

Japanese Pre-service Teachers' Concepts of Gaman (Enduring Hardship): How Gaman Relates to the Education of Preschoolers

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The purpose of this study was to examine Japanese pre-service teachers' concepts of gaman (enduring hardship) and how it is related to the education of young children. Japanese people consider this concept to be a very important skill that should be learned early in life. The data came from written responses of pre-service teachers majoring in early childhood education. The data analysis revealed that gaman was related to developing self-control, to understanding others' feelings, and to developing interpersonal relationships. The participants gave both self-oriented and others-oriented reasons for endurance. The implications for education and teacher education resulting from the study were presented.

Keywords: Japanese pre-service teachers, concepts of gaman (enduring hardship), and Japanese preschoolers' self-control skills

Introduction

In Japan gaman means to endure hardship or persist, and it is defined as to “endure the seemingly unendurable with patience and dignity” (Lomont, 2023, p. 10). It is closely related to the Western notion of resilience (Sylvester, 2023) and self-regulation (Huber, 2023; Yoko, 2023). The Japanese consider it to be a very important quality or skill that should be learned early in life, and people practice the act when they are facing difficulties in their lives (Huber, 2023; McRoy, Gerde, & Linscott, 2022; Norman, Juhasz, Ueda, & Kayama, 2021; Yoko, 2023). In the Japanese culture, there is a common belief that by trying hard, one can achieve anything. Gaman is a well-worn word “used to exhort people to try against all odds because spiritual substance will make it possible to overcome material hurdles—but only by trying very hard” (Befu, 1986, p. 24). Likewise, Libra (1976) relates gaman to self-discipline or self-control because it attributes success to diligence, effort, and endurance. Befu (1986) states that, “endurance, perseverance, and hardship do not connote the strong positive value inherent in the Japanese equivalents, which in effect, exhort Japanese to undergo Spartan experiences, defined as good in themselves” (p. 24).

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People in diverse cultures behave differently as regards endurance, persistence, cooperation, and individualism. In Japan, Shoji (1993) defines self-control in relation to gaman as the act of denying one's desires and engaging in socially accepted behavior for the sake of better results in the future, of harmonious human relationships, and of appropriate social conduct. She also includes four dimensions of self-control: social inhibition, personal inhibition, social facilitation, and personal facilitation. These dimensions have been related to the Japanese act of gaman (Horino, Hamaguchi, & Miyashita, 2000) and may be attributable to the Japanese collectivist culture (Chan, 2019). In collectivist cultures children are taught to prioritize the needs of the groups or of others from an early age.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the concept of gaman among Japanese college students majoring in early childhood education and how it relates to the education of young children. Not only does gaman pervade the daily activities of Japanese children, but adults also encounter it every day. In spite of this pervasiveness, little is known about pre-service teachers' understanding of the issue, and none of the existing studies have examined pre-service early childhood teachers' concepts of gaman. Because Japanese children learn this proficiency at an early age, the study of how pre-service teachers instill this in children can contribute to the field of early childhood education. Pre-service and in-service teachers' beliefs and perceptions influence their teaching in classrooms (Vartuli, 2005). For these reasons, research was needed to examine the way in which pre-service teachers promote this ability in young children at the beginning of formal education. To fill this need, we studied college pre-service teachers' concepts of gaman (enduring hardship). This study was conducted based on the following research questions: (1) What views are revealed in Japanese pre-service teachers' concepts of children's abilities in gaman? (2) Are there any similarities or differences among these teachers' views? (3) How are they similar or different? This article first outlines the contexts concerning the promotion of children's gaman in Japan. It is followed by a report on the study, analyses of findings, discussions of implications, and limitations for early childhood education.

Japanese Studies Regarding Enduring Hardship

One comparative study of American and Japanese mothers' expectations has found that Japanese mothers tend to expect their children to develop endurance skills or persistence more than do their American counterparts (Azuma, Kashiwagi, & Hess, 1981). This study also has revealed that American mothers expect their children's skills of verbal self-assertion and social skills to develop early. Another similar study by Olson and Kashiwagi (2001) has indicated that Japanese preschool girls significantly exceed boys in their abilities of delay and compliance and that such abilities of US boys and girls do not differ in this way until age five. Imafuku et al. (2021) have found that their preschoolers' self-care abilities are highly related to their endurance or self-control skills. One recent study examines how Japanese preschoolers' self-care abilities relate to their self-control skills (Zhu et al., 2020), revealing that girls' self-regulation skills are better developed than those of boys. Others argue that preschool teachers' guidance and "direct interventions with children could be an effective strategy to improve social skills" (Hosokawa, Nishida, Funato, & Mitani, 2023, p. 8).

In classrooms, many Japanese teachers support preschoolers' self-regulation skills in order for them to control their emotions and behaviors, to delay gratification, and to create positive social relations with others (Izumi-Taylor, 2023). Children learn to express their emotions appropriately with teachers' help. Such self-

regulation skills relate to children's resilience (Collet, 2017; Hill & Adesanya, 2019). Similarly, the Japanese governmental guidelines focus heavily on the promotion of children's social and emotional development and learning, including self-regulation skills (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology [MEXT], 2019), stating that children's healthy hearts and bodies need to be nurtured in cooperative environments. Teachers support children's social/emotional skills by creating social environments in which children play together freely, solve problems with peers, and learn social skills (Nakatsubo et al., 2021).

Generally Japanese preschool teachers practice remarkable patience when interacting with children (Izumi-Taylor, 2023; Izumi-Taylor & Rogers, 2016; Nakatsubo et al., 2021). Many teachers observe, watch over, and stand guard rather than taking immediate action while working with preschoolers (Izumi-Taylor, 2023), and it requires teachers' undeniable patience. They intentionally take the time to see what will happen when children are trying to solve problems. Such teachers' patience is related to their *gaman* as they are withholding their authority to intervene, and this teaching is called the *mimamoru* (watch over) approach (Izumi-Taylor, 2023; Nakatsubo et al., 2021). This approach is closely related to low intervention that American teachers practice when supporting children's cognitive and social/emotional development (Izumi-Taylor, 2024; Nakatsubo et al., 2021). Many preschool teachers intentionally nurture preschoolers' perseverance skills by being patient when interacting with them (Holloway, 2000). It seems that preschool teachers enhance children's *gaman* skills through their own skills of persistence and enduring hardship.

Method

Data Collection

The data concerning pre-service teachers' concepts of *gaman* came from written responses of Japanese pre-service teachers majoring in early childhood education at one university located in Tokyo, Japan. The respondent pool was selected through convenience of access (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). The participants were told that their participation was voluntary and that the results of this study would be available upon request. They responded to the following questions in one session:

1. What kind of hardships do you endure? Please give three examples.
2. When have you been told to endure something? Please give three examples.
3. What were the benefits of enduring hardship?
4. What was the most difficult aspect of enduring hardship?
5. Do you think it is important for children to learn to endure something? Yes, sometimes, or no.
- 5a. If you say "yes" to Question 5, please explain why.
- 5b. If you say "no" to Question 5, please explain why not.
6. When do you tell children to endure something?
7. What does enduring hardship mean to you?

Participants

The participants consisted of 55 pre-service teachers of early childhood education (five males and 50 females) from a suburb of Tokyo ranging in ages from 19 to 38 (*Mdn* = 20). The students were in their third or fourth year of college, the majority of whom usually become early childhood educators because they are working toward their teaching credentials. All of the students had different levels of field experiences of teaching at preschools and childcare centers, and none of them had children. These students had taken courses in early childhood

education, psychology, and child development. Table 1 shows the participants' birth orders as well as with whom they were living at the time they participated in this study. Since all of the students in this study lived with family members, these questions were included to explain their family backgrounds.

Table 1

Family Structure (N = 55)

Living with	N	Birth order	N
Parents and grandparents	10	First child	25
Parents	39	Second child	7
Single parent	6	Third child	2
		Youngest child	17
		Only child	4

Note. The second child is out of three or more and the third child is out of four.

Data Analysis

The first author, a native of Japan, translated the students' responses into English, and two Japanese bilingual educators then reviewed each response and reached consensus on translation (Izumi-Taylor, Ito, & Gibbons, 2010). Data were coded and categorized using qualitative analysis methods (Lichtman, 2010). The first author trained two assistants (native Japanese speakers) to code and categorize responses. In the first stage, each statement was read without any concern to its relationship with other aspects of the text. In the second stage, each statement was read repeatedly to familiarize ourselves with the transcript. In the third stage, we began to watch for patterns and themes to develop. In the fourth stage, among themes, patterns, as well as similarities and differences, we selected relevancies and discarded irrelevancies. Each assistant coded and categorized each response independently, and coders reached agreement upon the coding and categorization of all responses. Finally, in the fifth stage, we brought together the themes from each response, unified the themes under the umbrella of the cultures being studied, and then related them to the review of the literature (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010; Lichtman, 2010).

Results

Qualitative analysis of the data yielded three major themes: gaman as developing self-control, as understanding the feelings of others, and as developing interpersonal relationships. The following two themes regarding the reasons for self-control also emerged: self-oriented reasons and others-oriented reasons. Self-control referred to the state of controlling one's desires, emotions, actions, or behavior by one's own volition. Understanding the feelings of others included empathy, perspective taking, and compassion. Interpersonal relations may define a person "in terms of the relationships one has with others" (Befu, 1986, p. 22). Each theme will be discussed accordingly.

Developing Self-Control

When asked to give examples of the hardships they endured, the 38 students noted that they endure to maintain self-control. When these people discussed gaman in relation to self-control, their responses appeared to be associated with morality in the context of others. As stated earlier, all of the participants were living with some family members when responding to the questions. A 38-year-old man who lives with his parents wrote, "When I might hurt someone physically or psychologically, I face my aggression and endure it. And I control my urges".

A 20-year-old man living with his parents and one brother wrote his meaning of gaman, "I try to respect others, to have an empathic heart by suppressing my insistence, opinions, and feelings, although it can cause stress". Also, two 20-year-old women simply wrote, "Self-control", and "Controlling one's urges".

When asked if children need to learn to endure, 20 future teachers said it is important for them to learn this concept in order not to become *wagamama* (self-centered). To illustrate, a 20-year-old woman living with her parents and her two sisters wrote, "Learning to endure is important to children because it will give them the opportunity to develop self-control, and it will prevent them from becoming self-centered. But, I am strongly against us insisting that children be constantly self-monitoring. It takes time to develop this". Another 20-year-old woman living with her grandmother and parents stated, "Gaman means you look around you and control yourself".

In addition to self-control, these pre-service teachers associate gaman with self-denial of material or physical needs. In giving such examples, their comments describe self-denial in the form of not buying something they wanted, doing without their favorite food, attending classes when they did not want to, or being polite to their siblings when they felt hostile. Of 55 students, 35 noted that they endure hardship when they refrain from buying things such as clothes or food that they desire. A 20-year-old woman living with her parents and grandmother said, "I endure it when I can't buy things that I want to buy, and I just tell myself to forget about it". Another 20-year-old woman stated, "If there is only enough for others to eat, I don't eat anything and endure it".

Understanding Others' Feelings

These pre-service teachers expressed varying degrees of understanding others' feelings when responding to the seventh question. Of 55 participants, 28 observed that they endure in order to not cause trouble for others. A 20-year-old woman wrote, "I want to be thoughtful of others". A 19-year-old woman noted, "I think we do this to think about others and to have open hearts. We have to compromise sometimes".

In keeping with the theme of understanding others' feelings, 20 pre-service teachers responded that it is important for children to learn to endure. A 20-year-old man commented thusly: "Children need to learn that the world does not revolve around them, and they need to know that other people have their own opinions and thoughts. Therefore, they need to learn to compromise once in a while". A 19-year-old woman also reported, "When children learn to endure, they can learn that not everything can go their way, and they can become unselfish. This way they can develop empathic hearts".

Developing Interpersonal Relations

Of 55 participants, 29 pre-service teachers commented that teaching gaman is important to children because it helps the development of their interpersonal relations. A 19-year-old woman wrote, "I think children need to be cooperative, and in order to interact with others, they should know gaman is necessary". A 20-year-old man commented, "Children need to know that they are not the center of the world, that their opinions and ideas are not always accepted by others, and that other people have their own ideas. They must learn to gaman in order to maintain interpersonal relationships with others". A 20-year-old woman simply said, "Children should know that they cannot live alone and if they don't learn this, they would grow up to not be nice people!"

Seven pre-service teachers related gaman to children's development. A 20-year-old woman noted, "As children get older, we need to let them know the importance of interpersonal human relationships. It should be taught as children develop". These pre-service teachers considered teaching such skills to young children to be important, but they also noted that when teaching such skills, one should consider children's ages. A 20-year-old

woman living with her parents and one sister said, "I don't want to force them to endure everything, but when children start going to grade school, they can begin to endure a little". Another 20-year-old woman living with her parents and one younger brother related this from her experiences, "It is important to learn to deny materialistic desires sometimes so that children can understand the importance of money. But, it is not appropriate to make my younger brother endure something by telling him to gaman just because I am a big sister." This 20-year-old man's comments were insightful: "It depends on the children's ages. When they are very young, we need to accept their needs, and as they get older, we need to begin to teach them how to endure. If we don't respond to their needs in the early years, we cannot form loving, trusting personal relationships with them".

Reasons for Gaman

These pre-service students gave reasons for gaman that were related to both self-oriented and others-oriented. These reasons will be discussed accordingly.

Self-oriented reasons. 32 students gave self-oriented reasons for enduring hardship when, for example, they were not able to buy something they desired. Additionally, 44 of them reported that they would control their urges when wanting something, and 26 of them said that they would tell children to endure hardship when situations do not allow them to have what they want.

Most common of the self-oriented reasons were related to personal pleasure and satisfaction. To demonstrate, a 20-year-old woman indicated, "I endure hardship when I don't have enough money to buy something". A 20-year-old man claimed, "I endure and finish my project even if I am sleepy". These pre-service teachers also gave self-oriented reasons when asked to write when they would tell children to endure. A 19-year-old woman noted, "When we don't have enough money for something". A 20-year-old woman also observed, "When children want more and more candy".

Others-oriented reasons. Others-oriented reasons focused on the welfare of other individuals, and the pre-service teachers' responses were related to others in their lives. When giving others-oriented reasons, 28 commented that they endure hardship in order to not cause trouble for others. Of the 17 pre-service teachers who suggested that the benefits of enduring hardship are related to being able to think about others, 16 said the purpose of gaman was to learn to consider others' feelings. Emphasizing the happiness and comfort of others, these 16 students conveyed such concerns as follows: "To live in a society, we need to endure things. By doing so, we can become strong and accomplish things for others", "To gaman is to keep social conventions", "To endure is to keep harmonious human relationships", or "To gaman means to become a social person".

In keeping with the reasons related to others, 20 students commented that it is important for children to learn to endure so that they may understand others' feelings, and 15 of them said that they would tell children to gaman in order to not cause trouble for others. Of 15, two pre-service teachers, said, "I would tell children to endure when they are in trouble, for example, when they are very loud or when they might hurt someone", and "I would ask children to endure when their toys are taken away from them without being asked".

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the concept of gaman among Japanese college students majoring in early childhood education. Gaman was related to developing self-control, to understanding others' feelings, and to developing interpersonal relationships. These students gave both self-oriented and others-oriented reasons for endurance.

Through gaman, these pre-service teachers wrote that they were able to maintain self-control. Some of them related endurance to one's ability to avoid self-involvement. These observations are supported by many educators and researchers noting that many Japanese people are discouraged from focusing on self-interest, especially in a group setting, because they value internal control (Befu, 1986; Holloway, 2000; Huber 2023; Lomont, 2023). Likewise, the Japanese early childhood education guidelines set forth by the government (MEXT, 2019) highly recommend that teachers gently guide children in developing self-control skills through self-regulated activities.

The act of gaman sets the base for understanding others' feelings. These pre-service teachers commented that to practice endurance skills, one must understand the perspectives of others. Perspective-taking skills are highly associated with children's moral development in Japan (Befu, 1986; Huber, 2023; Izumi-Taylor, 2023; Lomont, 2023; Nakatsubo et al., 2021), and teachers model how to be patient with their preschoolers by using the *mimamoru* approach of not intervening in preschoolers' problem-solving situations (Izumi-Taylor, 2023; 2024; Nakatsubo et al., 2021).

In associating gaman with the development of interpersonal relationships, these pre-service teachers' responses indicate that children need to learn to fit in with others because the relationship of self to others in the context of a given situation is important in Japan (Befu, 1986; Holloway, 2000; Libra, 1976; MEXT, 2019; Shoji, 1993). Since these pre-service teachers took courses in child development, early childhood education, and psychology, they appear to have a good understanding of how children learn and develop within their age range. Their answers indicate that although gaman is important to children, they do not expect youngsters to practice such skills in the early years, noting that children can gradually begin to learn this. It appears that because children's self-control skills develop slowly and haltingly, adults should not expect children to maintain perfect control (Izumi-Taylor, 2023; Nakatsubo et al., 2021). Additionally, these participants' concerns for others' feelings could be partially related to the fact that since they all still reside with their family members, it might be necessary for them to be aware of others' feelings.

In giving self-oriented reasons for gaman, many pre-service teachers' responses are based on their materialistic needs, and these reasons are related to personal pleasure and satisfaction. On the other hand, when giving others-oriented reasons, these students clearly understand the importance of perspective-taking skills being related to gaman. Perspective-taking skills involve one's ability to take the viewpoints of others, and preschoolers gradually need to be encouraged to focus on others more than on the self (Nakatsubo et al., 2021). Such skills gained through endurance are one of the most difficult tasks for teachers to instill in young children. However, these future early childhood teachers seem to understand its importance.

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that these pre-service teachers' perceptions of gaman are related to their cultural and social contexts. Their responses to the questions provide insights into gaman and teaching. These pre-service teachers' altruistic approaches to nurture and enhance children's development and learning are focused on their cultural values and collectivist environments. Early childhood educators who are committed to providing high quality care need to be informed of the importance of self-control in children and adults. In spite of the fact that these pre-service teachers' responses about gaman are cultural in nature, this study has found that one's self-control skills are related to his/her understanding of others' feelings and to his/her development of interpersonal relations. Gaman is widely and spontaneously practiced by these pre-service teachers, and they appear to interpret the inherent tone in the word as being one of their daily practices to get along with others

harmoniously. However, they speculate that overuse might pressure children, and they observe that gaman is developmental and is related to the process rather than the product. Understanding the act of gaman has universal implications for educators, as all educators endeavor to nurture children to be healthy, happy, kind, and cooperative people (Izumi-Taylor & Rogers, 2016).

Implications for Education

Based on the findings of this study, the following practices can be used to stimulate and to nurture pre-service teachers' knowledge about the concept of enduring hardship:

1. Since enduring hardship relates to one's development of self-control in interpersonal relationships, inform pre-service teachers of the importance of forming such relationships with their charges.
2. Because the act of gaman can promote one's understanding of others' feelings, educate future teachers as to how they can nurture such understanding in children.
3. Emphasize the importance of how children develop self-control skills. It is important to inform future teachers that they need to know that children's self-control develops slowly and to not expect perfect self-control in them.
4. Inform pre-service teachers that people of all ages practice gaman because of both self-oriented and others-oriented reasons, and that the goal of early childhood education includes nurturing children who are capable of self-regulation.

Limitations of the Study

Future studies should include a wider range of Japanese pre-service teachers since this study was conducted in one progressive Japanese city. Sampling procedures show this study's limitations as well. Because all the participants lived with their family members, their responses could have been influenced by their home environments. It would be interesting to include pre-service teachers who did not live with their family members. Because we conducted this study among pre-service teachers with whom we had access, other pre-service teachers from different cities were excluded. Also, as with any study that relies on self-reporting, this study's dependency on self-reporting could be considered a limitation.

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