

A Comparative Study of American, Japanese, and Taiwanese Kindergartners' Perceptions of Clean-up Time

Satomi Izumi-Taylor

University of Memphis, Memphis, TN, USA

Chia Hui Lin

National Taichung University of Education, Taichung, Taiwan

Yoko Ito

Chiba University, Chiba, Japan

The purpose of this study was to examine similarities and differences of American, Japanese, and Taiwanese children's perspectives of clean-up time. The participants consisted of 25 American kindergartners in the southeastern US, 25 Japanese kindergartners from the mainland of Japan, and 25 Taiwanese kindergartners from central Taiwan. Children were asked to respond to six questions regarding clean-up time. Qualitative analysis of the data yielded five themes regarding clean-up time: transitions, fondness, clean and safe environments, work, and cooperation. Some participants associated clean-up time with transitions, but only Japanese children voiced their opinions that they liked cleaning. Many children considered clean-up as the notion of maintaining clean environments, but only Taiwanese children perceived it as keeping the classroom safe. Many participants viewed such time as work in which they cooperate with each other, and many Japanese and Taiwanese children's responses indicated how they and their teachers cooperate during cleaning. Their American counterparts did not consider this to be the case.

Keywords: clean-up time in American, Japanese, and Taiwanese early childhood, children's views of clean-up time, a cross-cultural study of children's notions of clean-up time

Introduction

Examining children's perceptions of clean-up time might help teachers to appreciate that children have their own needs, interests, and concerns regarding school activities (Izumi-Taylor & Lin, 2017; Izumi-Taylor, Ito, Lin, & Akita, 2017). Clean-up time in kindergartens refers to transitions where children clean up toys and materials to make space for the class so they can work on other activities (Lash, 2008). Transitions in early childhood education classrooms mean, "changes from one activity to another or from one place to another" (Thelen & Klifman, 2011, p. 92). Children's school experiences improve when teachers realize that children have rights to voice their opinions related to school activities (Cook-Sather, 2015; United Nations, 1989), and teachers need to

Satomi Izumi-Taylor, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Department of Instruction and Curriculum Leadership, University of Memphis, Tennessee, USA.

Chia Hui Lin, Ed.D., Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education, National Taichung University of Education, Taichung, Taiwan.

Yoko Ito, Ph.D., Professor, Faculty of Education, Chiba University, Chiba, Japan.

acknowledge that children's views of the world are different from those of adults (Griebeling, Jacobs, Kochanowski, & Vaughn, 2016).

During clean-up time, many teachers use various kinds of cues, including bells, songs, turning lights on and off, etc. (Izumi-Taylor & Lin, 2017; Weldemariam, 2014). For some teachers, clean-up time becomes "a source of conflict" for children and teachers (Nakatsubo et al., 2009, p. 81). Romero (1991) finds some children help clean up a few items, without finishing, but they then join in group time. Others clean up only toys with which they played. During clean-up time some children go to the bathroom or begin to paint on the easel or engage in other activities. Still others wander around in the classroom, telling others it is clean-up time. To avoid difficulties of cleaning up, saving children's play activities might prevent challenging behavior. Review of daily schedules to see if omitting unnecessary transition times may be possible to avoid children's challenging behavior (Gonzalez-Mena, 2014; Weldemariam, 2014).

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine similarities and differences of American, Japanese, and Taiwanese children's perspectives of clean-up time. Cultures, values, and traditions influence children's views of school activities, and understanding such influences might provide a high quality of education (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2017). As there is a growing global focus on child-centered education and care (Maclean & Symaco, 2017; Roopnarine, 2015), sharing children's views of clean-up time could have universal implications for early childhood educators.

In spite of the differences in cultural, educational, and political systems of these countries, American, Japanese, and Taiwanese early childhood educators recognize the importance of early care and education (Hsieh, 2004; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2017); however, some children's notions of clean-up time might not be the same as those of children from other countries (Izumi-Taylor & Lin, 2017). People with different cultural backgrounds are more likely to focus on different characteristics of the same phenomena, and this study provides a unique base for examining children's views of clean-up time in three different nations. Such perceptions of children might mediate their experiences in classrooms; thus, comparing children's views in three different countries could provide insight that might be useful in designing effective early childhood education.

Although children have the right to express their views about issues that are important to them (Cook-Sather, 2015; United Nations, 1989), there exist limited studies reviewing children's perspectives of clean-up time in different cultures (Izumi-Taylor & Lin, 2017). For these reasons, this study was conducted to address such limitations and was guided by the following two research questions: (1) What views of clean-up time were revealed among American, Japanese, and Taiwanese children? and (2) Are there any similarities and differences regarding their views of clean-up time?

Previous Studies of Clean-up Time

Some studies of clean-up time were related to children's self-regulation (Elias & Berk, 2002) or to parent-child relations (Combs-Ronto, Olson, Lukenheimer, & Sameroff, 2009). One study found cleaning up was a 100% teacher-initiated task (McMullen et al., 2006). Corsaro (2003) found preschoolers resisted the task of cleaning, wanting to save their activities till the next day. Other educators considered clean-up time as an opportunity for children to learn and develop special skills (Gonzalez-Mena, 2014; Zimmermann, Foster, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2018-2019). In the US, when building a classroom community, American children were encouraged to work in groups that participate in cleaning, mealtime, and whole-group times (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC,

2020). Although clean-up time was part of children's everyday activities, teachers needed to ask themselves if any transitions can be eliminated to minimize children's challenging behavior (Gonzalez-Mena, 2014).

In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, 2019) articulated the importance of developing children's skills in organizing their living spaces without adult assistance. Some Japanese kindergartners viewed that cleaning up toys should be done by only those who played with the toys, while others thought that everyone in the classrooms should participate (Hashimoto, Ikemori, & Toda, 2012). When children were satisfied with their play, they tended to engage in cleaning up without resistance (Nagase & Kuramochi, 2011b), and children learned to clean up as part of their everyday habits in group settings (Nagase & Kuramochi, 2011a).

In Taiwan, the Curriculum Outlines for Preschool Care-Taking Activities set forth by the Ministry of Education (2017) stated that children must use appropriate tools to clean up their environments, and they must adjust their behavior to clean their environments. However, there existed no research regarding Taiwanese children's concepts of the subject.

One comparative study of American, Japanese, and Taiwanese preschool teachers' views of clean-up time found these teachers' perspectives were related to their methods of teaching, the developmental stages of children, the extension of play, and reflection of teachers' professional knowledge and skills (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2017). They perceived clean-up time as more than just a transitional time and implemented various kinds of encouragement to engage children.

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 25 American kindergartners (10 boys and 15 girls) in the southeastern US, 15 Japanese kindergartners (16 boys and 9 girls) from the mainland of Japan, and 25 Taiwanese kindergartners (10 boys and 15 girls) from central Taiwan. We selected the respondent pool because of convenience of access (Hatch, 2007).

Data Collection

An American research assistant interviewed American children, the second author interviewed Japanese children, and the third author interviewed Taiwanese children. Each interview took from five to 10 minutes. Interviews were done informally depending on children's preferences of places (some children wanted to be interviewed in the classroom, while others preferred to participate in the playground). Children's responses were written down during interviews, and children were informed that the interviewers would take notes while talking to them. The interview questions were:

1. What does clean-up time mean to you?
2. Why do you think we have to clean up?
3. Is clean-up time work or play? If it is work, why? If it is not play, why? If it is play, why?
4. How do your teachers help you during clean-up time?
5. What do your teachers say when you are not cleaning up?
6. Do you and your classmates do something together to help each other during clean up?

Data Analysis

The first author translated Japanese children's responses into English, the second author followed the same

procedures to translate Taiwanese children's responses into English, and three bilingual educators reviewed the responses, reaching consensus on translation (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2017). Our data analysis consisted of content and thematic analyses. The data were coded and categorized using qualitative analysis methods (Lichtman, 2013; Yin, 2018). The first author trained two assistants to code and categorize responses. We coded each response according to its relevance to the study, and multiple category codings were counted as separate responses (Izumi-Taylor & Lin, 2017).

Results

Qualitative analysis of the data yielded five themes regarding children's views of clean-up time: transitions, fondness, clean and safe environments, work, and cooperation. Transitions were defined as cleaning up one activity in order to move on to another. Fondness refers to liking an activity and is related to responses, such as "I like to clean up because it feels good to be in clean classrooms." Clean and safe environments mean pristine and secure classrooms. Work refers to attending to required tasks. Cooperation is defined as working together to accomplish goals.

Transitions

When asked about meanings of clean-up time, 28% of American, 7% of Japanese, and 7% of Taiwanese children said that clean-up time is to pick up or put up items with which they have been playing. Although they did not mention the word, "transitions", their responses appeared to indicate that they end their current activities in order to move on to other ones. In the United States, some children said that they need to pick up their toys, and in Taiwan some children commented that they put away materials. One American boy said, "We have to clean up and put toys away and go sit on the bench," and another one responded, "Make the room clean. We can do something else." A Japanese girl commented, "If you don't clean up, you might not be able to play in the next activity." A Japanese boy claimed, "We need to separate our blocks so we can play with them tomorrow." Two Taiwanese girls replied: "Clean up means we cannot play anymore," and "Because time is up, we need to have our lunch."

Some American, Japanese, and Taiwanese children voiced their opinions that clean-up time is related to transitions when asked the reasons why they have to clean up. One Taiwanese girl remarked, "Because we have classes to go to," and another one also replied, "To have classes." Two American girls similarly claimed, "It is time to have class," and "Put toys away and have a morning meeting." Two Japanese girls commented, "When you do your next activity, you need to put away your things. That will make you feel good and clean, then you can do your next activity," and "If you don't clean up your toys, you cannot do the next things."

Only American children seemed to engage in cleaning through their teachers' signals, including verbal cues, songs, and turning off lights. Four American children talked about their teachers' signals. Three American children commented that they clean up when their teachers turn off the lights. One American boy explained, "It is clean-up time when teachers turn the lights off," and another boy said simply, "Teachers sing a song."

However, some Taiwanese children engaged in cleaning when teachers talked to them about some consequences of not cleaning. When asked what their teachers say when they are not participating in cleaning, one girl articulated, "My teacher said if you don't put materials back, you cannot play tomorrow." Another girl remarked, "Teachers would ask us to clean up again. If we don't, we have to stay in the classroom and cannot go out and play."

Fondness

This theme of fondness separated the Japanese children from their American and Taiwanese counterparts. Only Japanese children used the word, *like*, to respond to the two questions (what does clean-up mean to you and why do you think you have to clean up?). Forty-two percent of them claimed that they liked cleaning. One girl said, "I like to clean up at my kindergarten." Another girl explained how she liked to keep her house and classroom clean: "I keep my room at home clean. My mom is not good at cleaning and that is why I keep our house clean, too. I like cleaning up our classroom at kindergarten. I keep our classroom clean after we played, we ate lunch, and like that."

Regarding the reasons for cleaning, 14% of Japanese children mentioned that they enjoy cleaning. A girl explained, "Because I don't like dirty classrooms. I love to play but also like to clean up." Another girl observed, "To clean up is something we do every day. It is not something teachers force us to do, but we want to do it. I want to clean up." Also, 28% of Japanese children talked about positive feelings regarding cleaning when asked why they have to clean up, and some comments included, "When you move on to the next activity, you clean it up and you feel good about it," "When I clean up, I feel good about it," and "I feel good and clean after putting up my toys."

Clean and Safe Environments

When asked the reasons for cleaning, it appeared that some children's views (3% of American, 28% of Japanese, and 57% of Taiwanese children) were associated with the idea of maintaining clean environments. One American girl said, "Make the room clean," while another one said, "We clean up, then our room will be clean." Japanese children mentioned clean environments also. One girl noted, "We put away items to make everything clean." Another girl observed, "I clean up because I like to live in clean places." Likewise, Taiwanese children also saw clean-up time as keeping clean environments. One girl opined, "To keep our classroom clean," and one boy described his reasons, saying, "If we don't clean up, the environment will become messy."

This theme of safe environments separated Taiwanese children from their American and Japanese counterparts because only Taiwanese children associated cleaning with safe environments. One Taiwanese girl noted, "If you don't clean up, someone might step on the toys and stumble." Another girl articulated, "The classroom would become messy if you don't clean up and if someone steps on the toys, they would stumble and fall."

Work

When asked if clean-up time was work or play, 57% of American, 78% of Japanese, and 85% of Taiwanese children seemed to relate clean-up time to work. One American boy responded, "It is not play because we have to do it," and another one replied, "Work, because we can't play." These following Japanese children's responses indicated clean-up time to be work as well. One girl said, "It is not like my dad's work, but it is not play so it is work." A Japanese boy agreed, "Work! Because when you play, you play with blocks or play soccer." Some Taiwanese children's responses related to the notion that it is work and work is not fun. "Work, and play is fun. Clean-up is not play," remarked one Taiwanese girl. Another Taiwanese girl was more adamant about clean-up time being work by saying, "No one would think cleaning up is play. It is boring! You have to put things into the storage boxes and put toys back in their places."

Only Japanese children (21%) thought of clean-up time as between work and play. Three girls explained, "It is in the middle of work and play," "It is close to work," and "I think it is more like work."

Cooperation

The theme of cooperation emerged through many American (50%), Japanese (85%), and Taiwanese (42%) children's responses identifying the importance of working together. Many of them talked about how they help each other. One American boy said, "We help each other to put blocks away," and another boy remarked, "I help my friends to clean up in the block center."

Japanese children talked about how they work together to clean their play materials. A girl discussed her enjoyment of working together with her classmates, "When we cooperate during cleaning, you have fun and you can do it faster!" Another girl said, "We cooperate doing everything, including cleaning. We have many different children at my school, and that makes my school interesting." Similarly, two Taiwanese girls stated, "We would put the toys up together," and "We clean what we played with. Friends should clean up together if they play together."

Although Taiwanese children's responses indicated the cooperative nature of cleaning up together, and some stated that children should clean up only toys with which they played. Two boys articulated, "Clean what you played with," and "Materials we played with together, we have to clean up together."

Japanese and Taiwanese children's responses appeared to show the cooperative nature of relationships between the children and their teachers, and some Japanese and Taiwanese children mentioned how their teachers show them step-by-step processes to clean up their toys. A Japanese girl's explanations included her teacher's perspectives:

I was making dirt balls and my teacher pretended to eat them, then she asked me 'do you think we can start cleaning up?' At that time, we had more children playing everywhere so I went to tell others it is clean-up time.

My teachers said, 'It might take lots of time to clean up these so we might want to start now.' My teacher knows that some play stuff can take a long time to clean up and she is thinking about what we need to do ahead of time. My teacher knows a lot and I am impressed by her!

Another Japanese girl also mentioned her teacher's attitude regarding cleaning:

My mom gets mad when I don't clean up my room, but my teacher doesn't.

She cleans with us. My mom gets angry when I don't follow what I promise to do, but my teacher never gets mad at us. I think my teacher is a great person. She says let's clean up together!

One Taiwanese girl explained how children and teachers work together when cleaning. "My teachers would help us to clean our toys by posting tags or writing numbers, so it would be easy for us to clean up toys." Another Taiwanese girl explained how her teachers guide the children depending on their developmental stages, "If they were new students, teachers would teach them how to clean. If they were older students, teachers would just ask them to try."

American, Japanese, and Taiwanese children described their teachers' methods of encouraging them during clean-up time; it appeared that these teachers reminded their charges to clean by using different approaches: Two American boys remarked, "My teachers say 'Go, and help,' " and "Clean up, clean up, everybody, everywhere!" Only Japanese children (92%) said that their teachers use gentle reminders to clean, using helping hands. A Japanese girl remarked, "My teacher reminded me of my blocks that I played with and said gently to me to clean up. She guided me nicely so I wanted to clean up." Another girl claimed, "My teacher is very kind and gentle.

She uses a soft voice and shows me how to put things up. She praises me when I do it.” Also, two Taiwanese girls explained, “My teachers remind me and ask me to get back to cleaning,” and “My teachers tell us to get back and clean again together.”

However, when asked how their teachers help in cleaning, some American children explained that their teachers do not help them in cleaning up their toys. Two American boys said, “Teachers don’t help; they just sing clean-up songs,” and “Teachers never help and they just say, ‘clean-up time.’ ” Only one Taiwanese boy did not mention how his teacher helped cleaning up, but explained that he takes care of his toys by himself by saying, “No, teachers don’t clean up so you have to do it.”

Discussion

The thematic analysis of results indicate how American, Japanese, and Taiwanese children perceived clean-up time and related it to transitions, fondness, clean and safe environments, work, and cooperation. Both research questions will be addressed simultaneously.

American and Taiwanese Children’s Perceptions of Clean-up Time

All participants appear to freely express their opinions about cleaning. Some American, Japanese, and Taiwanese children seem to associate clean-up time with transitions although they do not use the word, “transitions”. They understand that clean-up time is the time to stop their activities when their teachers give signals that include verbal warnings, bells, songs, and lights, although more American children’s responses are related to transitions than their Japanese and Taiwanese counterparts. These observations about teachers’ use of signals are supported by others (Corsaro, 2003; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2017; Wedlemariam, 2014), noting that many early childhood teachers implement various kinds of signals during classroom cleaning. Only Taiwanese children’s responses appear to be related to consequences of not engaging in cleaning. Taiwanese children are told by their teachers what would happen if they did not clean classrooms. This is not the case for American and Japanese children. American and Japanese teachers are relaxed about cleaning and do not explain to their charges about the consequences of not cleaning (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2017).

Although these children from the three countries mention no complaints about cleaning, only Japanese children relate clean-up time to positive feelings, saying that they like cleaning. Some Japanese children give credit to their teachers’ gentle support and guidance for their reasons for having positive feelings. The reasons for Japanese children’s positive feelings about cleaning may be partially explained by the fact that Japanese teachers consider clean-up time as the extension of play (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2017) and save children’s toys till the next day so they can enjoy them. These Japanese teachers demonstrate remarkable patience in assisting children in any given activities including cleaning (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2017). These observations could be associated with the findings of one Japanese study that when children are satisfied with their play activities, they tend to engage in cleaning without resistance (Nagase & Kuramochi, 2011b).

American, Japanese, and Taiwanese children’s responses to clean-up time align with the notion of maintaining clean environments. In the US, NAEYC’s position statement (2020) and Copple and Bredekamp (2009) articulate that children and teachers should be responsible for class members and class environments. Similarly, the MEXT (2019) in Japan remarks that children need to develop their abilities to organize the kindergarten living space, and the Ministry of Education in Taiwan (2017) recommends that children need to learn to clean up their environments using appropriate tools. Only Taiwanese children perceive clean-up time to

be keeping the classroom safe.

The majority of American, Japanese, and Taiwanese children perceive clean-up time as work, however, these children do not mention any resistance toward cleaning classrooms. Instead, they simply respond that when they stop playing, it is time to put items away. Some Japanese and Taiwanese children are able to give a more detailed rationale for clean-up time not being play than are their American counterparts.

The cooperative nature of responses emerges from children in these countries when asked what they and their classmates do to help clean up classrooms. These children help each other clean up toys/props, and some mention the importance of supporting their friends during cleaning. One possible explanation for these observations is related to the fact that teachers in these countries encourage children to help each other in classrooms (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2017; MEXT, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2013; NAEYC, 2020). However, only Taiwanese children mention that they should be cleaning up only toys with which they played. This observation aligns with one Japanese study (Hashimoto et al., 2012) wherein some children perceive that they should be responsible for cleaning up only toys that they use. In contrast, more Taiwanese and Japanese children's responses indicate how they and their teachers cooperate during cleaning than do their American counterparts. This finding is parallel with one study (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2017) indicating that both Japanese and Taiwanese teachers and children tend to cooperate more during cleaning than do American teachers and children. The MEXT (2019) in Japan and the Ministry of Education in Taiwan (2013) enunciate the importance of developing children's abilities to organize and clean their environments.

Implications and Limitations

The findings of this study indicate that children from Japan, Taiwan, and the United States have their own perceptions of clean-up time and their own ways of comprehending it. Finding out the reasons for these children's perspectives may help teachers in different countries understand how to implement effective teaching methods in classrooms. To develop and expand teachers' knowledge on how to engage children in cleaning, teachers in those countries could work together by sharing their observations of clean-up time. When teachers recognize that clean-up time is more than a transitional time, they can construct effective methods of encouraging their charges during cleaning. When teachers respect and value children's perspectives of clean-up time, it helps educators understand how to create appropriate environments that encourage children to engage in such activities.

There is a need for further examination as to why some Japanese children's responses are related to positive feelings since clean-up time has created difficulties for teachers in previous studies. The indication of this study must be considered limited given the small number of participants from the three nations. Further research would require a wider sample of children from different schools.

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