

Free-play time in a Japanese kindergarten

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Introduction

Play is a fundamental activity for children. Through play, children learn and develop a wide range of skills, which is why it is one of the pillars of early childhood education. Japanese teachers highly value play as the main strategy for their students to learn academic content and social skills.

After observing some Japanese kindergartens, we reflected on the general practices in Mexican kindergartens during free-play time. Although the countries are different, it is interesting to observe the differences and similarities in their approaches to early childhood education. In this way, we can learn and open our minds to new ideas, experiences, solutions, and challenges to improve education.

This report aims to describe the Mori Kindergarten, a school we observed for seven months, noting how they use free-play time, the areas available to the students, the preferences of the students during this time, and what the teachers do to learn different perspectives on free-play time. This report also describes what children do during free-play time in a Japanese school. What are their attitudes toward their peers? What are their attitudes and interactions with teachers?

Physical characteristics of the Mori Kindergarten

The Mori Kindergarten is associated with Hiroshima University. It is located near the campus, in Higashi-Hiroshima, Saijo. The school's name translates as "forest," literally "Forest Kindergarten," as most of the school grounds are located at the base of a mountain. The school building is a single structure comprising three classrooms, a school library, a hall or auditorium, a principal's office, and a teachers' lounge. Of the three classrooms, the largest is "Hoshi" (the 3-year-old classroom), followed by "Umi" (the 4-year-old classroom), and "Sora" (the 5-year-olds' room). They each have a smaller space divided from the larger area by a sliding door. Each room is equipped with chairs and tables sized for children; a piano; shelves within reach of the children for storing materials for both group activities and individual use; a classroom library with various books suitable for the children's ages; sinks; bathrooms (except for the Sora classroom); a small refrigerator for storing lunch boxes; an area that recreates a traditional home with a kitchen, sofa, and table (except for the Sora classroom); and shelves with personal space to store children's backpacks, shoes, and changes of clothes.

The hall is an area within the school building that serves as a space for daily or group activities. It is an ample, mostly free space with a wooden floor and a high ceiling. This space can be used by all three groups at once, for school meetings, mother-child activities, and other events. Around this room, large cubes of wood and construction materials can be found and used by the children during play. At the back, there is a piano and bench. The wall displays individual pictures of the students, divided by classroom group.

The outside area of the Mori Kindergarten is large and spacious. As previously mentioned, the school is located at the base of a mountain, and much of the schoolyard, where the children can play freely, is forested. In front of the Umi and Sora classrooms is an area with some trees and a playground with a slide. The "playing house cabin," a sandbox, and a spigot are nearby. This area has a shelf with materials for the children to use while playing—frying pans, pots, and plastic containers, among other utensils and a bench with a tent that

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children and teachers can move to the location of their choice.

Next is the chicken coop, where the children are responsible for caring for four chickens. Next to the coop is a small pond and bridge, from which children can observe and collect frogs and insects during the summer. In front of this area is a small space for planting rice, followed by an ample space with grass used for simply running, playing, or constructing temporary buildings with materials like wood. Climbing a small hill, which becomes a fun area on which to slide in the winter snow, the landscape changes to include more trees and bushes. The “chestnut space” area is where Umi children (4-year-olds) meet, especially during the autumn and winter months. The area has a wooden table and a shelf with different utensils for the children’s use while playing. There is also a campfire or gathering area, which is equipped with various games made from ropes and wood, making use of the surrounding trees. Walking along the two nearby trails, it is possible to climb the mountain to reach the “summit space.”

On one side of “chestnut space” has a small walking path, where the children from the Hoshi classroom (3-year-olds) usually gather. Children can climb and play in a large wooden structure using a rope; there are also two tables, wooden benches, and a shelf with bottles, pots, and utensils for their free use. Continuing along the same path is the “kids’ base,” where it is common to see the children from the Sora classroom (5-year-olds) gathered. There is a wooden play structure here, a campfire area, and different ropes to use as swings or for help in climbing trees. This area has a small place with a table and a cabinet with hammers, glue sticks, scissors, and more for arts and crafts projects.

On the left side of the school building is the “running space,” to run or engage in sports activities, followed by a small room for the mothers to help organize school events. They gather with their laptops or notebooks to handle all the logistics in this room. Finally, there is an area to plant seasonal vegetables to harvest and use for school activities.

The Mori Kindergarten has a great deal of space for children to explore and play. When noted above that a specific area is where some group meets, this does not mean they should or would only be in that place at all times. On the contrary, the Mori Kindergarten encourages students to interact with their peers so they can play and visit different areas, especially during free-play time.

Free-play time in a Japanese kindergarten

Free-play time is, as the name implies, a time for children to play freely, without rules other than socializing, explanations of the games to be played, and the structure of the playing in general. Children are encouraged simply to play for the pleasure of playing, whatever they want and decide, in the area or space of their choice, and using (or not) any available materials. The children are only strongly motivated to play and enjoy this time with a partner or in groups.

For countries outside of Asia, the general ideas of Japanese early childhood education may seem unfamiliar. As Japan is a developed country that has significantly contributed to science and technology, it is commonly thought that these technological advances are used throughout all aspects of daily life, including education. Though much of these technologies are, indeed, present at different times and in different areas of the school, schools mostly use a combination of traditional and modern techniques.

The use of technology in education also depends on each school and its particular circumstances, such as its location (province or city), budget, approach or philosophy, and available space, among others. For example, one school may offer a mobile application for parents to record their children’s daily symptoms, such as headaches and body temperature, while another may do this through phone calls.

Kindergartens in Japan have many more “simple” activities that do not rely much on technology, contrary to many outsiders’ assumptions. One of the components regularly found in Japanese kindergartens is free-play time. Japanese society, as a whole, believes that young children should spend their time playing. For Japanese preschool teachers and administrators, play also means learning, but not in the sense of guided play, where a teacher indicates what to do, or even the results, rules, and ways of playing. Instead, Japanese preschools focus more on the sense of spontaneous play, where different emotions, personal and social limits, and implicit rules

are explored. According to an interview by Hayashi and Tobin (2015), one Japanese school administrator suggested that it is a mistake to force a child to engage in an activity, whether it is freely playing or a structured group activity, because, in “forcing” the child to participate, they will only be doing so because the teacher has instructed them to, not because they really want to do it. Children must want and feel motivated to engage in playing and structured activities because they want to, not because someone else says they should. It is a part of the teacher’s work to invite and motivate the children to action. If, at a given moment, there is no activity or game that catches a child’s attention, the teachers will have to wait until the child is interested.

This report describes the free-play time observed at the Mori Kindergarten and highlights that the free-play time allotted in other schools observed, except for those at the elementary level, is very similar, in terms of the amount of time and level of importance attached to it. The physical characteristics of the area where the children played, what they did during free-play time, and what the teachers did while they were with the children during free-play time are described below.

This report describes the Hoshi (3-year-old) class, taking note of their attitudes, likes, and preferences as the youngest and most dependent children in the school. They are contrasted with the children in the Sora class (5-year-olds), the students in their third year at the school who have more independence and experience in free play at school. We followed and observed the activities of the children from both classes during free-play time, both inside the classroom or hall and outside on the school grounds, paying particular attention to the space where the main teacher and the majority of the group were located, to observe their dynamics and interactions.

Free-play time at the Mori Kindergarten

The school day begins when children arrive at school, accompanied by their mothers and (sometimes) younger siblings. Free-play time begins once the children have placed their belongings, such as backpacks, lunch boxes, and other personal items, in their personal space. If they decide to play outside the classroom, they are expected to put on any needed outerwear and then go outside. Alternatively, they may stay inside and play with the available materials.

Inside the classroom/school: Activities preferred by three-year-olds

The Hoshi classroom is the largest room in the school and has several areas within it. One is the “house,” located in one of the corners next to a window. It is furnished with a small wood stove and cupboard with some pots and pans, glasses, plates, and other utensils for preparing food. These utensils are made of plastic or glass; they are not toys. Next is a shelf with different “foods” or “ingredients” to prepare typical Japanese dishes. Some of these are made from recycled materials, such as plastic bottles, cloth, string, and ribbons, while others are made of plastic, such as chains that simulate noodles and wooden or plastic models of fruits and vegetables. The area also has some tatami squares, a Japanese-style table, and a long sofa suitable for the children’s height. A corner holds baskets with stuffed animals, dolls, and other accessories.

This area is often used during free-play time, where both girls and boys can play house or pretend to cook. Generally, this is a calm place to play while sharing “food.” However, occasionally, it is possible to observe conflicts when two or more children want to use the same space or utensil without sharing. Some children cry out of frustration, and a few others react more physically against their peers by trying to push them away or forcibly removing the utensil. This provokes a conflict and the calling for help from one of the teachers. The conversations and attitudes that can be observed while the children are playing are improvised, but they are still familiar, as they are based on situations the children have experienced first-hand. It is common to observe dynamics such as “mother–son” or “big brother–little brother” in the different play situations, including food preparation, scolding, teaching good table manners, and birthday parties or other celebrations.

Another of the most commonly used materials in the classroom is the puzzle highway, which the children assemble in different ways and then play with using toy trains and cars. This play area mainly attracts boys, but sometimes girls join them. Occasionally, discussions and disagreements were heard coming from this area, when the children had different opinions about how to shape the highway or which way the cars and trains go, which

could be frustrating for some. These arguments rarely escalated to physical aggression. In most cases, it ended with one of the children crying or calling for a teacher.

Other materials, such as cubes of different sizes and other puzzles, are used less often, when the children are interested in them. These objects are sometimes played with alone, or with a friend who helps to assemble them, and sometimes, but less frequently, children can be seen taking turns playing with the same object. In general, we observed that the 3-year-olds preferred to play alone or with a close friend, especially in the first months of the school year. However, if the number of players grew too great, it could lead to arguments and fights, due to differences that arose while playing. Gradually, most of the children learned to share experiences with their classmates and began to be more open to sharing spaces, tools, and toys, and to hearing others' opinions and ways to play.

Inside the classroom/school: Activities preferred by five-year-olds.

For the Sora group, made up of 5-year-olds, the most frequent games played inside the school building were team or multiplayer games. It was common to find these children playing in the hall area using construction cubes, creating complex structures, and playing around them. They also enjoyed playing with balls, jump ropes, practicing the kendama (a traditional Japanese toy), or play a team game. They were more open to sharing materials, using words to discuss when a problem arose, and sharing the play space. In general, they pursued the company of a friend or classmate during free-play time. This does not mean that they never fought or argued, or that they did not call a teacher for help resolving conflict situation, but these occasions happened less frequently than in the 3-year-olds group, which is understandable since the students in the Sora group, as the oldest in the school, have more experience and maturity to resolve conflicts, share with others, and socialize. The Sora classroom lacks a kitchen area and does not have many other building materials to play with inside, so it is more common to find these children outside playing, rather than inside the school building.

Outside the classroom: Three-year-olds playing in the forest

Outside the Hoshi room is an area with faucets, a sandbox, and a small garden for flowers and vegetables. The sandbox is covered by a mesh and is a popular site used by the children during the summer. Children fill jars, bottles, and containers of different sizes with water and mix them with sand to create different scenarios or buildings. They can dig using small shovels, scoops, or similar tools, or use their hands to touch the sand and mold it into whatever they want. Near the sandbox is a table and bench where the children place different materials found in nature, such as tree leaves, flower petals, wooden sticks, and stones. In autumn, they take dry leaves, acorns, and small fruits from trees and mix them with water in containers, making different concoctions. They observe the color changes, measure quantities using other containers, distribute the mixtures in bottles or plastic bags, and play with them. The children and teachers play water games in this same area during the summer. They might set up a large container as a mini pool, use plastic bottles and water balloons, or use the hose to spray their classmates.

During free-play time, it is possible to interact with their peers, and with other teachers. While most of the 3-year-olds stayed close to their classroom or teachers, especially during the first few months, a few of them were motivated to explore further and walk on the forest trails or in other nearby areas; to run; climb trees; and observe animals, such as frogs and beetles, during the rainy season; observe plants; or join groups of older children, who generally accepted them, guided them, took care of them, and taught them, if necessary. Sometimes, the children joined the excursions of other groups and teachers. Occasionally, excursions were organized to walk along a mountain trail, accompanied by a teacher and several classmates.

As the seasons changed, so did the activities in the schoolyard. During autumn, the Hoshi class gathered in the tree house area, where they played on the wooden structure, climbing it in different ways. In this space, there are several wooden benches and tables available where the children can sit and prepare different "meals" or mixtures using natural materials from the forest and man-made materials such as jars, bottles, and plates, which were always available there. There was also a bonfire every day, and the children were in charge of helping to

light it. Here, they often roasted vegetables or sat near the fire to keep warm as the days began to grow colder.

When playing outside, the children showed curiosity about what they were observing and hearing, asking questions of either their peers or teachers. They engaged in intense physical activity and used their gross motor skills by jumping, running, climbing, and rolling, generally accompanied by good-humored shouts of surprise or happiness and loud voices. However, there were also some fights and arguments. Both inside and outside the classroom, the most frequent arguments were over the use of materials or tools available to everyone in the different areas, over the space to be used, and sometimes over disagreements about what and how to play.

Outside the classroom: Five-year-olds playing in the forest

Being outside the classroom was one of the Sora class's favorite activities. Most of them spent their free-play time around the schoolyard. Their only responsibility during this time was taking care of the school's chickens, which consisted of cleaning their cage and preparing and giving food and water to the chickens. Children were organized into teams to attend to these responsibilities each day, although they also accepted children from other classrooms who were interested in helping to take care of the chickens. Although this was a non-play-related activity, the children never saw it as a burden or an uninteresting task. On the contrary, they were very excited and committed to doing a good job. Here, they put on special gloves and used tools such as shovels, dustpans, and brooms to clean the chicken coop and used knives to cut food for the chickens.

During the summer, it was common to see the children playing with water and waiting their turn to get into the portable pool next to the school building. At the pool, the children and teacher would enter together, playing ball games or ones where they had to follow the teacher's instructions. They also had some free time to play as they chose in the pool.

In the autumn, children could be found in the "kids' base" area, where they played in the wooden structure. Generally, they used it partly as a "juice tent" and partly as a "house." To play "juice tent," they collected flowers, leaves, berries, and other things they could gather from the forest and mixed them with different amounts of water, which they then poured into cups. Once everything was ready, they invited children from other classrooms, their fellow classmates, and teachers to play.

The challenge related to climbing the wooden structure to play "house" was to jump up and climb a wooden board. When younger children came to play, Sora students encouraged them to try this jump to climb up, and they helped them. The older children also gave others instructions on how to enter the house, telling them to take off their shoes, how to sit at the table they had improvised, reminding them to put their shoes back on once they left, and other basic Japanese manners.

During the autumn, a campfire was lit, and children played around the "kids' base" area daily. The campfire was lit by the children when they were interested in doing so, and they were in charge of keeping it going. Sometimes, they made mixtures of water and leaves and heated them over the fire in a frying pan. Other times, they cooked onions or potatoes.

The Sora children's outside games were diverse, and while they were not required to be with the rest of the class group at all times, most of them still chose to play nearby or in the same area. Generally, they played games in groups of three or four, sometimes more, but always in a group.

The children demonstrated a good attitude and happiness during free-play time. They were motivated to interact with peers who might not even be from the same classroom. They talked to the adults and interacted with them as well. The children showed a genuine interest in their activities, which led them to investigate more, try more, and get excited about their accomplishments and results. There were also frustrations, disagreements, disappointments, and sadness. However, within a controlled environment like the kindergarten, these emotions had a positive effect on the children, as they were allowed to experience a range of feeling and to become familiar with them, so they could learn to cope with them.

What do teachers do during free-play time?

Free-play time is when children decide what to do, how to do it, and for how long. At the Mori

Kindergarten, teachers are as engaged in the children's play as possible, but without making too many modifications or giving instructions. They usually receive an invitation to join a game from the children, with some comments, or by simply including them during the game. Sometimes it is not only the classroom teachers who are included, but also administrators, support staff, and other adults visiting the school that day and with whom the children feel comfortable and trust.

Children are the focus of free-play time. During this interaction time, children choose with whom they want to keep company. Teachers, during this time, allow the children to interact with their peers to a greater extent and let them lead the play. When a teacher is involved in the play, their role is always as "another player." The attitudes and interactions of the teachers during free-play time depends partly on their personalities. For example, Hoshi's classroom teachers tend to speak more clearly and are more indulgent when one of the children is crying or needs attention, while the Sora teacher tends to be more relaxed in terms of personalized attention to the children because, being the oldest and possibly most mature children in the school, teachers give them the confidence to resolve conflicts by themselves.

The main approach used by teachers is Mimamoru, always observing the children, being aware of what they are doing and their feelings, yet giving them space, time, and trusting in them to resolve what could be a problematic situation. This asks them to put into practice different skills, such as conflict resolution; communication; socialization; and experiencing firsthand some "uncomfortable" feelings, learning to recognize them and knowing what to do with those feelings in such situations. As for accidents when playing in the schoolyard, teachers carry a bag with first aid materials whenever they go outside. Teachers also support one another by knowing where each of the children is and if they are safe. Leaving children to resolve their conflicts does not mean teachers are negligent, but rather that the children must learn to think of solutions and learn to trust that it is possible to receive help from their peers. In short, they learn that an adult will not solve all of their problems.

During free-play time, there are not many restrictions on play. As mentioned before, children may climb trees, catch bugs, climb the mountain, and use tools such as small saws, scissors, and other materials without much supervision. Teachers only intervene and change or give suggestions to the children's play when what they want to do puts them in grave danger. Teachers are more concerned about children staying out of the way and wanting to avoid playing and exploring nature than they are about children engaging in activities with these types of tools.

Teachers know that learning can take place at any time, so they sometimes use free-play time to introduce or spark an interest in students in new topics or ideas through "coincidences" that can be seen, discovered, and explored by the children during this time. For example, they may leave a plastic container with water outside on a cold autumn night and then watch the next day as children notice it has frozen. The children play with it and then ask questions about the situation. On occasions when the children do not seem to be very motivated by these coincidences, the teachers do not force the idea much since, as mentioned before, it is important for Japanese teachers that the children have the desire to participate under their own interest in activities and games at school. Teachers hope that one of the children will be interested, which will, in turn, attract the attention of the others.

When Mori Kindergarten teachers play with the children during free-play time, they are open to the possibilities of play, ready to "go with the flow" of the play and the ideas the children are applying. Teachers do not put themselves in the "lead role" in the play, nor do they try to force or change the play into an academic or guided activity where children must learn something. Teachers know that, by the simple fact of playing and experiencing everyday life together, they are already learning. During free-play time, the teachers engage with the children through relevant conversations during the play and dialogues; they also approach the children and the play area and use the same spaces and tools, if necessary.

What can Mexico learn from the Japanese kindergarten?

As a Mexican kindergarten teacher, observing the activities organized at the Mori Kindergarten and the

other kindergartens observed during this period was fascinating. The free-play time, in particular, was very interesting and exciting to see. In Mexico, we have time for free playing, but it is applied differently. In Mexico, free-play time is generally used to reward good behavior and as a transition from one activity to another. Free-play time is also given after lunch or snack times, when children play for approximately 20 minutes with their classmates or other children in the schoolyard. The main learning strategy teachers use in Mexican kindergartens is learning through guided play, so most of the activities in the school are guided games where the teacher explains what to play, how to play it, the rules of the game, and sometimes the final result. The teachers try to ensure that the activities or games are to the liking and interest of all the children in the group, but sometimes it is difficult for everyone to enjoy the same activity or game, so it is necessary to use various strategies to motivate them. Sometimes this works; sometimes, it does not. This is why teachers may not become very involved when the children are in free-play time, as they have already been “playing” with them all day and prefer that the children have this time “free” from the teachers’ instructions.

We can always learn and improve our teaching skills, and learning about the different ways of teaching used around the world helps us to open our minds and see situations from another perspective. Learning about other cultures and ways of teaching helps us to see that there are other ideas and solutions to daily teaching tasks. Although it is not a good idea to totally copy a strategy or approach used in a different part of the world and force it into our context in the same way, as techniques should always be adapted to the local context, knowing a variety of methods used in education helps us to diversify our educational practices.

So, what can we learn from the Japanese kindergarten? One of the biggest lessons is the value and appreciation that Japanese teachers place on free-play time and all of the natural, non-pressured learning possibilities that occur within it. They let children play freely and experience a wide range of emotions, feelings, and sensations as they interact with their environment and other children, respecting their right to be children and to play. They give children the time and space to think of solutions to their problems and trust that they can resolve situations themselves. Further, interactions and free-play among 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds is a valuable opportunity for peer learning. Younger children can learn from more mature and experienced ones about play, social skills, and emotions. How teachers engage in children’s playing is another interesting point to reflect from Japanese kindergarten teachers. Being with the children and supporting their playing, knowing when to intervene (or not intervening it at all), and trying to change from mainly guided play or games to more free and relaxed play are good goals for Mexican early childhood educators. In short, the Japanese early childhood education curriculum, which includes simple and contextualized educational goals and objectives, does not attempt to over-saturate the day with academic content. It focuses more on socialization, health, play, and the well-being of children as a basis for the academic work that is to come in later years.

Mexican education aspires to have a child-centered approach, but we are still figuring out the best strategies that adapt to our context for achieving this goal. Teachers from all parts of the world give their best effort with the materials and spaces available for their students.

Conclusions

Observing other educational practices leads one to reflect on one’s own practice. It is essential for teachers always to be interested in improving the way they teach, so they may create a better environment and opportunities for children to learn.

During this time of observation in Japanese schools, it was possible to experience a variety of activities and school moments typical and emblematic of the Japanese culture, such as celebrating national and local festivals, important holidays, or even school lunches. These moments require more concentration from the children and more teacher guidance; however, we could also observe simple moments full of creativity and fun, such as free-play time.

There is a reason why Japanese teachers give priority to free play, and that is because children are happy when they can choose the activities in which they participate. This motivates them to explore more, investigate more, and become more interested in the world around them. Learning what free-play time means and how it is

used in Japanese kindergartens has been an invaluable experience.

While it is not possible to copy and do everything exactly as it happens in Japanese schools in a Mexican context, it is possible to learn and adapt the best features of free-play time, such as the patience and trust that children are given to solve the problem situations they face. We must remember that children can learn naturally without so many instructions on what to do and how to do it; when they do this, it promotes their socialization among their peers. We must also understand that a child-centered education gives children more opportunities to express themselves and to be freely interested in what they choose.

References

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