Mind my child: The evolving role of mother in the Japanese early childhood context

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Early childhood teachers are part of an institution that plays a vital part in teaching the dominant ideology of the state. In Japan, teachers position themselves as experts on childhood behaviour, despite generally being young and childless. As a means of managing, shaping and monitoring a mother’s behaviour, tasks are assigned to ensure mothers are meeting the expectations placed on them by the education system. It is implicitly expected that mothers will embody the good wife/wise mother construct. While, in the past, Japanese mothers have shown little resistance to this ideology, less competition for kindergarten places in rural areas has led to mothers gaining the power to challenge teachers’ demands. Based on fieldwork conducted at five Hokkaido centres as part of a Masters thesis, this paper examines the pressures placed on mothers in the Japanese early childhood context.

Introduction

In any culture, early childhood teachers are part of an institution that plays a vital part in teaching the dominant ideology of the state. In the case of Japan, teachers, who are themselves the well-socialised products of their society’s group-oriented culture, position themselves as experts on childhood behaviour, despite generally being young and childless. Although couched as requests, the myriad of tasks assigned to mothers by early childhood teachers are a means of managing, shaping and monitoring a mother’s behaviour to ensure she is meeting the expectations placed on them by the education system. It is implicitly expected that mothers will embody the good wife/wise mother construct, a state ideology which is all the more pertinent as the government attempts to stem Japan’s rapidly declining birthrate.

While, in the past, Japanese mothers have shown little resistance to this manipulation by state and early childhood educators, less competition for kindergarten places in rural areas has led to mothers gaining the power to challenge teachers’ demands. Based on fieldwork conducted at five Hokkaido centres, this paper discusses the pressures placed on Japanese mothers in the early childhood sphere and examines the changing parent-teacher relationship in modern Japanese society. Research has been drawn from my Masters study (Burke, 2007), which examined socialisation processes in the Japanese early childhood context. Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Massey University Ethics Committee. The paper also draws on my personal experiences as both a teacher at a Japanese kindergarten, and as a mother of three children attending kindergarten in Japan.
Methodology

The journey towards this paper began during my six years (1998-2005) spent living and working in rural Hokkaido, Japan. During these years, my three children were born and attended kindergarten in our small town, while I worked in early childhood centres in a nearby city. During this time, I not only became proficient in Japanese, but gained some insider status (Beckerleg & Hundt, 2004) from my roles in the community as both teacher and parent.

Data is drawn from five institutions that represent the diversity of Japanese preschools; a locally funded child-care centre predominantly serving the farming community, a private Catholic kindergarten, an elite private kindergarten partially funded by regional government, a private child-care centre used by parents in professional employment, and an unregistered child-care centre caring for children of the working class. All of the centres visited were familiar to me, either through direct past contact or through introductions by Japanese educators. These connections and personal introductions are vitally important for those wishing to undertake research in Japan (Bestor, Steinhoff & Bestor, 2003; Kurotani, 2004).

I undertook participant-observation at each of the five Hokkaido centres for a minimum of two full days, arriving at 8.30 am as children were being dropped off, and leaving at approximately 5.30 pm. Participant observation methodology is widely regarded as the defining research method of social anthropologists (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002). I chose to focus my observations on the four year old class (*nen chu san*), as they represent the midpoint of the early childhood experience. These observations were accompanied by interviews with staff. With the exception of one centre, all the teachers filled in a question sheet in addition to oral interviews. Local contacts also provided valuable opportunities to hear accounts of early childhood education by mothers who play an important role in the effectiveness of socialisation ideology (*shūdan seikatsu*). These combined experiences gave me an expansive view of the early childhood world, which would have been impossible to gain in such a short time if I had arrived in the field ‘cold’. All of these combined observations, interviews and personal experiences formed the basis for analysis, using a ‘classic analysis strategy’ (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 118).

The Japanese early childhood sector

While Japan’s dropping birth rate has seen the kindergarten (*yōchien*) and the child-care centre (*hoikuen*) come to resemble each other more and more, the origins and aims of these institutions are quite different. The first national kindergarten was established in 1876 and followed the theories of Froebel (Shoji, 1983). Rather than promoting academic ability, the Japanese kindergarten curriculum has continually evolved to reflect the prevailing social conditions (Ishigaki, 1992). In contrast, the roots of the first child-care centre, established in 1875, can be seen in the day nurseries (*takujisho*) established for women working in factories. The level of care at these centres was minimal, and provided a focus on hygiene and morals, rather than the educational emphasis of the kindergarten. While the historical origins of Japanese early childhood education may not be unique, they are distinctive in their continuation of the dual system that separates children of the same age into different types of institution,
based on whether a child is “in need of care” (Torimitsu, 2003, as cited in Imoto, 2007, p. 88).

In 2006, the Japanese government hurriedly introduced a new category of early childhood institution: the accredited children’s centre (nintei-kodomoen). Combining characteristics of both the kindergarten and the child-care centre, the impetus for developing the nintei-kodomoen focussed on relieving the stress of working parents, reducing waiting lists for institutions, and to balance the inconsistencies between demand and supply of places at kindergarten and childcare centres (Imoto, 2007). This move marks a radical departure from governmental policy, which has always emphasised the separation of the yōchien (kindergarten) and hoikuen (child-care centre) in both administrative and ideological terms.

**Good wife/wise mother**

While independence and creativity may be valued by centres in New Zealand, Japanese kindergartens work towards a harmonious group of children whose views and behaviour are mirrored by their classmates. Dominated by lengthy periods of free play with little disciplinary action by teachers, classes as large as forty introduce children to ‘life in the group’ (shūdan seikatsu) and to essential Japanese social values (Burke, 2007). The early childhood arena is the main arena where shūdan seikatsu is conducted, but the peripheral roles of parents and teachers as agents of socialisation cannot be underestimated. It is not just the children who are being socialised into embodying characteristics and behaviour seen as intrinsically Japanese, parents and teachers are participants as well as agents of this process.

Often young, teachers are products of the state’s economic and political agendas, while the role of ‘parents’ usually translates to the efforts of ‘mother’, who is, herself, expected to embody the good wife/wise mother (ryōsai kenbō) ideology (Fujita, 1989; Uno, 1993; White, 2002). Constructed by the pre-war Japanese state, ryōsai kenbō ideology defined the ‘good wife’ as a woman who “carefully managed the affairs of the household and advanced the well-being of its adult members, while the ‘wise mother’ devoted herself to rearing her children to become loyal and obedient imperial subjects” (Uno, 1993, p. 297).

While Peak (1991) argues that Japanese mothers’ role in the socialisation of children to school is minimal, scholars such as Field (1995) contest that the school institution works to instil in mothers the importance of daily routines and rituals that mobilise children towards later academic achievement. Alison (1996, p. 138) incorporates the ideas of both of these scholars, suggesting that “the position of mothers vis-à-vis the educational imperatives aimed at their children is, in my view, therefore contradictory: mothers impose a behavioral regimen onto the child consistent with that of school but outside its parameters, yet they also cushion the child from this regimentation with nurturance and comfort”.

**Expectations of mothers**

There is no doubt that the responsibility for children falls squarely on the mother. In post-war Japan, the move from an agrarian to an industrial society, from
extended family living to nuclear family households, and the rise of the workaholic salaryman father means that the full burden of childrearing is borne by the Japanese mother (Buckley, 1993; Imamura, 1987; White, 2002). Cross-cultural studies show that Japanese fathers spend less time with their children than fathers in either Western countries or in other Asian nations, such as Korea and Thailand (Ishii-Kuntz, Makino, Kato & Tsuchiya, 2004; Makino, 1995). Over and above the difficult early years spent at home raising children, mothers realise that, once their child enters kindergarten, demands on her time will continue to be made by the education system (Imamura, 1987; White, 2011). For the mothers of preschoolers, this translates to making themselves fully available to participate in the PTA activities, to attend regular open days (sankanbi) to observe their children’s progress, to help with cleaning classrooms and kindergarten grounds, and to participate in various daytime meetings, events and lectures on childrearing at the kindergarten (Hendry, 1993).

Mothers are also expected to produce numerous objects for use at preschool, such as personalised hand-sewn smocks, cushion and seat covers, and bags for lunch-boxes, shoes, and notebooks of pre-defined sizes and materials (Allison, 1996). When my son first enrolled in a small Japanese centre, I can recall being overwhelmed by the exhaustive list given to me. Many of the objects were things I had never heard of, and couldn’t even imagine, such as the oshibori bako, a container in which to carry one’s pre-dampened flannel. I ended up placing the flannel in a zip-lock plastic bag, which my son took to kindergarten each day, until a concerned teacher called me aside and showed me one from another child’s bag. Once I realised I should be looking for a plastic, round, lidded container covered in cute, childlike designs, I was able to locate oshibori bako in a department store in the neighbouring city. To my surprise, there were rows of products dedicated to preschool paraphernalia: lunchboxes; chopstick cases; hat bags; clay sets; instrument cases; swimming bags; flasks and plastic sheets for picnics; umbrellas; and fabrics for sewing the bags, all embellished with superheroes or fairies.

Then there are the regular requests for obscure objects or fiddly home-made decorations, which must be brought to kindergarten the very next day. At a Christian kindergarten, I was amazed when I was given written instructions for an extremely complicated pop-up Christmas card to construct overnight. The teacher explained that the cards would be attached to the presents given out by Santa, and that our efforts would show the children how much their parents cared for them. I was bemused to see that, despite spending three frustrating hours late at night folding, pasting and embellishing, my two sons merely glanced at the cards before ripping open their presents. In fact, all the children seemed to do the same. I suspect this exercise wasn’t really about the children at all, but, as Allison (1996) suggests, a means of managing, shaping and monitoring a mother’s behaviour, to ensure she is meeting the expectations placed on them by the education system.

**Producing the perfect lunch box**

The ultimate test of a ‘good mother’ would have to be the daily production of the bentō, or lunch-box. Much has been written about these seemingly innocuous prepared meals that children carry with them to kindergarten. Anthropologist Gail Benjamin (1997) writes of being puzzled by the number of mothers’
questions about the bentō for the first day of a school trip, a seemingly trivial matter in the context of children spending a week away from home. In fact, the bentō is a powerful symbol of amae in the conflicting environment of the group (Peak, 1991).

The concept of amae is difficult to translate accurately into English, with the closest meaning being ‘dependency’. Amae is seen as essential for babies and young children, allowing them to feel secure in their mothers love. It is also viewed as a key concept for understanding the Japanese psyche and society (Doi, 1973). Therefore, lunch-time “can be considered symbolic of the shaping of the amae-based feelings of the home in the direction of greater self-discipline and social acceptability” (Peak, 1991, p. 94). The conflicting set of values of the bentō, those of the home (uchi) and those of the outside world (soto) means it is a topic of much discussion and concern amongst mothers.

At the kindergarten I taught at, teachers often noted poorly assembled lunchboxes, and attributed them to lacklustre mothers. Not only is the mother judged on her ability to produce an aesthetically-pleasing, wholesome bentō, the preschool child is expected to consume it in its entirety during the ritualised school lunchtime. At times, teachers would even resort to spoon-feeding children the remains of their lunch. For, just as it is the mother’s responsibility to make a delicious bentō, and the child’s job to consume it completely and cheerfully, it is up to the teacher to ensure that this operation is correctly carried out within the kindergarten context.

Child-rearing magazines regularly carry articles on the topic of preschool bentō, complete with glossy photographs of beautiful, nutritious lunchboxes, full of rice balls (onigiri) adorned with seaweed or sesame patterns, delicate vegetable flowers, and sausages cut into the shape of an octopus. Department stores also have whole sections devoted to the art of the bentō, selling gender-specific plastic lunch cases with matching drink bottles, quilted bags to protect the lunch-case, colourful animal-topped plastic toothpicks for dainty tidbits, patty cases, plastic grass, paper flags and moulds for turning out perfect rice balls (onigiri).

From a mother’s perspective, I personally found the daily bentō preparation rather daunting, realizing early on that, even as a foreign mother, I would still be judged on my ‘performance’ against the Japanese ideal. As Benjamin notes (1997, p. 109), “The box lunch is a bridge from home and amae to school and group life. Box lunches prepared by mothers are expected to be individual, appealing to the child, elaborately prepared, and presented as a symbol of the mother’s attention to her own child”. As mothers, we were often reminded by the teachers to make the portions smaller so children mastering chopsticks could easily retrieve and consume the food, or to try something new if our bentō contents were becoming repetitive. For some mothers, this was an expectation they felt they could not meet, and some mothers gave the daily bentō chore as a reason why they opted to send their child to child-care instead of kindergarten.1

1 The yōchien (kindergarten) is the only preschool that requires children to bring bentō. The hoikuen (child-care centre), as befits its social welfare roots, serves a hot lunch to children each day. Within educational institutions, the bentō is quite specific to kindergarten, as, once children enter elementary school, they eat school lunch (kōshoku) daily with their classmates.
Shaping and managing the working mother

The extensive demands kindergartens place on mothers means that, in general, child-care is the only option available to families where both parents are working. Mothers who hold jobs outside the home have to face not only the stress of juggling work and childcare commitments, but also the disapproving attitudes of extended family, neighbours, and sometimes even their own colleagues and the day-care teachers (Jolivet, 1997). Disapproval of mothers who ‘dump’ children under the age of three in day-care is particularly high as this act is seen as fundamentally opposing the chance to promote dependence (amae) and affection between mother and child (Fujita, 1989; Jolivet, 1997). This belief is often explicitly stated to women seeking childcare, and requests to local authorities are sometimes rejected on the basis that it is ‘unnatural’ for women to leave children under the age of three in day-care (Tomizawa, 1996, p. 196).

Whether they are based at home or working, mothers have little chance to escape their childrearing duties, as babysitting services are rare, expensive and considered unsettling for the child (Imamura, 1987), although this is changing as the numbers of working mothers rise (Tanikawa, 2007). Much of the opposition to babysitting services operating in city facilities is based on the belief that child-care is the mother’s responsibility, and mothers who seek childcare to attend classes or group activities are sometimes labelled as selfish or weak (Imamura, 1987; Ito, 2013). In the face of such strong social pressure, some women with young children stop work altogether or reject joining the labour force (Takahashi, 2003). These pressures are compounded by the fact that there is a shortage of child-care, and working mothers often face long waiting lists at child-care centres in contrast to the relative availability of kindergarten places (Takahara, 2010). As a result of the difficulties securing child-care, working mothers may be forced to leave their children in temporary or unlicensed centres while they seek better quality child-care (Mie, 2013).

Those working women who do manage to find suitable child-care facilities for their young child still face social expectations that they perform various tasks set by the centre that mark them as ‘mother’ (White, 2011). While the demands are not as great as those made on kindergarten mothers, the hokuien mothers must nonetheless prove that they understand the ideology of the child-care environment. One such expectation comes in the form of toilet training.

Toilet training as ideology

At the child-care centre, toilet training is undertaken by the staff, but mothers are expected to contribute to this process. In the case of my one year old son, a notice was sent home that announced toilet training was to begin the following week, and would mothers please supply 20 pairs of cotton underwear, 15-20 pairs of trousers, 10 pairs of socks, two changes of sheets, and a rubber-backed futon cover. Despite being aged from 21 months to two years old, all five children in the class were to commence toilet training at the same time. The as of 1 April 2010, over 26,000 children were listed as seeking childcare in government subsidised centres, with the majority of those aged two years or younger. Only 69% of Japan’s kindergartens, however, were operating at full capacity (Takahara, 2010).
teacher explained that the method was simple: children were left for a short time in wet or soiled underwear to make them physically uncomfortable, and therefore aware of the need to use the toilet. The fact that their peers were also undergoing the same training would encourage the children to master toileting quicker. In fact, it took about three months for all the class to become fully toilet trained, which still seemed remarkable to me, considering the age of the children.³

For the mothers at this child-care, their child’s mastery of toilet training meant another reason to celebrate, as it finally signalled the end of an arduous task: the supply of freshly laundered clothes each morning. During the toilet training process, mothers would arrive to pick up their child after work, and also to retrieve an enormous bag of soiled underwear and clothes to be washed and dried ready for the next day’s training. Many of the mothers I spoke to would tackle this task late at night, once they had prepared the dinner, helped with homework, bathed the children and put them to bed. This was a daunting task, especially for the full-time working woman, but juggling the roles of mother and worker means that certain expectations must be fulfilled (White, 2011). While mothers often jokingly complained amongst themselves about the logistics of all that scrubbing and hanging out of clothing, no mother ever refused to carry out the task assigned to her. It was implicitly assumed by the teachers, and duly accepted by the mothers, that everyone would comply with the child-care centre’s request.

‘Kyōiku mamas’ and ‘monster parents’

While reading and writing is officially taught once children enter elementary school, Hendry (1993, p. 230) notes that, despite mothers initially claiming their children are acquiring academic skills ‘naturally’, many upwardly mobile parents regularly play academic games and offer access to educational television programmes, which could explain why the majority of children are able to read hiragana by the time they leave kindergarten.

The intense competition between mothers that escalated in the post-war period has resulted in a sub-group entitled the kyōiku mama (education mother). Such mothers take their job of child-rearing very seriously, supporting every step of their child’s education, starting from choosing the most advantageous kindergarten, and continuing until the child has gained entry into a prestigious university (Simons, 1991).

The emergence of the kyōiku mama, combined with the dropping birth rate, has resulted in a change in the balance of power between mothers and teachers. Where once the teachers issued directives to grateful parents, modern mothers are more informed and have greater expectations for their children. An experienced teacher at one centre lamented the fact that where once parents

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³ While New Zealand mothers generally begin toilet training from two to two and a half years old, Japanese mothers begin much earlier. Early writings on Japan concluded that toilet training was started early, and severely, which some scholars believed contributed to various negative traits such as hypochondria and excessive cleanliness, see Benedict (1946) and LaBarre (1945). Other writings contradict the severity of toilet training, but agree that it begins early, see Sikkema (1947) and Pease (1961).
would sleep overnight outside the kindergarten in order to gain a place for their child, mothers these days come armed with a checklist to compare institutions.

At all the Hokkaido centres I visited, parents were encouraged to drop their children at the foyer, and are only permitted to view classes in progress during special events or open days. In this way, the teachers maintain control over the socialisation process within their sphere. Despite teachers’ and mothers’ claims that close and open communication is desirable, in reality, the vast majority of problems are rarely discussed (Allison, 1996; Fujita, 1989). This may be attributed to two reasons, firstly, that teachers and mothers take a long term view of children’s behaviour, believing it would eventually change, and secondly, that the frank communication about children is sacrificed “to an unwritten but more fundamental goal of preserving social harmony between mother and teacher” (Peak, 1989, p. 101).

However, as the birth rate continues to fall, the teacher-mother power balance is changing. While there may still be lengthy waiting lists at centres in Tokyo, Hokkaido kindergarten staff talk of closing down or amalgamating institutions in order to remain economically viable. With fewer students, centres have been forced into competing with each other, leading to changes in both classroom practice and ideology. Modern Japanese mothers with increasingly academic expectations are seizing the chance to influence early childhood policy, once a domain strictly monitored by teachers. In response to demands, Hokkaido kindergartens no longer close at 2pm, but offer after-hours child-care. Private child-care centres do not limit themselves to teaching hygiene and table manners, but offer specialist academic instruction. Following requests by mothers, after school classes, such as English, computer and swimming lessons have become popular, despite many teachers seeing this as departing from the goal of “life in the group” (shūdan seikatsu).

Over the past decade, and with increasing frequency, the Japanese media has reported on the rise of an emerging class of ‘monster parents’, whose demands on the education system are seen not only as extreme but a threat to Japanese society (Lewis, 2008; Yamashita & Okada, 2011). In response, many mothers see their actions as beneficial for their child and in line with basic consumer rights, which have previously been ignored by the education system. As the birth-rate continues to fall, it seems inevitable that the early childhood sector will need to continue to accommodate mothers’ demands. At the same time, what it means to be good wife and wise mother continues to evolve, and to be contested, in contemporary Japan (Holloway, 2010).

References


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