education will likely become increasingly a topic of interest to policymakers.

Other nations may fall closer to one or other of these rates of special education services, and the statistical differences between various nations likely reflect these policy-level

differences, but perhaps are also at least in part due to different underlying philosophies that inform special education approaches. As for Japan, Hayashi and Tobin (2015) write in their work *Contesting Visions at a Japanese School for the Deaf*:

Japanese culture generally is better with inclusion than with dealing with difference. Japan struggles with special education (Maret, 2008) because special education requires identifying, classifying, and separating, which go against the ethos of Japanese education and society. Schools for the deaf [break] this taboo by separating deaf children from others. But this is justified as a temporary intervention to prepare them to re-enter mainstream Japanese society. (p. 393)

In other words, there is a strong preference in Japan for inclusion over diagnosis, separation, and specialist intervention, at least in the case of high-incidence and relatively mild difference/impairment. In cases of more severe communication, learning, or physical impairment the result of diagnosis is often education outside of the mainstream system in specialized schools. In fact, the majority of students who receive special education services in Japan are placed in these specialized schools. In her work comparing special education in the U.S. and Japan, Kayama (2010) noted that following special education reforms in Japan in 2006, there has been somewhat of an increase in public school students who receive a diagnosis (e.g., of learning disability or mild autism) and remain in general education settings with accommodations, but that having a diagnosis is still seen as potentially stigmatizing. The approach in Japan—a reticence to diagnose—may be both a strength and a weakness of their system. On one hand, this means there is still a strong tendency to avoid labels and single out children from their peers. On the other hand, difference, once labeled and given separate treatment as a diagnosis, may be highly stigmatized.

As the goal of this article is to argue for what one approach in Japan can contribute to a conceptualization of what is possible and desirable to do with young children with communication delays or differences, my emphasis will be on the potential benefits of approaches in Japan. However, I need to be clear that not all aspects of special education in Japan work well. At the risk of oversimplification I would suggest that Japan's strength is in dealing with high incidence and less severe forms of disability, where underdiagnosis is likely to be less harmful than overdiagnosis (as opposed to low incidence and more severe forms of disability where special education services are essential and inclusion is more challenging). My focus will be on identifying the value in emic perspectives on working

with young children with mild communication impairments based on the interview I conducted. The *hoikuen* director's perspectives on supporting children with communication impairments offers a challenge to how terms, such as intervention and individualized education, might be commonly understood globally as well as within Japan. While I cannot argue based on this single case study that all of the perspectives she shared in our interview are generalizable to other preschools in Japan, I point out where her perspectives align with Japanese emic concepts in ECEC broadly as described in the anthropology of education literature.

Methods

Like any research method, there are advantages and disadvantages to using a single case study. One clear disadvantage of a single case study is the challenge in establishing the typicality and generalizability of the case. The trade-off is the ability to attend to the individual characteristics and distinctions of the case that might be lost in trying to paint a more generalized picture from multiple sources in larger study. Indeed, as Flyvbjerg (2006) points out, case studies can be invaluable in bringing forth contrasts and diversity that upon close examination mark every individual case, which in turn adds to new or more nuanced understandings of more general principles, which is my intent with this study.

My interview with *hoikuen* director Saito-sensei (pseudonym) was semi-structured with a few broad questions guiding our conversation, such as “what do teachers do when they notice a child who seems to have difficulty with communicating in the classroom?” and “how might teachers approach a child whose speech sounds significantly different from other children of the same age?” I audio recorded this conversation with permission from Saito-sensei and then transcribed the interview. I coded parts of the transcript that specifically attended to working with children perceived as having speech and language delays and differences, and I employed an interpretive analysis of those sections. Specifically, I coded for lines and sections of the interviews that employed terms familiar to global discourses on education such as “individualization,” “developmental norms,” and “intervention” as well as noting statements and sections that seemed to suggest approaches

that felt novel, strange, or even contradictory to me as I listened and read through the transcript. My analysis focused on developing an understanding of how both familiar terms and these novel or contradictory ideas might make sense together as a philosophy and approach through conducting multiple re-readings of the whole interview and the parts of interest. Through this analysis I developed two key themes that appear to shape Saito-sensei's philosophy and approach: 1) purposeful non-intervention is action and 2) intervention is naturalistic, embodied, and involving the whole class.

Findings

In this section I present several portions of the transcript with a description and analysis of the key themes that emerged from our conversation. I add emphasis in the transcription presented here to indicate phrases that shaped my development of the key themes. Our conversation took place in Japanese, and there are several words/phrases that do not translate directly or have multiple possible translations, and for these I either add brief explanation within the text in parentheses or as a footnote for longer notes.

Purposeful Non-intervention is Action

We have many different children, for example, with a “speech sound impairment” or “stuttering.” . . . Imagine we have a friend here who stutters, we don't treat it (intervene/address it) on purpose. We just think “she's² having a hard time talking.” But, *purposefully*, we don't ask them to say it again or anything like that. We just speak to them normally.

At first it appears that Saito-sensei is suggesting that the teachers in her *hoikuen* do nothing to intervene with students who seem to have a communication difference. In particular, she points out that they recognize the difference (e.g., “We just think, ‘she's

² In spoken Japanese, subjects, and pronouns more generally, are often omitted. In order to fit the conventions of English, I alternate between “she” and “he” when a pronoun was not indicated. I employ a general “we” to indicate teachers, staff, and administrators who are interacting with the children.

having a hard time talking’.) yet do nothing. However, the words “on purpose” and “purposefully” (Japanese: *aete*) seem to indicate that not intervening is *not the same thing* as doing nothing. There is an explicit recognition of a communication pattern that is different from peers and a purposeful decision to “speak to [the child] normally.”

In the continuation of our conversation, what “not intervening” means began to take shape more clearly:

For example, a student with a “speech sound disorder,” if even when he’s 5 years old, he says “chenche” instead of “sensei” (teacher) . . . you know, if that has continued for a long time. . . . Using three years old as a check point, the teacher has naturally begun carefully watching that student individually.

Saito-sensei seems to be suggesting that part of the purposefulness of not intervening is in this strategy of “carefully watching.” In other words, it is not a blindness to or ignoring of difference; it is a more subtle approach of holding back.

What Saito-sensei talks about here resonates with an approach explored in other research on ECEC in Japan. The strategy of *mimamoru*, teaching by watching and waiting, is a strategy widely employed by preschool teachers (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). This is a purposeful restraint, a belief in the value of intervening as lightly as possible for example in children’s arguments. This reflects the sense that an important skill in teaching is to be able to judge when a child has the ability to resolve an issue on their own and therefore to be able to hold back. This requires constant monitoring of how situations develop (e.g., interpersonal conflicts or a child struggling with a task, such as an art project or changing clothes). In the case of a communication difference or delay, a *mimamoru* approach might take the form of a teacher not asking a child to repeat themselves (“we don’t treat it”) and “speak[ing] to him normally” based on a careful, long-term monitoring of the situation and the particular characteristics of the child. In other words, restraint from overly intervening or intervening too soon is an active and ongoing choice. It is doing something. It is carefully observing the communication patterns of the child, determining whether they might fix errors over time on their own, and possibly might even include providing a model of the word or sound for a child within the natural flow of that conversation or another rather than asking the child to repeat the word.

This restraint from direct intervention, however, was not the only approach she described.

A critical part of restraint from overly intervening based on careful, ongoing observation over time is determining when and how much more direct intervention is needed. Saito-sensei's discussion of this intervention was couched in the language of individualized education.

Before starting school (first grade), when students are in the 5-year-old class, if they haven't made much improvement, we might, you know, talk to their parents, saying "what do you think about having an evaluation through your doctor?" We do make connections (recommendations) like that. But we don't suddenly say, "do something!" because we notice a difference. We let them show us their development for one year, two years. It's *natural exposure to experience over time (keiken) and embodied learning (taiken)*.

This statement gives a sense of what restraint from intervention looks like and makes clear that it is not the same as not noticing or not being concerned about a problem.

Intervention as Naturalistic, Embodied, and Involving the Whole Class

In the last sentence of our conversation above, Saito-sensei provided more specific hints as to what direct intervention might ideally look like. Intervention (and perhaps even all educational experience) should: 1) be naturalistic, 2) take into account a long perspective on development, and 3) value the body in learning. In other words, if anything is done, it should be done within the context of other learning and play that occurs throughout the school day. It should not be approached as something that will happen overnight but rather with acknowledgment of how people change subtly over time. Lastly, intervention should be approached in an experiential way that recognizes not all learning and knowledge is cerebral but also embodied (Hayashi & Tobin, 2015). We might summarize this position as young children, when you give them space and time, learn more through doing than through "learning about."

Saito-sensei provided some examples of what a naturalistic, embodied approach over time might look in practice:

Then, you know, students who struggle with sounds, we'll start playing with *everyone* making sounds as we are blowing bubbles "haa" or "fuuu!" "Let's blow bubbles! fuuu. fuuu." "Wow! That

Stephanie Yagata

was a big bubble! Try blowing softly,” and things like that . . . using play in their day-to-day routine. Then, naturally the child may think, “Isn’t it fun?” Using that daily play, if there’s a student we’re a little concerned about, *we don’t address it with just that student. We all do the same* play activity. We address it with *all students in the same way* (We treat all students the same). That’s our basic principle.

Building on the ideas that intervention should be naturalistic, have a long, generous perspective of time, and value the role the body plays in learning, Saito-sensei outlines one way a suspected speech sound impairment or delay might be addressed. If teachers notice that one child needs help with making a particular sound, they might find a way to model and practice the sound within the context of the whole group during play activities they typically engage in. Saito-sensei continues,

Now there are a lot of “developmental disorders.” You know, like autism, or um, doctors separate children into all kinds of categories. When students come here, we aren’t experts in all of that, so, if there is a student like that who doesn’t understand, for example, language concepts, there are probably some other students who also might not understand some parts. We look for an approach to help *everyone* understand, like making some materials. Then we use them with *everyone* during daily routines. For the mornings we might make “Good morning!” and “Welcome!” picture cards.

This approach implicitly values two things. First, it recognizes that all children in the class can potentially benefit from an activity intended to help one child. It would be inequitable to assume that only the child with a sound difference would benefit from or enjoy the activity. Second, it recognizes that “treating everyone the same” does not imply an assumption that each child has the same needs, strengths, or weaknesses and would benefit from a “one size fits all” kind of education. In other words, this approach does not gloss over individual differences. Instead, it suggests that individualization of education and intervention, if determined that it is needed over time, can be approached in a way that actively promotes inclusion and could potentially benefit others in the class as well. While one child might be learning about sounds, another might be learning about what kind of mouth shape and breath force makes the most or fewest, biggest or littlest bubbles. While one might be using the picture card to supplement language concepts, another might be using it to learn about class routines.

Saito-sensei made it clear that although teachers should avoid rushing to diagnoses of disabilities and giving struggling children more individual assistance than is absolutely necessary, that their approach features attention to each child's individual developmental progress:

In the Japanese education system, the student's teacher watches her individually every day. We make *individualized curricula*. ...We don't compare people to others. In school (from first grade), they have grades, comparisons to others, and whatnot, but in preschool, we think, "how was that child's development in April?" For example, even with words, "in April³ she wasn't talking at all, but now she is making eye contact. We can't leave her progress there. What do you think we should do for her next?" The classroom teacher doesn't do that by himself. We talk about it all together in meetings.

This notion of "individualized" at first seems to clash with the whole-class approach to intervening in language delays. However, taken in the context of the whole interview it seems that what Saito-sensei is emphasizing here is that progress is looked at individually and interventions are developed for individual students, but implementation of an intervention is provided within the whole class context and embedded into daily routines and play activities. This approach is believed to benefit not just the individual child for whom the intervention was designed but also the class as a whole. In the team-based approach for determining what to try, she also suggests that teachers can draw from their collective knowledge of children. Saito-sensei also mentioned that occasionally they do seek the advice of specialists in order to gather more ideas about what to try. However, they can implement intervention strategies without first needing a specific diagnosis or a specific treatment protocol. Instead, their approach is to create whole class activities that are responsive to the strengths and weaknesses of all of the children in a class.

Discussion and Conclusion

Saito-sensei's philosophy and approach to intervention for students with mild communication impairments might be briefly summarized in this way:

³ April is the beginning of the new school year in Japan.

- individual students are attended to carefully (*mimamoru*);
- restraint from intervention is not the same as *no* intervention;
- interventions, when needed, are embedded in play and daily routines;
- interventions are provided for the whole class;
- progress is tracked individually; and
- difference is noticed and given attention without necessarily being formally diagnosed.

This approach suggests that teachers can pay attention to each child's differences without needing to "treat" them individually (or separately) from the rest of the class. This anti-categorization/medicalization notion also implies that teachers do not need to treat a category as if it is an actual "thing" that defines the child's strengths, weaknesses, and progress. This does not prevent them from collaborating within their team or even seeking specialist advice for what to try in the classroom. Finally, addressing the needs of one child within the context of the whole class' daily routines and play is viewed as beneficial to all students rather than detracting from the learning or progress of others.

However, it would be naïve and overly simplistic to suggest that Japan simply has a "better" special education system than that of other nations or that the approach suggested by this *hoikuen* director is a better approach than that of other schools. The approach in this school in Japan has its own strengths and also significant weaknesses. For example, this approach of forestalling diagnosis, avoiding individual interventions, and treating everyone as if they are the same does not work well for all children, such as deaf children, who have a difference that does not allow them to thrive in an inclusive setting that provides no systematic accommodations (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014, 2015).

Nevertheless, there is still something valuable in looking at diverse practices and approaches. Numerous scholars have tackled the dangers of globalization, and more specifically standardization, of early childhood education quality and policy (e.g., Duhn, 2006; Rosenthal, 2003; Tobin, 2005), warning that globalization of policy has the potential to overwhelm local diversity of practice and the potential strengths that come with this diversity in approaches. As Tobin (2005) points out while talking about receiving offers to consult with the Turkish government about [early childhood education] "best practices":

we must balance the value of the dissemination of cutting-edge notions of quality in early childhood education with the dangers of participating in a decline of global diversity in approaches

to early childhood education and of contributing to the loss of fit between a community's beliefs and needs and their system of early childhood education and care. (p. 429)

Tobin suggests in this paper that taking seriously the emic beliefs and practices about ECEC from other countries and also from diverse communities within a nation is one way to challenge taken-for-granted notions in ECEC and special education and to push back against the notion of universal ECEC standards and globalization, especially those that flow in a mostly unilateral direction from the West to other nations. In presenting this interview, I hope to add, at least in a small way, to this dialogue by highlighting how valuing diverse perspectives in education may contribute to current conversations in the fields of special education and intervention.

I conclude with a series of optimistic questions that the interview with Saito-sensei provoked. What could inclusive practice and inclusive intervention look like if it were embedded into daily routine and play activities in which the whole class participated? What might be gained from the mindset that interventions for one child could truly benefit the whole class? What if interventions were approached with the intention not of improving the prognosis of a diagnosis but of more holistically supporting equity in education and supporting the growth of each child?

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