

# **A critical analysis of the reception and implementation of Froebel's educational philosophy in Japan.**

米 山 珠 里  
Juri Yoneyama

## **Abstract**

Froebel's kindergarten was introduced in Japan in 1876 at the invitation of the Japanese government. This then led to the opening of a number of Japanese kindergartens based on the Froebel curriculum and system as part of the government strategy to modernize society. However, there were some problems related to religion. As a result, Froebel's ideas were to some extent abandoned. The Froebel kindergarten contributed to Japanese kindergartens' development, but the idea was not popularized.

## **1. Introduction**

The first Japanese kindergarten adopted German educator Friedrich Froebel's ideas, including the concept of gifts, from the West in 1876, and it significantly influenced Japanese Education systems and the curriculum; Froebel's ideas were introduced on a large scale as many new kindergartens were opened in imitation of the first, but his ideas were gradually decimated. Western styles of education flowed into Japan from the 1870s. The trend is very intriguing because it was a great step and it became the base for the future Japanese Education system. Therefore, this paper focuses on the history of the Japanese kindergartens. From the historical process of the kindergarten, we can see how a unique Japanese Educational institution was made from a Western style institution. Moreover, Froebel's kindergarten ideas were spread in the late 1870s, and the numbers of kindergartens dramatically increased from the 1880s, continuing to grow steadily in the early part of the twentieth century. As a result, kindergarten became a permanent part of the educational institution for entrance into elementary school. However, the process led to a departure from Froebel's ideas and his gifts. This article intends to show how Froebel's education was received and implemented in Japan, and why his ideas was not popularized despite its good start in Japan; there is debate on a number of issues, some of which relate to politics, religion, social situation and Japanese educator's ideas.

## **2. Social background during in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century**

In the late nineteenth century, Western-style values and culture were introduced in Japan. Commodore Matthew C. Perry had urged Japan to open trade in 1854; as a result four ports, which were Nagasaki, Yokohama, Kobe, and Hakodate, were declared open to foreign commerce. Therefore, the Meiji era (1868~1912) ended 250 years of isolation and it led to some modernisation (Wollons, 1993). As a result, many Western educational ideas were imported into Japan (Holloway, 2000). At that time, German educator Friedrich Froebel's kindergarten ideas

were introduced (Wollons, 1993). According to Suwa (2006) at that time, the quality of childcare at home was not always satisfactory. For example, upper class mothers tended to leave their children to a helper of the house, and working class mothers tended to neglect their children for work. In addition, Suwa (2007) suggests that people's view of children had slightly started to change; before the late nineteenth century, people considered that children were like small adults, but at that time they began to see the importance of childhood. In the UK also there were similar social circumstances; the concept of childhood had been discussed during the nineteenth century, and the Romantic view of childhood had become more widely accepted (Hendrick, 1994). Liebschner (2001) points out that Froebel was influenced by this as he believed that children were born in innocence, and they are naturally good; their bad behaviour was related to negative experiences in their life. Froebel's Romantic philosophy of childhood was introduced in Japan in this era. According to Landerholm (1996), the first Japanese kindergarten was established in 1876 by the Department of Education as part of Tokyo Women's Normal School. The initial intake of this kindergarten was 75 children (Matsukawa, 1990) aged three to six (Landerholm, 1996). The first head teacher was Clara Matsuno (1853-1941), a German who had studied Froebel's ideas in Germany (Wollons, 2000). This kindergarten was based on Froebel's ideas and gifts (Tobin et al, 1989). The nursery school were open for 4-5 hours, and the curriculum was based on Froebel's ideas. During the children's activity, Froebel's 20 types of gifts were mainly used (Fukumoto, 2007). After that many private and public kindergartens were established, and these kindergartens were based upon Froebel's kindergarten ideas (Holloway, 2000).

### 3. Political reasons

The Western style of kindergarten was introduced in Japan in the late nineteenth century for particular political reasons. Firstly, in this period Japanese government wanted to emphasise Japanese modernization. Therefore, the Japanese government accepted the kindergarten ideas from Europe (Wollons, 1993). Wollons (2000:123) states that 'it was at this point that Japan chose to introduce itself as a modern cultural equal to the West, to counter the exotic image that resulted from the 1876 event'. Secondly, the government wanted to introduce the kindergarten ideas as soon as possible, because they did not have enough systems and curricula for early years' children. The modern national education system was declared in 1872 by the government (Wollons, 2000). School was divided into elementary school, junior high school, and university, and the declaration also mentioned infant school (Suwa, 2006). However, until 1876, when the Japanese government announced the opening of first kindergarten, there were no guidelines for infant schools. Thirdly, Tanaka Fujimaro (1845~1909) who became the Vice Minister of Education in 1873 (Wollons, 1993), favoured Western style, so during his period of office, many Western style schools were instituted (Wollons, 1993 and 2000). He emphasized that Japan needed to modernize its education system, and he declared that the first kindergarten would be used as an experiment for early years' education (Suwa, 2007). Therefore, from these three reasons, it could be said that the first Japanese kindergarten was strongly connected with the government's strategies. Thus, Japanese kindergartens were strongly controlled by the government (Wollons, 1993). This is borne out by the fact that the government initiated the first kindergarten, which may be the only case in the world (Wollons, 2000). It might be said that the adoption of Froebel's kindergarten ideas was one

of the strategies for cultural enlightenment.

Froebel's kindergarten ideas was used as a base for Japanese kindergartens because Japan did not have a clear curriculum for infant school until the Educational Rescript was introduced by the government in 1899 (Wollons, 2000). Suwa (2006) points out that 112 kindergartens, of which 86 were public and 26 private, were instituted before 1899. All these kindergartens were strongly influenced by the curriculum of the kindergarten at Tokyo Women's Normal School, which was based on Froebel's kindergarten (Fukumoto, 2007). However, Suwa (2007) claims that the main influence of Froebel's kindergarten on Japanese kindergartens was related to the activities which used Froebel's gifts, so Froebel's theory was not emphasised so much. Froebel's gifts were used for most of the activities in the Tokyo Women's Normal School kindergarten, and the gifts were used in many kindergartens. The Government published "Youchien (kindergarten)" which introduced Froebel's twenty gifts in 1878 but they were introduced as toys, and there was no mention of Froebel or his theory (Suwa, 2007). Liebschner (2001:71) argues that Froebel's gifts would encourage children's self-activity, and 'this was not merely an exercise in providing toys'. Only the Japanese educator, Shinzou Seki, introduced Froebel's ideas and gifts in his book entitled "Youchienki", but even he only outlined the main aims of Froebel's kindergarten and gifts; he did not discuss Froebel's holistic ideas (Suwa, 2007). Suwa (2007) points out that Froebel's ideology was not emphasized, because Froebel's child-centred approach was not considered suitable for Japanese kindergartens for cultural reasons. According to Wollons (2000) Froebel's ideas was based on the individual's relationship to God, and children's individual development and self-education was emphasized. However, Suwa (2007) claims that in Japan children were expected to obey their teacher, and self-education was not considered suitable for the Japanese context because of Japanese traditional values. In Japan, cooperation and partnerships are generally viewed as more important for children than self-education. Therefore, Froebel's gifts and some of his ideas were used from 1876 but his holistic ideas were not introduced in Japan.

Moreover, Froebel's ideas and his gifts were criticized in the late nineteenth century on a worldwide scale. This criticism began in the USA in 1890. In addition, in the UK also Froebel's gifts and occupations began to be viewed more negatively in the late 1890s (Brehony, 2000). Educators in these two countries required that children should be emancipated from Froebel's gifts (Fukumoto, 2007). These incidents influenced Japanese society. In fact, in Japan this debate had intensified after the Educational Rescript was announced in 1899. The Educational Rescript defined the aim of education, the formation, the content of the education, and the equipment in kindergarten for all Japanese kindergartens. Therefore, Japan started to establish its own unique concept of Japanese-style kindergartens and curriculum (Fukumoto, 2007). As a result, some Japanese practitioners and educators, not including Christian kindergarten practitioners, started to criticize Froebel's gifts because they thought that Froebel's gifts were not suitable for Japanese children. They claim that the gifts were only for training the sensory organs of children. Therefore, Froebel's gifts were given a low value from this period. As a result, Froebel's kindergarten style was criticized, and the government reflected on it, because they had merely imported the kindergarten style from the West (Fukumoto, 2007). Froebel's ideas formed the basis of the Japanese kindergarten curriculum and systems until 1898, but after the declaration of the Educational Rescript, Japan started to move

towards a more Japanese style of early years' education which was based on home education.

#### 4. Religion

Froebel's ideas are strongly related to religion, but religion differs greatly between Japan and the West; the Japanese government's attitude to Western education began to change, and it sought to make their own ideology and curriculum for the kindergarten. According to Matsukawa (1990), after Japan opened the country, Christian missionaries soon became very active. They had a strong desire to establish churches and schools, because they thought it was a good opportunity to popularize Christianity amongst the Japanese. In addition the Christian kindergartens had better qualified teachers, compared with non-Christian kindergartens in Japan, so they could contribute to Japanese Education (Matsukawa, 1990). Moreover, many kindergartens were quite expensive so mainly upper class children could enrol. Christian missions paid attention to the poor children (Suwa, 2006), and some Christian kindergartens were opened for them, so they could enter for free or for a small charge (Matsukawa, 1990). However, the Christians had some strategies by which Christian kindergartens were used for popularizing Christianity. Matsukawa (1990) points out that Christians had strong a desire to open kindergartens, because they thought kindergartens were useful to spread Christianity to a wider public through the children that they educated. In the 1890s several Christian kindergartens were founded, but from this period anti-foreigner and anti-Christian ideas began to be revived (Holloway, 2000), because the government feared Christianity and they wanted to avoid Christian intrusion (Wollons, 1993).

In addition, most of the Christian kindergartens referred to Froebel's ideas, because his ideas were based on Christian religion (Liebschener, 2001). Wollons (2000:114) suggests that 'Christian missionary schools adhered to the original intention of Friedrich Froebel and there was firm Christian identity'. Liebschner (2001) suggests that Froebel emphasized the nature of the relationship between God and man. In addition his ideas basically underlined "unity of life" which was the substructure of his thinking and his relationship with children (Liebschner, 2001:33). In addition, Froebel included religious meaning in the gifts. For example, Liebschner (2001:121) suggests that 'coloured balls were made to represent the rainbow spectrum which in turn was interpreted as the symbol of peace between God and man'. However, the majority of Japanese were not Christian, so they could not understand the meaning. Therefore, some of Froebel's religious ideas were not understood and were unsuitable in Japanese kindergartens.

The decision was made by the Japanese government to place some limits on the Christian kindergartens. The Educational Rescript of 1899 was declared, and the government forbade religious instruction in both government and private schools because they thought Christianity unsuitable in Japanese education (Wollons, 1993). As a result, new Christian kindergartens were refused permission to open. Moreover, many Christian groups closed their schools and returned to their countries, because of the Rescript (Wollons, 2000). Wollons (2000) suggests that the Educational Rescript caused divisions between the Japanese teachers and the Christian teachers. From this period Japanese education started to emphasise home education, which meant a departure from Froebel's model (Wollons, 1993). Wollons points out that Japanese

schools were increasingly centralized (1993) and Japanese moral education was underlined in the kindergarten's curriculum from the late 1880s (2000). According to Wollons (2000), it meant that there was a chasm between the Western Christians, whose aim was to spread their religion to the Japanese population, and the Japanese government, who wished to preserve Japanese culture and values. Moreover, Wollons (1993:31) points out that 'simply re-drawing Froebel's pictures of the gifts and games was not sufficient to fit the Western kindergarten into the Japanese education system'. Therefore, the Japanese government distinguished the Japanese style kindergarten from Western style concepts (Wollons, 2000). As a result, Japanese moral education and curriculum were developed from the late nineteenth century (Wollons, 1993). Froebel's kindergarten was the model for the Japanese kindergarten; it was big challenge to translate Froebel's kindergarten to Japanese kindergarten, but it was not popularized because the Christian religion and Western morality were unacceptable in Japanese society.

## **5. Social and political changes**

In Japan, some aspects of Froebel's kindergarten ideas were accepted, and they contributed to Japanese Education; however, some of his ideas were criticized and social change also led to departure from Froebel's kindergarten ideas. The Japanese kindergarten dramatically developed from the late 1870s and it became a permanent part of the educational institution for preparing for entrance into elementary school. Wollons (2000:113) points out that Japanese education was a "borrowed" educational institution from the West, but it became a unique Japanese educational institution. Suwa (2006) states that the number of kindergartens increased to five in 1880, to 138 in 1890, and to 475 in 1910. The process began with Froebel's ideas, which then became the base of the Japanese Kindergarten concept. Wollons (2000:129) explains that 'Indeed, before it could flourish, the kindergarten had to go through a process of becoming a Japanese institution, which meant subordinating the Froebelian curriculum to the principles of Japanese national identity'. In fact, Japan adopted some of Froebel's ideas. Liebschner (2001) suggests that Froebel believed that pre-school education was a vital part of the whole of children's educational development, and therefore necessary for all children. According to Suwa (2006), in 1882 the government declared that kindergarten should be for all children, and tried to give opportunities for children from poorer backgrounds to enter. Moreover, Wollons (1993:6) points out that Froebel 'divided the process of early education of children between birth and age six into discrete stages of physical and mental development. For each stage, he devised special exercises, materials, "gifts" and "occupations"'. Therefore, Japanese kindergarten focuses on education for children aged three to six and each stage has its own activities based on their ages (Fukumoto, 2007). In addition, Liebschner (2001) suggests that Froebel thought that certain activities would facilitate children's development into intelligent human beings and therefore provided materials which stimulate their self-activity. However, in Japan, people did not know that children's play would encourage their development before Froebel's ideas were introduced in Japan. Therefore, Froebel's ideas contributed to Japanese Education and the Romantic view of childhood became accepted in Japan.

However, some of Froebel's ideas were criticised. For example, his gifts were disputed because they were considered too difficult for children, and many practitioners thought that they limited

the development of children's creativity (Fukumoto, 2007). As a result, Japanese traditional play and toys were reviewed and became popular from late 1890. For example, "Musubihimo", which involved creating many shapes from a piece of string, was played. Many educators believed this to be a more creative activity than those using Froebel's gifts and more suitable for the Japanese context. As a consequence, the implementation of Froebel's ideas diminished even in the Tokyo Women's Normal School kindergarten. According to the Regulation of the Tokyo Women's Normal School in 1877, the kindergarten's curriculum was mainly based on activities using Froebel's gifts, but Japanese traditional song and play were mainly based on it from 1899 (Fukumoto, 2007). In addition, reference to Froebel's gifts was finally deleted from the kindergarten's curriculum in 1911.

Moreover, social and political changes both within and outside Japan led to the abolition of Froebel's ideas in kindergartens. Wollons (2000:128) points out that 'The "Taisho Democracy," from 1912 to 1925, proved to be a time of experimentation and progressivism in the elementary schools, and in the kindergartens as well'. From Taisho Democracy, a new education movement happened and variety of education styles was introduced. For example, The USA's Project Method and Montessori's method started to be introduced in Japan (Fukumoto, 2007). Moreover, Suwa (2007) suggests that Japan was influenced by the USA's reform of the kindergarten Education. In 1890s the kindergarten education crusade happened in the USA, and Froebel's gifts were criticized because they were considered to engage the hands but not the mind (Fukumoto, 2007). In addition, in 1926, the Kindergarten Act was introduced. As a result, each kindergarten could decide its own curriculum (Suwa, 2006). Wollons (2000:128) points out the Act that 'The new act reinforced an era of vibrancy in Japanese early childhood education'. Therefore, it might be said that social and political changes also backed up the departure from Froebel's ideas and gifts.

## 6. Japanese educators' ideas

Kurahashi Souzou (1883~1955), who was an educator in Japan, served as an inspector of the Tokyo Women's Normal School kindergarten in 1910 and he criticized Froebel's kindergarten ideas and gifts (Suwa, 2006). Both Froebel and Souzou thought kindergartens were needed for supporting children's families (Liebschner, 2001 and Suwa, 2006). However, Souzou opposed Froebel's ideas because he thought Froebel's kindergarten and his gifts were not suitable for the Japanese context. Suwa (2007) points out that Souzou said in his report entitled "Kodomono Souzou" in 1911 that Froebel's ideas were really excellent when they were first developed, but from the standpoint of educational psychology in the early twentieth century, they needed to be rethought. Souzou emphasized that Froebel's ideas and gifts were merely imported from the West, so there were serious limitations to adopting them for Japanese education. Souzou criticized Froebel's ideas from a cultural standpoint. He emphasized that Japanese kindergarten was incongruous with Froebel's child-centered approach and self-education, because in Japanese culture cooperation and partnerships are more important for becoming a well-adjusted person. Souzou emphasized "Kokoromochi" which means human relationships, and he claimed that creating bonds through person-to-person relationships is very important for children's development. He argued that children would only learn to cooperate and form partnerships through human relationships,

emphatically denying that these abilities could be acquired from self-education (Suwa, 2007). Therefore, Souzou criticized Froebel's idea with due consideration of cultural and social values, because he thought that the relationships between culture and education were inseparable.

Souzou tried to replace Froebel's gifts with Japanese toys, because he thought Froebel's gifts were unsuitable for Japanese children's development. At that time, Froebel's twenty gifts were a key element in Japanese kindergartens; however these gifts were foreign styles, with which the majority of Japanese people were unfamiliar (Fukumoto, 2007). Souzou noticed that Froebel's gifts were completely out of touch with the realities of Japanese children's lifestyle, because usually people do not have such kind of material in each family and many adults did not know about the gifts or about Froebel's ideas. Therefore, he emphasized that children do not need to use such special gifts, and they should use more normal Japanese toys. Souzou believed that Japanese toys such as 'Kumiki' and 'Himomusubi' were more suitable for Japanese children, because many adults knew how to deal with them and many families could prepare these toys. In addition, the use of these toys could facilitate an understanding of traditional culture (Suwa, 2007).

Souzou regarded Froebel's kindergarten as an unusual space for Japanese children because of the Western style, so he insisted that Kindergarten education should be more natural and based on their real life spaces (Suwa, 2007). Since homes are the centre of real life for children, as well the place where parents pass on their knowledge and experience, Souzou regarded the home as central to education. Therefore, he insisted that teachers need to visit children's houses, a practice that he called "Dekakehoiku". He instituted his own child care method which is called "Youdou hoiku hou" (Suwa, 2006). The method is based on the theory that every child's activity should start from their real life. Thus kindergarten activities were based on Japanese lifestyle, and Souzou argued that these activities could lead to proper children's development. During activities based on children's interests of their real life, adults can teach new knowledge, social role and cultural values. In addition, as the child is being taught, there are human relationships, so the child can learn human relationships which lead to their further partnerships (Suwa, 2007). Suwa (2006) says of Souzou's method that it was a challenge to approximate relationships between Kindergarten education and home education. According to Suwa (2007) the key to Souzou's success was that he developed Education methods which were suitable for Japan. Souzou's ideas received much attention, and Kindergartens followed his ideas. As a result they became a vital part of the theory of education in Japan.

## **7. Conclusion**

The first Japanese kindergarten, which was based on Froebel's ideas, was started by the Department of Education; it became the foundation of the Japanese Kindergarten's curriculum and systems, but Froebel's ideas were not popularized. Froebel's kindergarten's ideas were imported from the West as part of the government's strategy for Westernization. Froebel's gifts were used in the kindergarten, but Froebel's ideology was not emphasized, because Froebel's child-centred approach was not considered suitable for Japanese children for cultural reasons. Moreover, since Froebel's ideas are rooted in Christianity, which is not much practised in Japan, they were not

entirely suitable for the Japanese context. In addition, Froebel's ideas and his gifts were criticized in the late nineteenth century on a worldwide scale, and Japan was influenced by the USA's reform of the kindergarten education. As a result, Japanese kindergartens began to move away from Froebel's ideas and instead introduced a wide range of education methods. Moreover, Souzou criticized Froebel's ideas, and Souzou's ideas received much attention because his ideas were considered more suitable for the Japanese context. Froebel's kindergarten formed the basis of the Japanese kindergarten, and it became an opportunity to establish unique Japanese education systems. However, they were found not to suit Japan because cultural values and religion are different between Japan and the West, so Froebel's educational philosophy did not become popular in Japan.

### Bibliography

- Annie, H. And Sakata, K. 1893. *Hoikugakugaku Syoho*, Japan; Fukuonsya. [online]  
<http://kindai.ndl.go.jp/BIBibDetail.php> (Accessed: 24/12/07)
- Boocock, S.S. 1989. Controlled Diversity: An Overview of the Japanese Preschool System. *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 15 (1) , pp. 41-65.
- Brehony, K. 1998. Even far distant Japan' is 'showing an interest': the English Froebel movement's turn to Sloyd. *History of Education*, 27 (3) , pp. 279-295.
- Brehony, K. 2000. 'The Kindergarten in England, 1851-1918' in Wollons, R. (ed.) *Kindergartens and cultures: the global diffusion of an idea*, London: Yale University Press.
- Froebel, F. Extracts on 'The Young Child' in Lilley, I. M. 1967. *Friedrich Froebel: A Selection from his Writings*, London: Cambridge University Press.
- Froebel, F. 1842. *The duties of a Nursery School teacher in Blankenburg* [manuscript]
- Fukumoto, M. 2007. Hoikunaiyou no henshen. Moriue, S. and Sibazaki, M. *Hoikunaiyousouron*, Japan: Tokyo syoseki.
- Hendrick, H. 1994, *Child Welfare: England 1872-1989*, London: Routledge.
- Holloway, S.D. 2000. *Contested Childhood: Diversity and Change in Japanese Preschools*, New York: Routledge.
- Karasawa, M. 1905. Ikuji no Hanashi, Tokyo: Hafuudou. [online] (Accessed: 24/12/07)  
<http://kindai.ndl.go.jp/BIBibDetail.php>
- Kurahashi, S. 1926. *Youchi en zasou*, Tokyo: Uchidaroukakuho. [online]  
<http://kindai.ndl.go.jp/BIBibDetail.php> (Accessed: 24/12/07)
- Landerholm, E. 1996. Early Childhood Education in Japan and the United States: A Comparison of Regular Education (Kindergarten and Daycare Programs) and Special Education Programs. *Early Child Development and Care*, 124(1), pp. 33-47.
- Lee, S.W. 2001. Froebel and Christian education of young children, Korea: Unity Press
- Liebschner, J. 2001. *A Child's work: Freedom and Guidance in Froebel's Educational Theory and Practice*, Cambridge: Lutterworth.
- Lilley, I. 1976. *Friedrich Froebel: A Selection from his Writings*, London: Cambridge University Press



- Lincicome, M.E. 1999. Nationalism, Imperialism, and the International Education Movement in Early Twentieth-century Japan. *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 58(2), pp. 338-360.
- Matsukawa, Y. 1990. The First Japanese Kindergartens. *International Journal of Early Childhood*. 22(1), pp. 32-37.
- Suwa, K. 2006. *Gendaihoikugakunyuumon*, Japan: Froebel kan.
- Suwa, Y. 2007. *Nihon no Youjikyokuikuisou to Kurahashi Souzou*, Japan: Shindokusyosya.
- Tamiaki, G. and Kouno, R. 2006. *Hoikugenri*, Japan: Kitaoji syobou
- Tobin, J., Wu, D. and Davidson, D. 1989. *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China, and the United States*, New York: Yale University Press.
- Tujii, T. 2006. *Best Kindergarten*, Japan: Okutabu.
- White, J. 1907. *The Educational ideas of Froebel*, London: W.B. Clive
- Wollons, R. 1993. The Black Forest in a Bamboo Garden: Missionary Kindergartens in Japan, 1868-1912. *History of Education Quarterly*, 33(1), pp.1-35.
- Wollons, R. 2000. *Kindergartens and cultures: the global diffusion of an idea*, London: Yale University Press.