

Japanese and Taiwanese Teachers' Perspectives of Spiritual Development Through Outdoor Play

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The purpose of the study was to examine kindergarten teachers' views of spiritual development and outdoor play in Japan and Taiwan. The participants consisted of 15 Japanese kindergarten teachers on the main island of Japan and of 15 Taiwanese teachers in the central part of Taiwan. The results of qualitative analysis of the data yielded the following three themes: the importance of acceptance and respect, of cooperative play environments, and of nature-related play. It was found that the participants' cultures, the educational guidelines set forth by their governments, and play environments have an effect on their perspectives of spiritual development through outdoor play. Implications for early childhood education were also presented.

Keywords: a cross-cultural study, outdoor play, spiritual development in Japan and Taiwan

Today's children live in challenging times dealing with multifaceted global issues. They have lost many opportunities to play outdoors because of the never-ending threat of terrorist attacks in the world, of changes in manners of entertainment, of busy everyday lifestyles of adults (Izumi-Taylor, Turner, & Ro, 2021; James, 2017; Rivkin, 2014), of no availability of safe outdoor play spaces (Charles & Louv, 2009; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2021; Rivkin, 2014), of polluted environments (Rivkin, 2014), and of increased academic pressures on children and educators (Chawla, 2012; Izumi-Taylor & Scott, 2013). Such stressful environments contribute to decreasing outdoor play time for children, and environmental fears and stress negatively influence children's lives very early (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2021; Izumi-Taylor & Lin, 2023).

It is not possible for early childhood educators to completely protect children from these stressful environments, but they can support children's spirits by providing them with opportunities to play outdoors (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010; Blain & Eady, 2002; Chawla, 2012; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2021; Izumi-Taylor & Scott, 2013; Rivkin, 2014). Supporting children's spirits refers to "developing and supporting the vital core of

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human nature” (Izumi-Taylor & Scott, 2013, p. 38). Early childhood teachers need to strive to nurture children’s abilities to cope with stress (Chawla, 2012; Dykstra, 2020; Policoff, 2018; Sisson & Lash, 2017; Izumi-Taylor & Lin, 2023). Nature is the best way to promote such abilities in children (Bento & Dias, 2017; Izumi-Taylor, 2021; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2021; Rich, 2010). Nurturing children’s spiritual development through outdoor play is not about implementing religious beliefs in classrooms (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010), but it is about offering developmentally appropriate outdoor play environments. Through outdoor play, children can learn and enjoy lessons about “caring for others, being part of a community, and working to create positive change” (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010, p. 91).

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine kindergarten teachers’ views of spiritual development and outdoor play in Japan and Taiwan. Because education and schooling in Asian countries impact every facet of our lives, including the issues of employment, education, training, labor forces, cultural orientation, attitudes, and values (Maclean & Symaco, 2017), studying education in Japan and Taiwan will broaden educators’ perspectives and knowledge. Additionally, examining education in Asian countries could help educators understand how the growing prominence of Asian economies and corporations is advancing the field of early childhood education (Izumi-Taylor & Ito, 2017; Izumi-Taylor & Lin, 2023; Maclean & Symaco, 2017).

Research on teachers’ perceptions of spirituality and outdoor play in different cultures has been limited (Izumi-Taylor & Lin, 2023; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2014). Thus, this study was conducted to address such limitations and was guided by these research questions: 1. What views are revealed in Japanese and Taiwanese teachers’ views of spirituality and outdoor play? 2. Are there any similarities and differences among these teachers’ views? 3. How are they similar or different? This article first outlined the contexts concerning promoting children’s spirits and outdoor play, as well as play and spirituality research in Japan and Taiwan. It was followed by a report on the study, analyses of findings, and discussions of implications and limitations for early childhood education.

Promoting Children’s Spirits and Outdoor Play

Promoting children’s spirits is associated with the development of their qualities of kindness, compassion, love, forgiveness, peacefulness, empathy, generosity, and tolerance (Montessori, 1972; Meredith, Bubing, & Izumi-Taylor, 2020). Teachers are required to nurture all aspects of a child’s development, including spirituality (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010; Harris, 2007; Izumi-Taylor & Lin, 2023). “A new type of reciprocal, spiritual curriculum between children and teachers needs to take place within our classrooms” (Harris, 2007, p. 267). When intentionally nurturing the whole child, teachers need to address children’s physical, cognitive, and emotional development, including their spirituality (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Epstein, 2007; Morrison, 2015). Early childhood teachers must integrate all domains of developing the whole child by including intellectual, social, and affective domains of learning (Bento & Dias, 2017; Davis, Rea, & Waite, 2006; Epstein, 2007; Harris, 2007; Morrison, 2015; Rivkin, 2014; Torquati et al., 2010).

To support all domains of children’s development, teachers can offer them outdoor play activities for five-to-10 hours a week which can be beneficial to their development of spirituality (Pedersen, 2014; Nauert, 2015). When young children regularly engage in outdoor play, they have more opportunities to be physically active (Bento & Dias, 2017; CDC, 2022; Izumi-Taylor, Li, & Ro, 2023; Spencer & Wright, 2014). When playing outside, it allows children to be exuberant, and they enjoy a sense of freedom (Rivkin, 2014). Children’s gross

motor skills are also developed through outdoor play activities (Izumi-Taylor, Li, & Ro, 2023). The natural world offers opportunities for climbing, running, and child-directed manipulation. Equally important to gross motor development is the social and emotional development through outdoor play activities (Bento & Dias, 2017; CDC, 2022; Sisson & Lash, 2017; Spencer & Wright, 2014). Experiences in the outdoors help children to understand the life cycle and seasons, and to make predictions and become aware of the interdependence between plants, animals and elements, including rain, sun, snow, and storms (Izumi-Taylor, 2021; Rivkin, 2014).

In their efforts to support children's spiritual development, Baumgartner and Buchanan (2014) suggest outdoor play is a strategy that teachers might use to nurture children's spirits based on three components: a sense of belonging, respect for oneself and others, and awareness and appreciation of the unknown. As regards a sense of belonging, when children play outdoors, they have opportunities to experience caring for animals and plants as they develop empathy for nature and for other people (Acar & Torquati, 2015; Bento & Dias, 2017; Chawla, 2012; Izumi-Taylor, 2021; Sisson & Lash, 2017; Wokye, 2004). Such experiences with nature foster curiosity and questions about their natural environments (Harris, 2007). When teachers create safe and nurturing classroom environments where students are accepted, valued, and respected, students' basic psychological needs are met (DeVries & Zan, 2012). Playing and experiencing the outdoors relates to children's spiritual development (Wilson, 2012) as well as to all domains of development (Bento & Dias, 2017; Sisson & Lash, 2017). When children feel that they are part of their environments, they tend to cooperate and help each other (Harris, 2007). "Unity is an important sense" of belonging to something (Acar & Torquati, 2015, p. 68). Such a sense of belonging promotes children's spirits as well as their friendships (Bento & Dias, 2017; Harris, 2007).

To promote children's respect for themselves and others, highly skilled teachers encourage children to be respectful to each other, thus, supporting their spirituality (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010; Harris, 2007; Koontz, 2002). When teachers truly believe that children are spiritual beings, they can support the development of their spirits (Izumi-Taylor & Scott, 2013). Supporting children's spirits enhances children's creativity (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010), and their outdoor play provides children opportunities to be creative and imaginative (Acar & Torquati, 2015; Chawla, 2012). Such play also promotes children's respect for their environments (Bento & Dias, 2017; Sisson & Lash, 2017; Wilson, 1993; Wokye, 2004).

When children engage in outdoor activities, there is a stronger knowledge base of and empathetic regard toward environmental issues (Izumi-Taylor, 2021; Rivkin, 2014). Children need to experience and appreciate what the world offers (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010; Chawla, 2012). They need to see, feel, and hear such things in nature as trees, the soil, the sky, animals, water, snow, and rain (Izumi-Taylor, 2021). Children need to know about and enjoy nature, as outdoor play experiences promote their sense of wonder (Chawla, 2012; Izumi-Taylor, 2021; Woyke, 2004), and that sense of wonder comes from their discovery of nature and the outdoors. "The intrinsic nature of play is also grounded in a sense of wonder and awe" (Harris, 2007, p. 271).

Play and Spirituality Research in Japan and Taiwan

Although there exists no research regarding teachers' perceptions of spiritual development and outdoor play in Japan and Taiwan, one cross-cultural study (Izumi-Taylor & Lin, 2023; Izumi-Taylor & Scott, 2013) examined how Japanese and American teachers promoted children's spirits through literature. Japanese teachers claimed that through nurturing children's moral development, they enhanced children's spirits using literature. Another cross-cultural study explored how American, Japanese, and Taiwanese pre-service teachers viewed the play of children and adults (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2014). In this study more American and Taiwanese participants agreed

that play was related to learning compared to their Japanese counterparts. However, both Japanese and Taiwanese participants reported that although play can develop their learning, children should enjoy play just for the sake of playing.

In addition to these cross-cultural studies, because both Japanese and Taiwanese governments regulate early childhood education, it is important to understand how their educational guidelines influence the education of children in each country (Ito & Izumi-Taylor, 2018; Izumi-Taylor & Ito, 2017; Leung & Chen, 2017). Recently, educators in both Japan and Taiwan have made several changes to meet societal needs, and to sustain high quality and availability of early childhood education. The central and local governments, along with private sectors, have worked together to build and subsidize more childcare facilities as well as to provide free childcare for many families in Japan (Izumi-Taylor & Ito, 2017).

As regards the educational guidelines, the government have focused heavily on the promotion of children's social and emotional development and learning in Japan (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2018; 2019). In section 1, it stated that children's healthy hearts and bodies need to be nurtured in cooperative environments. It also delineated that children need to interact with and play in natural environments in order to appreciate and experience changes in nature. Through such experiences children's curiosity and wonderment may be cultivated, and children need to learn about and to respect and appreciate animals and nature in natural environments.

In Taiwan, the government has demonstrated an understanding of the importance of early childhood education (Leung & Chen, 2017). The curriculum standards state the importance of developing children's health, daily life experiences, and moral development (The Ministry of Education, 2017). To promote children's morals, teachers need to support children's awareness of their mental and physical health, as well as to foster their curiosity and interests in learning through play (Lin, 2015).

In 2013, the Ministry of Education has issued the *Preschool Activities and Curriculum Guidelines Working Edition* (the Working Edition of Curriculum Outlines for Preschool Care-taking Activities), including the notion that teachers need to promote children's healthy minds and bodies to cultivate their social habits, and to initiate their care for the environment (Lin, 2015). Although the guidelines do not use the word, "spirits" or "outdoor play," they appear to suggest the importance of social development and of environments (Lin, 2015). In the guidelines, the following three areas of the curriculum are deemed to be important: the social, the emotional, and the aesthetic. Among these areas, teachers are expected to develop children's skills in perception and identification; in expression and communication; in caring and cooperation; in reasoning and appreciation; in imagination and creation; and in self-management (The Ministry of Education, 2017). Along with these areas within the curriculum, teachers need to provide children with opportunities to experience nature so they may observe and experience natural phenomena and changes. Teachers also are expected to offer children opportunities to appreciate, connect with, and enjoy nature, including living things.

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 15 Japanese kindergarten teachers on the main island of Japan and of 15 Taiwanese teachers in the central part of Taiwan. We selected our respondent pool through convenience of access and availability (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). We identified our respondent pool as teachers who might be able to provide the best information for our research (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Three male teachers and 12 female

teachers participated in Japan. Their experiences as teachers ranged from two to 30 years, and their educational backgrounds included 12 Bachelor's degrees and three associate degrees. Eleven female and four male teachers participated in Taiwan. Their teaching experiences ranged from one to 23 years, and of 15, four had Master's degrees, and the others had Bachelor's degrees.

Data Collection

The third author requested that a Japanese kindergarten director ask if the teachers could participate in this study. The second author followed the same procedure to identify participants in Taiwan (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2014). We asked teachers the following six questions: 1. Do you think we need to nurture children's spirits/hearts? 2. If yes, how do you go about this? 3. Do you use outdoor play to nurture children's spirits/hearts? 4. If yes, what kind of outdoor play do you use to accomplish this? 5. What kinds of outdoor environments do you provide to promote children's interests in outdoor play? and 6. Can you tell about your philosophy of early childhood education? The written responses were collected by the second and third authors.

Data Analysis

The first author translated the Japanese teachers' responses into English; two Japanese bilingual educators reviewed the responses, reaching consensus on translation (Izumi-Taylor, Ito, & Gibbons, 2010). The second author then followed the same procedures in Taiwan. Our data analysis consisted of content and thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We coded each response "according to its relevance to the study, and multiple category codings were counted as separate responses" (Izumi-Taylor, Ito, & Gibbons, 2010, p. 412). We discarded irrelevant responses, such as "Playing outdoors is good for children" and coded some responses more than once.

Results

Qualitative analysis of the data yielded the following three themes: the importance of acceptance and respect, of cooperative play environments, and of nature-related play. We defined acceptance and respect as teachers respecting and valuing children as they are. Cooperative play environments include settings where children's play is based on play activities promoting cooperation, including games with rules and teamwork. Nature-related play refers to play that children engage in outdoors where they have access to nature, including the four seasons. We will discuss each theme accordingly.

Acceptance and Respect

All teachers (100%) in Japan and Taiwan agreed that nurturing children's spirits is important. In order to do so, 33% of Japanese teachers and 20% of Taiwanese teachers wrote that accepting and respecting children as they are is important in order to support the development of spirituality. One thoughtful Japanese teacher described how she assists her students' spirituality, "I hope my students value and respect their peers as friends. I accept them as they are, and every day I support their strengths." Another teacher noted, "I need to accept my students' opinions and feelings and respect each child." Two Taiwanese teachers commented, "I accept my students' thoughts and give them opportunities to express themselves," and "Teachers should work hard to create a learning environment that is respectful and cooperative. I also arrange an environment that promotes children's sense of belonging."

The theme of acceptance and respect appeared again when Japanese teachers discussed their philosophies of early childhood education. Twenty percent of Japanese teachers voiced their opinions that their teaching is based on accepting and respecting children. One teacher said, "I try to work with children from the children's

points of view.” Another one mentioned, “I know each child has unlimited possibilities and respect them unconditionally.” However, none of their Taiwanese counterparts mentioned this theme when discussing the philosophy of early childhood education.

Cooperative Play Environments

When asked if they use outdoor play to nurture children’s spirits/hearts, 100% of teachers in Japan and Taiwan said yes. Both Japanese and Taiwanese teachers appeared to implement cooperative play and group games to promote children’s spirits. Forty percent of Japanese teachers and 13% of Taiwanese teachers mentioned how they used cooperative play. One Japanese teacher mentioned the importance of heart-felt experiences of games with rules that are challenging, “Of course, depending on their development, I think children should feel in their hearts the joy and pleasure of play with rules and experience how, within such play, they can learn to solve conflicts.” Another Japanese teacher was adamant about the importance of cooperative play in group games:

Through kicking balls, jumping rope, and playing hide and seek, children need to play together and learn to understand rules. They need to challenge themselves in order to develop various kinds of social skills as well as to develop their physical skills.

Similarly, the following comments were made by Taiwanese teachers: “Children need to engage in group play or team play, and they learn to form peer relationships as well as develop interpersonal skills,” and “I provide group games to foster a spirit of teamwork and cooperation.”

Also, both Japanese and Taiwanese teachers offered opportunities for children to play cooperative games with rules. Approximately 53% of Japanese and 53% of Taiwanese teachers claimed that they provided their students with such games. A Japanese teacher described how she provided her students games with rules: “Children need to cooperate with their friends when playing games. They use their minds and bodies to enjoy games. It is different from solitary play, and playing games can expand their world.” Another Japanese teacher noted, “I think that children have their own image of games, and teachers need to provide appropriate environments for them. They interact with each other and develop cooperation through playing ball games.” Similarly, Two Taiwanese teachers commented about games with rules: “I provide my students challenging games, cooperative games, and role-playing games,” and “Group games or games with rules could develop children’s abilities to work together and nurture their spirits and hearts.”

Nature-Related Play

Nature-related play seemed to be important to many teachers when developing children’s spirits (about 47% of Japanese and 73% of Taiwanese participants). When asked about how they arrange their outdoor play, many teachers’ comments appeared to relate to the importance of nature. One Japanese teacher reported her thoughts:

I go beyond what we have in our playground. For example, depending on their games and play, I place various kinds of items, including hanging ropes from trees, provide them with plastic blocks, draw lines on the ground, and display their art on trees.

The following two Japanese teachers were the only ones who expressed the importance of four seasons and of children’s special place in the outdoors by saying:

I provide my students with an environment where they can observe and feel the seasons. Trees and flowers are important. Equally important is providing my students with a special place, such as forts where they can hide and enjoy some freedom from adults’ control.

And “I want to offer my students natural environments where they can feel and touch items from our four seasons.” However, none of their Taiwanese counterparts mentioned the four seasons.

Many Taiwanese teachers also mentioned how they value natural environments and explained how they implement this. One teacher simply said, “I provide a nature setting with water, sand, wooden boxes, etc.” Another one explained in detail, “Natural environments would be my choice when providing outdoor environments. Children can use their imaginations when playing with sticks, leaves, flowers and grass in various ways.”

Discussion

The thematic analysis of results indicated how samples of Japanese and Taiwanese early childhood teachers perceived spirits and outdoor play and related it to teaching young children. Certain themes appeared to be more commonly identified by one or another of the two samples in their responses. The following discussion will be addressed in the two research questions simultaneously: 1. What views are revealed in Japanese and Taiwanese teachers’ views of spirituality and outdoor play? And 2. Are there any similarities and differences among these teachers’ views? How are they similar or different?

Japanese and Taiwanese Teachers’ Views of Spirituality and Outdoor Play in Terms of Similarities and Differences

The responses to question 1 indicated a strong belief that both Japanese and Taiwanese teachers consider the development of spirituality to be important, consistent with the Japanese educational guidelines stating that one goal of early childhood education is to promote children’s social development, including their hearts and bodies (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2018; 2019). Although in one study the Japanese teachers did not include outdoor play activities, many of them intentionally fostered children’s spirits through the use of literature (Izumi-Taylor & Scott, 2013). Likewise, all Taiwanese teachers responded that they need to nurture children’s spirits. These findings were supported by their educational guidelines, articulating that children’s minds and bodies should be nurtured (The Ministry of Education, 2013; 2017).

As regards acceptance and respect, both countries’ teachers seemed to agree that they need to be respectful of their students. When respectful teachers accept children as they are, their students’ spirits can be enhanced (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010; Izumi-Taylor, 2023). Both Japanese and Taiwanese teachers provided their students with outdoor play activities, hoping for them to experience and develop empathy for nature and for other people (Acor & Torquati, 2015; Bento & Dias, 2017; Chawla, 2012; The Ministry of Education, 2017; The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2018, 2019; Session & Lash, 2017; Woyke, 2004). Such experiences can enhance children’s spirituality (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2021; Harris, 2007). Although both Japanese and Taiwanese teachers indicated the importance of accepting and respecting their students, more Japanese teachers’ responses suggested this than their Taiwanese counterparts. It is interesting to note that a sense of belonging which was one of the components in promoting children’s spirits (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010) was mentioned by only one Taiwanese teacher. However, none of Japanese teachers commented on a sense of belonging in their responses.

Many of these participants in both countries considered providing cooperative play environments to be important. These participants appeared to value children’s cooperative play in relation to the development of

spirits (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2021; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2014). To promote children's social development, including spirits, the Japanese educational guidelines clearly indicate that children need to willingly and cooperatively play together and that teachers must provide such play environments (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2018; 2019). Similarly, many Taiwanese teachers' responses were related to cooperative play environments (Lin, 2015; The Ministry of Education, 2013; 2017).

To foster children's spirits, both Japanese and Taiwanese teachers implemented outdoor play activities involving nature. The educational guidelines of both countries clearly describe how teachers can offer play activities in natural environments (The Ministry of Education, 2017; The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2018; 2019). Outdoor play is the best way for teachers to implement spirituality into early childhood educational settings (Izumi-Taylor, 2021; Pedersen, 2014; Rich, 2010; Rivkin, 2014). Playing outdoors with nature, where children can experience and appreciate the four seasons, is one of the main goals for Japanese early childhood education (Izumi-Taylor, 2021; The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2018; 2019). It appeared that both Japanese and Taiwanese teachers closely follow their educational guidelines when working with their students. However, although in Taiwan teachers offered outdoor play activities, they did not mention anything about seasonal changes. Instead, many Taiwanese teachers provided nature-related play activities, including playground play activities or play activities with natural materials. This was contrary to the guidelines set forth by the Taiwanese government, claiming that teachers are obligated to provide natural environments to children in order for them to experience and to appreciate nature and its changes (The Ministry of Education, 2017).

Implications and Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study reveal that the participants' cultures and their educational guidelines set forth by the governments have an effect on their perspectives of spiritual development through outdoor play. Preschoolers need safe space to move freely and explore their capabilities in outdoor environments where teachers respect and accept children as they are. Preschoolers require spacious outdoor environments where they can engage in cooperative play to enhance their spirituality. As nature-related play can enhance children's spirits, teachers need to reflect on and examine their outdoor play environments to see how their environments are connected with nature.

Each culture has its own way of promoting and of developing children's spirituality, and both Japanese and Taiwanese teachers can work together and share their perspectives, knowledge, and skills in order to develop the best practices to support the development of children's spirits through outdoor play. When these teachers reflect on their own teaching practices and learn from each other, children's spiritual development can be enhanced. Educators and those involved children's lives need to understand how cultures influence teachers' practices. They must recognize that developing spirituality through outdoor play is related to a cultural phenomenon. To do this, educators and others need to work with governmental officials to provide the best educational guidelines that are align with children's needs, modes of learning, and development.

However, future samples need to be inclusive of a wider range of teachers from different countries. Also, because teachers in each country decipher each question differently, it is critical to create culturally unbiased questions (Ito & Izumi-Taylor, 2013).

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