Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited:
A Deeper Look
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Is there a common pedagogy for early childhood education across countries? This research question has been on my mind since I first read Anderson-Levitt’s *A World Culture of Schooling?* (2003). My initial response to this question, “No.”

Having visited and worked with school systems outside of the US, I do not see similar “cultures of schooling” other than children gathering, a teacher present, and learning occurring in some form. However, my work is limited to the United States and developing countries. I wanted to explore pedagogy in other countries. I have assumed that schools are places where the values of society are reflected and reinforced. Recently, a professor encouraged me to explore this further instead of stating it as fact. Do schools reflect the culture of the societies they serve? Do they contradict these cultures? After reading *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited,* I see that my questions are far too complex for simple yes or no answers.

Joseph Tobin, Yeh Hsueh, and Mayumi Karasawa wrote this book as a follow-up to a study conducted in three countries, China, Japan, and the United States in the mid 1980’s. In the initial study, their goal was to explore the connections between what is happening in early childhood education (ECE) and what is happening in the larger society in each country. The aim of the second study, conducted in the early 2000’s was to revisit each site and document how the schools and their pedagogy changed or stayed the same over the almost 20 year span as well as to “foreground the explanations of insiders, that is, the voices of preschool teachers and directors explaining why they do what they do in their preschools, their reflections on where
they have come from professionally, where they see themselves as going, and why” (p. 2). Their research question was, “Have China, Japan, and America early childhood education ideas and practices grown more alike since the last study” (p. 3)? The schools in the studies remained identifiable for the second study. Daguan You’eryuan, the school in China, was not identifiable in the first study for security purposes, but was in the second. They also added one new school in each country.

The research method the researchers use is quite complex and rather unique. In fact, it is informally referred to as the “Preschool in Three Countries” method; however, it is officially called “video-cued multivocal ethnography”. There are six steps in this method:

“1) videotape a day in a preschool in each culture; 2) edit the video down to twenty minutes; 3) show this edited tape first to the teacher in whose classroom we filmed; 4) show it to other staff at her preschool; 5) show it at early childhood educators at other preschools around the country; 6) and finally show it to early childhood educators in the other two countries.” (p. 5)

The interest of the researchers lies not in the videos, but in the reactions to the videos of the teachers and other stakeholders in early childhood education in each country. Therefore, the videos show a “typical day” at that school, but the schools do not necessarily represent the ECE programs in that country. Representation of the nation would not be possibly since only two schools are chosen from each country.

Preschool is defined as a place where “child rearing meets education: where the parents and home first meets the world of teachers and school; and where the
labor market's need for working women meets society's need for young children to be well cared for and prepared to be productive in the future” (p. 2). The authors explore the continuity and change that occurs in each school and nation. They also explore the role of education in the larger society, as a place driven by the market economy and as a preserver of the societies culture and values.

The book has five chapters; 1) Introduction; 2) China; 3) Japan; 4) United States; and 5) Looking Across Time and Cultures. As the researchers intended, each chapter reflects the interviews and comments of the viewers of the videotapes. Therefore, there is some overlap in common themes or trends, but the overall topics vary. There seems to be a reason that the Unites States is saved for last. It is in this chapter that the authors reveal that the book was written for an American audience. Though this can be assumed throughout the first three chapters, it is made explicit in chapter 4.

**China**

China was the country that had changed the most since the first study. This chapter highlights these changes in relation to the vast changes in Chinese society. The researchers refer to the changes in China as a paradigm shift. China shifted from a socialist economy to a goal of participating in global capitalism. They opened themselves to the outside world to become more globally competitive. Aside from the major political shift, Daguan underwent a major facilities change. The changes were possible because of the rapid economic gains in the community, Kumming. These facility changes included building a much larger building with modern
technologies and modern equipment. The local teachers refer these to as “hardware”.

An example of this that is given much attention in the book, is the bathroom. In the first study, the bathrooms are outside, communal (boys and girls together) and have long troughs for the children to squat and relieve themselves. During the revisit, the bathrooms are now indoors and have running water. There are still troughs but the boys and girls are separated. The authors mention that upon a later visit, the school has decided and started the process of replacing the troughs with toilets as a result of this study. They realized that since most of the children have toilets in their homes, having toilets in the schools is more child-friendly.

Despite the One Child Rule in 1983, the enrollment at Daguan has increased by nearly 3 times. This is evidence that the market economy has increased and parents are now able and willing to invest in preschools for their child. They also eliminated the boarding program. The boarding program was initially meant to be a service to working parents, to know that their kids were safe and cared for during the week. This elimination enabled them to increase enrollment because it lowered the teacher to student ratio. Previously, the teachers worked in shifts around the clock and served in a parental role, now the teachers serve in a professional role and work a “regular” shift. The increase in teacher to student ratio is not something that concerned the educators. It is not important as an indicator of quality. However, as a constructivist approach to teaching is implemented, how it is carried out may likely need to meet the potential challenge of high teacher to student ratios.
Like in the United States, Japan, and other countries around the world, China’s schools are driven by a market economy. Because China wants (or needs) to become competitive globally, they became open to the outside world and began borrowing from other countries. This borrowing also happened in the early childhood education field. This is made evident in the 1993 “Guidelines for the Reform of Education in China.” These guidelines stated that most of the children in urban areas should attend kindergarten and at least 70% of children in rural areas should attend kindergarten. With the rise in need for preschool because of these guidelines as well as more mothers in the workforce, preschools became competitive for enrollment. They were ranked based on physical resources and teacher quality. The top schools charged the most. Daguan was driven to improve its facilities and programs to compete in this “business of preschool” (p. 34).

The idea the education in China is driven by a market economy is also evident in Postiglione’s *Education and Social Change in China*. This book does not mention ECE but rather focuses on school aged children. This book focuses on the shift in China’s market economy and therefore on education. However, attention is given to the inequity of opportunity for children to receive education. Where Tobin’s study only examines two schools in urban settings, this book explores education nationwide with a focus on the inequity of access for rural, lower income families. The books were written for two different purposes, but both highlight the rapid change happening in education and employment as China becomes poised for the global market. They also both mention the view of Confucian tradition as limiting to China or holding China back, but then the realization of the traditional
value of Confucian tradition and the need to bring some of these values back, particularly the value of relationships and peace and harmony in these relationships.

This can be seen in the example of the story telling. The class has a classroom routine of children telling stories before lunch. The child tells the class a story and then the class votes if that child is worthy to be called the “Story Telling King”. The children that vote no must give a reason for their vote. The child should then accept the feedback to improve this skill for next time. The American and Chinese viewers view this as being harsh, however, it is part of Chinese culture to be blunt and offer criticism to help one improve.

Parents are another part of early childhood education that was brought up by the teachers. Teachers are concerned with the quality of parenting (too much attention, too little attention). Parents are adding pressure to the teachers and schools to add more rigorous academic programs. However, experts in ECE are pushing for play-based, child-centered curriculum. The teachers are stuck between pleasing the parents and doing that is best for the kids. The authors describe parents as “consumers”.

Pedagogy change is another paradigm shift occurring in China. This change is due to the ultimate goal of preparing children for a global economy by borrowing from other countries. Changing teaching and learning from teacher-centered, didactic teaching to the current practice of including being responsive to children’s desires and rights. Though this is a shift from the traditional teaching methods, it is not new to China. John Dewey brought the idea of child-centered education to China
in the early 1920’s. However, there was little mention of Dewey by the teachers during this study.

It is only recently that China has started taking a firmer grasp on the direction of early childhood education. The critics of the pedagogical shift, both internally and externally, shared that China is moving ahead towards an end goal of constructivist teaching but without a clear path for arrival at this approach. The teachers lack sufficient training in this method. Most teachers learn through apprenticeship. They are described as being in a “decalage;” the old is unstable but the new has yet to be established.

China is now slowing the borrowing and looking at how to preserve the traditional culture and values such as teaching the children national pride and the importance of society. These are practiced through the communal bathroom (a social experience) and the daily, uniform exercise in the courtyard that is required of all students across the country. The Westernization of ECE in China conflicts with Confucian culture. Parents expect that their children will learn the traditions and values they experienced as children.

Japan

The researchers examine the lack of changes in early childhood education in Japan, as opposed to the vast changes seen in China. This is quite significant that the school has stayed relatively the same over the span of nearly twenty years! This chapter was quite a surprising read for me. After reading Watanabe’s chapter on Japan in Rotberg’s Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform, I expected Japanese preschools to reflect the standards and pedagogy of the
elementary and secondary schools. I expected that they would be much more academically driven. As noted in that Watanabe’s chapter and as well as in this chapter, there is a loosening up on strict didactic education; however, education is still the “basis on which the society exists” (Rotberg, 2006).

Early childhood education in Japan is presented as a place where young children are taught the traditional culture and values of being Japanese. They spend the day playing and “being children.” The aspect of Japanese early childhood education that was most shocking to the American and Chinese teachers was the lack of teacher intervention in social squabbles. When the children argue or fight, the teacher stands back as an observer and if it seems there is no danger of someone becoming hurt, she does not intervene. This teaches the children to handle their own problems and work together.

Unique to this pedagogy is having older children care for younger children. This does not happen universally in Japan, but it is a way to reinforce the value of caring for one another. It is education of the heart. These older children must learn to be sensitive to the needs of the young children as they teach them to walk, use the bathroom, and eat.

An interesting part of this that I struck me was what the Watanabe piece referred to as “bullying.” In the preschool setting, this is seen as the children teaching other children how to behave socially, how to fit in. An example in the Tobin book is the young girl wanting to play with her favorite teddy bear. The other girls snatch it from her or try to get it first to teach her that she needs to share and
be part of the group. This kind of teaching and learning seems unique to Japanese culture. The idea of being like the group is a social issue in Japan.

A large issue facing Japan is the decrease in the birthrate. This decline impacts schools all the way up through the university level. This is seen as a real problem in the preschools and has caused schools to have to become competitive for students to keep enrollment up. The *yochien* and *hoikuen* schools are very much a part of this competition. These are side-by-side schools that were once separated for infants and toddler and 3-6 year olds, but now are in competition across early childhood education. *Hoikuen* was established to serve the working class with hours that spanned into the late evenings. The focus of these schools was not on academics. Yochien schools were for middle class families and provided half-day care. These programs were more academically focused. In light of the need for enrollment and the need for more mothers to work in a declining “post bubble-burst economy,” both schools have felt pressure and had to adjust by lengthening days and adding more academics to their curriculum.

Yochien schools are both private and public. What is interesting about the public yochien schools is the teacher turnover. The government requires that teachers rotate positions every several years to keep the qualities of schools more equal. The private yochien schools also have a high teacher turnover rate, but this is a strategy for the schools to save money. Because the teacher’s salaries rise rapidly with experiences, the schools encourage the teachers to retire after only a few years to save costs. This may save the schools money, but what is it doing for the (predominantly) female employees who are limited in what they can earn in this
position? Hoikuen schools are under the Ministry of Health, not the Ministry of Education like the yochien schools. Their teachers and directors rotate among schools as well.

A big concern with the need for schools to be competitive, as was evident in China, is the need to attract “clients”. Once again, the battle between what the early childhood educators and experts see as best for children and the wishes of parents for academic rigor. Japanese ECE experts view the market effects as bringing an unfortunate pressure on preschools to please the parents and families as opposed to practicing a pedagogy that is best for the needs of the children.

The biggest difference noted by the researchers between 1984 and 2005 is the mental state of the Japanese. The mood is described as pessimistic. The stories told by teachers and others in the study are very negative. The teachers are blaming the parents for their child’s lack of social skills and now feel responsible to teach these skills. The parents feel that the outside world is unsafe and are overprotective of their children. The early childhood educators feel it is important not to protect children from problems. They need to experience problems so they can struggle to find solutions.

**United States**

It is not until reading about educational practices in other countries that it becomes easier to identify the culture of education in the United States. It is easier to compare and see where the US is different than to simply talk about early childhood education in the US. “Use your words” is what stood out to me the most. As an American early childhood educator and a mother of a toddler, I must say this
100 times per day! It is something that we value in America. We are not comfortable with physical aggression or intimacy in the school and work settings. Children need to be taught to express how they are feeling verbally. This is in stark contrast to Japan where the responsibility is on the listener to perceive what the person is thinking or feeling through his body language.

Education in the US is also driven by a market economy and by mandates such as No Child Left Behind. Schools feel pressure to push academics not only from parents but also from these mandates. However, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has requirements for licensure that contradict some of these mandates. It is a lose-lose battle. In this study, teachers were sited as not seeing much value in full day preschool or even kindergarten. I suspect that this will be changing nationwide in the years to come, as it is already so in the DC area and other upfront urban settings. With the decline in the market economy, both parents need to work to earn income. This leaves the problem of childcare, as in China and Japan. Many schools providing half-day programs, such as Alhambra preschool, provide before and afterschool childcare options as well.

The business world of the United States views schools with potential future gainful employment. This is based on research showing that the higher the education level, the higher the salary. This education is seen to begin at the early childhood level. The belief is that the benefits of children receiving quality early childhood education outweigh the costs of providing the education.

Other programs such as Head Start have increased attention to early childhood education. The current issue in the field is gaining recognition
professionally. Teachers feel the pressures of mandates and expectations of parents and requirements for licensure without feeling the respect as professionals in the field of early childhood education.

An ongoing source of tension in the United States is the teaching of reading. The agreement is that it is a top priority; the disagreement is in the best way to teach reading, through phonics or through whole language. Kindergarten teachers expect students to arrive already reading as well. This adds to the push down on preschool teachers.

The preschool classrooms studied in the United States both show the teaching and enforcing on American beliefs: free choice, self-expression, individual rights, and the right to the pursuit of happiness. Teachers’ reflections also included the implementation of the beliefs in their pedagogy. Choice is an important part of ECE in America, however the choices are limited, not like in Japan where there is freedom. Choice is critical in learning about capitalism and democracy. Individualism is also valued and is expressed through words and individual work.

The US, like Japan, has a fear for the children, but this fear is different. It is a fear carried by the teachers and schools of being sued if a child becomes hurt. It is a fear of the teacher and schools of being sued if a child is touched. This causes a separation of body and mind with the emphasis on the mind. The teacher is very involved and watches the children carefully to ensure overall safety.

Unique to the United States is the debate over whether preschool is good or bad for young children. This debate stems from the belief that young children should be with their parents or family during their young years. They are not ready
for the pressures of school and should be given individual attention to thrive. This is a point that would not seem culturally significant to Americans until examining the view of ECE of other nations. However, this debate is shifting and is now focusing not on if children should attend preschool, but what should they experience in preschool.

**Looking Across Cultures**

The authors conclude that all three countries have curricular reforms with the same goals, to ready their children to be competitive in the global workforce. However, the direction each school has taken to achieve this goal is quite different. This goal stems from the perceived role of the school as an economic tool. When the country suffers financially, so do the schools; when the national policies and focus on the market economy change, so do the schools. This is not unique to these three countries, but happens globally.

There were common issues and trends in each of the schools. These included: parent expectations, economic influence, pressure on teachers, and borrowing. Economic influence on schooling, as mentioned earlier, is a major factor in the role of schools in society. If schools are to be a place where youth are prepared to be productive members of the larger society and to improve the state of the country, then what is happening to the economy and industrial world impacts schools. Another way schools are involved in the market economy is through funding. Public schools, funded by the government, are subject to funding based on availability. When the economy is down, the government has less to spend on school. In private schools, the issue is with enrollment. This is also true for public
schools. Schools become businesses, places to lure clients and consumers of their product. Therefore, the will of the parents is often a well-heard voice.

The teachers mentioned parents in every chapter in the book. Teachers talked about parents in relation to the pressure they placed on preschools to provide more academic rigor. The image given to parents in this light presented as negative. The teachers felt the need to choose what the parents requested and what was best for the child. Because the early childhood experts disagree with the parents, does this mean that the parents do not want what they perceive as best for their child? There was also mention of parenting of single children in Japan and China. Schools and teachers felt the need to compensate for the social-emotional development of only children. The feeling is that parents are over or under-protective or they have too many fears of their child getting hurt or having negative experiences and deprive the child of life learning.

Borrowing is also a tool that is used in all three countries. However, it presents differently in the preschool setting in China and the United States than in Japan. China opened its doors to the outside world and started borrowing faster than their teacher preparation needs could accommodate. This borrowing was at the loss of some strong cultural values and traditions in the preschools. The United States is always looking at competing nations and examining new academic policy against that of its competitors. Japan, however, while very competitive in the grade school level, does not impart this on the pedagogy in preschool. It will be interesting to see how long this holds true with the push from parents for more academics at an earlier age.
The Answers

While my research questions were not clearly answered, I gained invaluable insight into the complexity of the questions. Are there global trends in early childhood education and do schools reflect the culture of the communities they serve? These two questions have actually become intertwined to the point where I cannot answer one without drawing on the other. It certainly seems at a very broad level that the answer is yes, but on a deeper glance, the answer depends.

An example of this in early childhood education in the United States, as mentioned in the book, is the implementation of Reggio Emilia inspired schools. This approach to preschool learning originates in Reggio Emilia, Italy. However, as the authors note, if you look at the manifestation of the program in the US and in Italy, you will see that only the aspects of the program that can be transferred universally, meaning they are not tied to the local culture and values, are implemented in the United States. In Reggio Emilia, Italy, the whole community has a strong commitment to the education and experiences of the young children. In the US, while the community plays a part in the pedagogy, it is on a different level.

There are more examples, such as China realizing that they were eliminating what is important to them by borrowing pedagogical practices without adapting them to their own cultures. Japan has this practice down pretty well. Their constructivist pedagogy would not be transferable because it strongly imparts their traditions, values, and Japanese patriotism. This is one of the reasons Japan, though the market economy has changed and has impacted grade school reforms, the early childhood education has changed very little.
As previously stated, the United States also imparts our culture and values in our school systems. A big example of this is the provision and availability of early childhood education. Many programs are offered part time, half-days, meeting only two-three mornings per week. This is because there is still uncertainty on a cultural level of the best place for children, in the home with the mother, or at school. Like many other nations, including Japan and China, many women are entering the workforce out of need but also desire. This leaves a greater need for early childhood education in the United States and, therefore, will likely continue to lessen the attention to if young children should go to school and focus on the pedagogical practices and expectations at those schools.

**Conclusion**

This book leaves the reader with more questions than answers, a sure sign of a thought provoking piece. Educational policy is complicated and, at times, contains so many elements of influence; it is hard to pick them apart. This book is an important read for early childhood educators. It brings clarity to how complicated policy changes and practices in early childhood education can be. Early childhood educators in the United States are pushing for recognition as a profession, but instead, it seems business and politicians have all of the say in the policies. Reading this book sheds light on why that is so, though it makes it no easier to accept.

It also provides insight into how culture and values are intertwined within education, particularly at the early childhood level. After seeing the complex ways culture and values of society are woven into the preschool pedagogy in these schools, it is ponderous why countries continue to borrow and the “pedagogy
pendulum” continues to swing from didactic to constructivist and everywhere in between at different rates in different countries.

There certainly are limitations to this study, which are not hidden from the authors. Their data is not generalizable. It is, instead, insight into how their questions were answered in those schools, in those countries, during those time periods. Choosing only two schools from each country from urban areas limits the ability to really get a sense of how local cultures are represented in the schools throughout the country. For example, *Education and Social Change in China* talks about the children moving from rural areas to the cities and the struggle to fit-in culturally. The schools are too different. At the end of the book, the authors hint at another visit in twenty years. I am looking forward to it.
References


