

Risk and return

In the first of a four-part series, **Julie Mountain** explores what Japanese kindergartens can teach us about risk-taking and resilience

Pre-school education is not compulsory in Japan, so most settings are privately run. Over 90 per cent of children attend pre-school provision of some kind, but demand is high and there is a significant gap between demand and provision, with huge waiting lists not uncommon, and queues forming outside the most popular settings on the application dates. Urban areas suffer particularly with shortages in provision, along with staffing difficulties. In many settings, pay is low and attracting young people into the sector is difficult. So far, so not dissimilar to the UK. However, there is no Ofsted equivalent for early years provision, and while Japan's Ministry of Education (MEXT) and its Ministry of Health jointly set a general direction for pre-school provision, settings are left to interpret and deliver their own curriculum in accordance with their own

philosophy, and this results in an array of types of establishment. MEXT's philosophy is child-centred and focused on free play. Japan's first pre-school, set up in 1876 at Ochinomizu, the Women's University in Tokyo, launched with a Froebellian pedagogy, and Reggio and Montessori approaches are widely recognised in Japan. Akiko Hayashi, in a study for PECERA¹, described the concept of *mimamoru* – roughly translated as 'watching and caring' – and explains that the Japanese have a much more 'hands off' approach to curriculum: 'In the pre-school classroom this cultural logic of *mimamoru* takes the form of pre-school teachers using a low intervention approach to dealing with children's cognitive as well as social and emotional development. By [MEXT] not being too directive, directors, teachers and students are encouraged to find their own solutions, not individually but collectively.' Colleague Mary Jackson and I



wanted to visit settings where outdoor play and the concept of *mimamoru* could be seen to play a significant role in developing children's resilience – not just their physical capabilities, but also their intellectual and emotional resilience. Dr Ko arranged visits to settings he had worked with, along with internationally well-known nurseries such as Fuji – the 'doughnut' school. A clear set of principles began to emerge.

PRINCIPLES

- Adults are actively engaged in outdoor play with children. However, this doesn't mean they take over, or that activities are largely adult-directed. Adults show a practical understanding of the difference between interacting and interfering² and by their words, body language and actions they demonstrate how important children's interests and actions are.
- The landscapes are physically and intellectually challenging, with tricky inclines, high levels, hidden spaces and risky equipment and resources. All of these are used to the maximum by adults and children alike, regardless of the scale of the outdoor space.

- Hygiene and routines are critical; Japan's cultural norms are implicit in how outdoor play is managed and routines such as handwashing, shoe changing and clearing up help children become self-reliant, astute and resilient.
- The landscape is a rich resource in itself; not all of the settings have an abundance of loose parts, or traditional play equipment, but all make the most of their topography, local weather systems and vegetation to create exciting, playable spaces.
- Children of all ages play together and are able to roam freely all over the outdoor space, however extensive it might be. Children occupy the same play spaces but can be distinguished by their colour-coded sunhats – although babies do have separate play spaces in addition to accessing the main spaces.
- Risk and challenge are graduated so children can build up their confidence and physical strength on real, difficult features that are appropriate to their developmental stage – and they can always see what the 'next' challenge is, looking to older or bigger children as role models.

Adults dynamically risk-assess to enable exciting, challenging play, not to prevent it.

ADOPT AND ADAPT

Much of what we discovered in Japanese settings can be traced back to cultural beliefs and practices. Equally, there are elements and principles that would translate into – and potentially enrich – practice in UK settings.

Observing Japanese kindergartens' approaches to routines and space management has greatly influenced how I think about designing and revamping outdoor spaces in UK settings – these are some of the ways we are experimenting with Japanese ideas:

Indoor/outdoor shoes

Cost of a huge piece of fixed play equipment (and safer surfacing) – £10k-plus. Cost of 50 pairs of wellies, and 50 pairs of *uwabaki* in various sizes, and all the loose parts a child could ever want: considerably less. If you are thinking of spending a decent sum on developing outdoors, include footwear and wet-weather gear in your budget.

Rethink the transition area

At Kohoku and the other settings we visited, 'connecting' spaces

Clockwise from above: at Kohoku, the children use a bike track they made themselves; a shop; and the main play space

immediately adjacent to the classrooms were surfaced differently – for example, with decking or textured paving – and some included a small step down to the play space. The only items stored on connecting areas (which count as 'indoors') are shoes and *uwabaki*, reinforcing the distinction between indoors and outdoors. In the UK, we tend to store 'transition' resources in convenient, child-accessible storage units around the perimeter of the play space.

Better outdoor storage

Multiple outdoor storage units were characteristic of the settings and accessibility was crucial. Children were able to help themselves to resources, and were part of the clear-up routine. Storage units were appropriate to the resources contained in them, and any resources to be accessed with adult support were stored above children's reach.

At several settings, including Miyamae, long storage units contained an abundance of exciting loose parts resources, and were simply secured with cargo netting.

Rethink routines

Routines were important to the structure of the day, and contributed to the quality of time spent outdoors. Children often start the day in the outdoor playspace, with parents dropping them off and not entering the building at all. At the end of the session, children bring their bags out to the connecting area, change back into their shoes and meet their parents to go home.

Clearing up is a shared responsibility, carried out at the children's pace – there is no rushing or panic. Adults and children work together to move large items, brush up leaves and put loose parts back in their designated storage areas.

Policies

Settings have a simple uniform for children – at its most basic, children wore colour-coded baseball or legionnaire hats, indicating which age-based pre-school group they were part of. In other settings, polo shirts and shorts were the norm.

Almost every practitioner we saw, across a dozen settings, wore an apron or tabard, in attractive prints or fabrics. Even when practitioners had a uniform to

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about this series



After a whistle-stop tour of kindergartens in Yokohama in 2017, I was determined to return to delve deeper into the exhilarating outdoor play programmes I'd seen. As a member of the International School Grounds Alliance, I was able to use its 2018 conference as the opportunity to plan a detailed research and visit programme. Supported by a generous grant from the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, my colleague Mary Jackson (pictured right) and I spent two weeks visiting schools and settings, talking to head teachers, parents,

children, practitioners and designers, and observed hours of rich, challenging, physical outdoor play and learning. Our visits were curated by landscape architect Dr Ko Senda, of Tsurumi Junior College. The professional backgrounds of Ko and his colleague Ryutu Otsubo (of Japan's Playground Safety Network) helped us to investigate the theory and practicalities that enable such high-quality, risk-taking play to take place. In particular, we focused on how risk-taking outdoors can foster resilience in young children. This series aims to share our findings with a view to helping UK settings plan new approaches to risk-taking outdoors.

outdoors in Japan, part 1

wear, they still wore aprons, which seem to offer them freedom or permission to get dirty themselves. I am busily making cross-back aprons for my current crop of project settings so we can test if they do make a difference to their willingness to engage in messy play.

CASE STUDY: KOHOKU KINDERGARTEN

Kohoku Kindergarten, in a hilly neighbourhood of Yokohama, is jammed between a busy overpass, apartments and suburban streets. When it expanded, Kohoku engaged specialist architects to create intricate and intriguing buildings, inserted perfectly into a challenging landscape.

Determined to make the most of the natural topography, landscape architect Dr Ko Senda worked closely with the architects to ensure the whole site – including the new buildings – provided physical challenges and nurtured children's emotional well-being.

The new building deserves a case study on its own – suffice to say, the nooks and crannies children adore can be found all over the garden but also in the building's eaves, under platforms, over walkways and hidden behind staircases. Shifting walls and glazed doorways provide light and transparency, and the distinction between indoors and outdoors is blurred in the most wonderful and compelling ways.

In common with most of the settings I visited, the principal outdoor surface at Kohoku is dirt. Smaller areas of paving and rubber matting provide protection from erosion in high-use areas, but this is a simple palette of colours and materials, taking in mounds and embankments, existing trees and older play equipment. I was particularly struck by how the 'dirt' surface was used: children could dig



in it, mark it out with chalk, speed along on bikes, and as a stable, level surface, it is perfect for construction and water play.

However, what really stood out was the importance of shared routines – and how easy children and practitioners made it look.

Footwear

Traditionally in Japan, outdoor shoes are not acceptable indoors – while some public institutions such as libraries no longer insist on this, it is still the norm in schools and kindergartens, as well as in people's homes. The nursery building at Kohoku is bordered by a wide ribbon of hardwood decking, with staircases to the upper levels, which for the purposes of circulation are considered to be 'internal', even though they are outdoors.

Clockwise from above: at Kohoku, the children help to pack away the swings; taking off shoes; climbing the hill; a footwear store; digging in the dirt

Adjacent to classrooms, the decking is covered by overhanging eaves, providing shelter and shade. In the UK, we mostly call these strips of space 'transition areas' – you may well have them at your own setting – and they are definitely 'outdoors'.

The crucial difference between UK transition areas and these Japanese 'connecting' spaces is that they are considered to be 'indoors'. At Kohoku, the connecting spaces are clean and clear of any clutter; the only objects on them are shoe and slipper caddies. Adults, children and visitors change footwear on the edge of the decking before entering the building or the grounds; some children were enjoying a story session with a practitioner, using indoor blankets and cushions.

Because changing footwear happens frequently throughout the day, even the very youngest children are very competent at it. Parents choose easy-to-remove shoes – for example, slip-on or with Velcro – and settings (or parents) provide washable, white fabric slippers, called *uwabaki*, which have an elasticated strap and often a reinforced toe.

Shoe and *uwabaki* caddies are located conveniently on the connecting areas and at the perfect height for young children. The clear expectation is that children will manage their own footwear.



Taking responsibility

In common with other settings we visited, children at Kohoku are expected to participate in the smooth organisation of outdoor play, and they do so – on the whole – willingly. Unless practitioners have a specific activity in mind, for example, practising on bikes and trikes, at the start of the outdoor session very little has been set out for children.

Instead, they will approach the storage units and help themselves to equipment and materials. When outdoor play is available, which it is for large chunks of the session, children are free to move in and out of the building and we saw very young children making choices

about where they wanted to be, and with whom.

Clearing up at the end of the session is a shared enterprise, and can take up to 20 minutes. Practitioners begin to move equipment towards storage units, and are soon joined by children, who we saw putting swings away, parking bikes and trikes, raking the dirt, carrying loose parts back to the shelving units and tidying up chairs and benches that had been moved around the space.

It was heartening to see how well they collaborated, and how carrying out these 'chores' was made enjoyable because no child needed to stop their own play at an arbitrary point – they joined the clear-up



The construction storage unit at Kohoku

MORE INFORMATION

- For blog posts, more about the research project and case studies, visit Play Learning Life at: www.ploutdoors.org.uk
- For more case studies, visit Learning through Landscapes at: www.ltl.org.uk
- Information on the International School Grounds Alliance and International School Grounds Month is at: www.international-schoolgrounds.org
- The Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, www.gbsf.org.uk
- For Dr Ko Senda's kindergarten work, visit the Environment Design Institute at: www.ms-edl.co.jp/works
- To translate the Japanese settings' websites, visit <http://translate.google.com>, choose 'Japanese' and paste the setting's URL into the 'detect language' box, then click on the translated web address in the 'English' box.
- Kohoku Kindergarten, www.kohoku-yochien.ed.jp
- 'Routines' case study, www.ploutdoors.org.uk/casestudies
- Miyamae Kindergarten, www.miyamae-net.com

when they were ready to. We observed this same approach to clear-up time at Miyamae, where it worked equally smoothly.

Hygiene

Every setting had several washing troughs in its outdoor spaces. These are located at convenient points and children are expected to use them before re-entering the building. Each trough will have three or more taps, each with a net bag of soap hanging down, and many troughs also have a shower hose attachment for rinsing legs or boots.

We noted that while the troughs are well-used, children and adults didn't display any fear of dirt or being dirty; hands were washed when necessary, but children were free to interact with the landscape regardless of how muddy or messy they might become.

We saw this repeatedly in the settings we visited. We observed younger children and practitioners visiting the troughs together. Older children demonstrated remarkable competence at hand-washing and took time to ensure all dirt was removed.

There is no staff uniform at Kohoku, but every adult there was dressed appropriately for being outdoors, and wore aprons or tabards of their own style to protect their clothing.

IN CONCLUSION

Kohoku's practitioners, with their *mimamoru* approach and evident belief in their charges as competent, self-reliant humans, are scaffolding the exuberance of their children as they occupy the challenging landscape at Kohoku. Its steep embankments, tall play structures, dirt surfaces and level changes speak of children's confidence and resilience at every step.

From the older boys dragging heavy benches away at the end of the session to the barely walking toddlers skidding down dirt hills, the children at Kohoku joyfully embrace risk and challenge. ■

Footnotes

1. The Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (2011) in *Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education*, 5 (2)
2. See Julie Fisher's work on this for a UK context

glossary

- **Yochien** – private, sessional kindergarten/pre-school provision for children aged three and over. A typical day is 9am-2pm and parents usually provide a bento (packed) lunch. The legal ratio is 35:1 but is typically much lower than this.
- **Hoikujo** – day nursery/daycare for working parents, offering wraparound care from three months to five years. Some are private; some managed by the local 'prefecture', or local authority. Legal ratios

- are from 3:1 (babies) to 30:1 (four- and five-year-olds).
- **Genki** – health and well-being, an important consideration in early years provision.
- **Hoiku** – the term for care and education in a childcare context.
- **Uwabaki** – slip-on canvas pumps worn indoors, a little like plimsolls.
- **Mimamoru** – watching and caring, an early childhood education philosophy.