

Original Research Paper

Breaking out of the Child-rearing Cell: Parental Outcomes from Participation in Japanese Playcentres

Junko Satoh

Japan Playcentre Association

Suzanne Manning

New Zealand Playcentre Federation

Key words: child-rearing, Playcentre, Japan, parent support, cultural context

Abstract

Changing demographics of Japanese society since World War II has meant that fewer mothers of young children could rely on extended family networks to provide parenting advice and practical support. This has resulted in increasing isolation for these mothers or, as it has been termed in Japan, 'child-rearing in a cell'. Playcentres were introduced to Japan in 2002 as parent support initiatives to address this issue and help isolated mothers build support networks. This paper reports on a recent study which looked at the impact on Japanese mothers of participation in a Playcentre. The results showed the mothers were motivated to attend by the opportunity to participate alongside their children and it was this active involvement that resulted in the formation of strong social and support networks. Their parenting confidence was also increased through the formal and informal education opportunities offered. These are indications that Playcentre can be viewed as successful in providing a tool for a Japanese mother to 'break out of her cell' and re-connect with the community. The results were compared with the New Zealand study of adult participation in Playcentre (Powell et al., 2005) and found to be similar in the way support networks were generated. There were some differences in emphasis between the two countries due to the collectivist nature of the Japanese culture versus the more individualist New Zealand culture, and the nature of the different parenting discourses. Ongoing research on the impact of Playcentres in Japan would be useful to confirm these preliminary results.

Introduction

Parenting can be very difficult without support. In Japan support has traditionally come from extended family networks, but as family structures change this support is diminishing. Mothers have increasingly been confined to smaller private and public spaces, leading to the term "child-rearing in a cell" (Tendou, 2004). Playcentre, a well established family support and early childhood education organisation in New Zealand, was introduced to Japan

because of its perceived potential to generate support networks amongst mothers of young children. This was to substitute for the loss of traditional networks, and to help mothers “break out of their cells”. However, while it has been shown that Playcentres in New Zealand do generate such support networks (Powell, Cullen, Adams, Duncan and Marshall, 2005) there was no guarantee that importing the model to another country would have similar results. This paper reports on a small scale study which investigated whether Japanese Playcentres support mothers through the generation of networks.

Child-rearing in Japan

The declining birth rate is of major concern to the people of Japan, and has been for over two decades. The Japanese birth rate has been steadily declining since 1980 (Ochiai, 1994; OECD, 2009) and in 1989 reached 1.57 (indicating the average number of children a couple have in their lifetime). This low point is still referred to as the “1.57 shock” and from this point forward, the government started formulating policies to check the decline (Asakawa, 2008; National Institute of Population and Social Security Research [NIPSSR], 2003; Rebick and Takenaka, 2006). Despite these measures, the birth rate continued to drop. In 2006 the rate was 1.3 and the Japanese population was the fastest ageing population in Asia (OECD, 2009), which has the potential to cause multiple social and economic problems in the future.

There are many interconnected reasons postulated for the declining birth rate. One of these centres on the changing Japanese family and child-rearing structures. The traditional Japanese family was an extended one, where women raising their children had the support of other relatives (Asakawa, 2008; Rebick and Takenaka, 2006). After World War II there was rapid industrialization of the economy and urbanisation of the population in Japan (Porter, Takeuchi and Sakakibara, 2000), which gave rise to more nuclear families and a decline in extended family networks in close proximity (Parsons, 1955). The smaller scale of families meant that responsibility for child-rearing was often taken on by mothers alone, with less likelihood of receiving support or parenting guidance based on blood relationships than previously (Inoue, 2005; Ochiai, 1994; Rebick and Takenaka, 2006).

The trend of mothers assuming sole responsibility for child-rearing led to higher levels of anxiety (Ochiai, 1989; Makino 1982, 1988; Matsuda, 2008; Nakamura, 2008; Nakatani, 2006; Oomori, 2010; Tendou, 2004). The feelings of isolation and anxiety became commonly known as “child-rearing in a cell” (Tendou, 2004). This referred to the idea of a mother and child spending their days in a small apartment while the father was at work, without support networks of family or community. There was an increase in the reported numbers of child abuse as noted in the NIPSSR report on family policies:

Other than caregiver’s mental pathology and worsening household financial situation, it is argued that overburden of mothers who are taking care of children without any help from family members or neighbors, lie behind the recent rise in the number of cases. The recent survey conducted by child abuse prevention centers indicates that the share of abusive mothers is higher for those without any help for childcare than mothers who are able to get some kind of help. (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare [MHLW], 2003 as cited in NIPSSR, 2003)

Consequently child-rearing in Japan was increasingly seen as difficult and burdensome, with many women choosing to delay having children or not to have children at all (Asakawa, 2008; NIPSSR, 2003; Rebick and Takenaka, 2006).

The government policy approach to addressing the declining birth rate was to attempt to provide supportive environments for families with children, as opposed to interfering in family life by 'telling' couples to have children. The 5 year *Angel Plan* (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Ministry of Welfare, Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Construction, 1994) was targeted mainly at dual income households through expanding the number and types of childcare centres. These policies were underpinned by the assumption that it would be beneficial for society if women were able to work outside the home as well as play the role of mothers. Certainly the number of childcare facilities increased, but the birth rate still declined and young children continued to be cared for mostly by their mothers, with recent surveys showing this to be over 80% of children under three years (Eniwa city council, 2009; Syakai-Hosyou Shingikai, 2008). The issue of women being isolated with their children continued unacknowledged by government policies and the traditional Japanese employment system and family gender roles ensured that a mother's 'cell' remained intact (NIPSSR, 2003; Rebick and Takenaka, 2006; Yokoyama, 2002).

By the new millennium there was a change of policy direction brought about by reports to the government in the late 1990s, growing numbers of reported child abuse cases and research on the experience of full-time mothers (Terami, 1996; NIPSSR, 2003). The New *Angel Plan* (MHLW, 2000) included measures aimed at restructuring Japanese employment and family systems. A report to the government in 2002, known as Plus One (MHLW, 2002), built on the previous *Angel Plans* but also recommended broader measures such as increasing local support for child rearing and transforming men's working patterns. In 2003 the Child Welfare law amendment extended its provisions to include children who still had caregivers, in recognition that full time mothers were bearing heavy childcare loads and needed support (NIPSSR, 2003). The new government policies therefore appeared to recognise the issue of isolation in child-rearing and its negative contribution to social well-being and to government birth rate goals, and were attempting to address this by providing extensive support.

Local child-rearing support initiatives in the 2000s generally took the form of providing venues for mothers and children to gather which was a distinct change from the early *Angel Plan* initiatives which separated mothers and children to relieve mothers of the 'burden' of childcare. However, establishing such venues in themselves did not resolve all the problems and stresses surrounding child-rearing, as they were based on an image of a problematic and passive mother in need of support and education (Nakatani, 2008). The role of the mother was simply to attend these venues with her child. In some ways, this was simply taking her 'cell' with her.

Research has shown that Japanese mothers actively seek out parenting support networks, preferably within extended family but will develop peer networks as a substitute (Kubo, 2001; Matsuda, 2009; Ochiai, 1989; Sekii, Onoide, Matsuda and Yamane, 1991; Tendou, 2004). Mothers' 'child-rearing anxiety' has been shown to be inversely correlated with the extent of peer networks (Makino 1982, 2005; Nakamura, 2008). Social capital studies have also shown that local parent networks contributed to community revitalisation (Kaneko, 2007; Matsuda, 2008; Nozawa, 2006, 2009; Tsutsui, 2007) and conversely that apathy toward others and avoidance of involvement with others were on the rise in Japanese society (Kadowaki, 2003). This suggested that to break out of her 'cell' a mother needed to form networks with other local parents to provide education and support that was no longer guaranteed through the extended family.

The Introduction of Playcentre

In New Zealand adult participation in Playcentres has been shown to develop social capital within communities, to empower parents and to provide opportunities to build social networks (Powell et al., 2005). The introduction of Playcentres to Japan, modelled on the New Zealand Playcentres, was intended to help parents develop peer networks through participation in a parent cooperative. The concept of a service provided by the parents rather than for the parents was a radical one. It was not a government initiative but rather was the vision of Japanese academics Dr Mika Ikemoto and Professor Chikara Kuboto (Gibbons & Corry, 2002). The first Japanese Playcentres were opened in Tokyo in 2002 (Picasso Playcentre) and in the Shizuoka Prefecture south of Tokyo (Mishima Playcentre). Eniwa city Playcentre, in the northern island of Hokkaido, opened in 2008.

By 2009 there was anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of the nine Japanese Playcentres in supporting parents to develop support networks. The study outlined in this paper was designed to investigate this anecdotal evidence. Having now set the context for the study, we give a summary of the methodology followed by the major findings. In the discussion, we compare the results of this study to similar research, albeit larger scale, conducted within New Zealand Playcentres. In the final section we make recommendations for future work made.

Methodology

The study was a limited survey of mothers participating in two different Japanese Playcentres using semi-structured interviews. Face-to-face interviews following the method of Matsuda (2008), a researcher who has investigated parenting networks, were used to generate data as such interviews enable the mother's voice to be heard directly. The interview questions were based around three categories:

- Family structure, the mother's role in the family and the child-rearing environment provided at home;
- The family and non-family networks she had in her community;
- How the mother felt about child-rearing and her degree of anxiety about this.

The impact of Playcentre participation was specifically asked about in each of these categories.

Two contrasting Playcentres were chosen for the study, Picasso and Eniwa. Picasso Playcentre in Tokyo was one of the original Playcentres from 2002, and in 2009 catered for approximately 40 families. It was initiated by a group of citizens, some of whom then formed the Japan Playcentre Association (JPA). Voluntary supervisors who had done the JPA six month training course ran the sessions which took place in the morning three times a week. Parents attended sessions with their children, coming regularly on as many sessions as they wished. Management was generally taken care of by the supervisors and the parents covered expenses through fees and donations. There were monthly meetings where the parents discussed what was happening at the Playcentre and where there was also general parent education based on Playcentre material produced by the JPA. Some parents completed the JPA supervisor training and these trained parents would run the session if the usual supervisors were unavailable, and three had left to open their own Playcentre in Kodaira City.

Eniwa Playcentre was the newest Playcentre, having opened in 2008. It was an initiative of the Eniwa City Council, who provided the venue and employed supervisors who then trained through the JPA system. Like Picasso Playcentre, management was not a fully cooperative enterprise as in Aotearoa/New Zealand Playcentres, but there was still a large amount of parent and voluntary community involvement. An example was the building of an outdoor sandpit at a working bee using donated materials. Some parents undertook the JPA training and therefore were able to contribute more to the running of sessions. In 2009, approximately 30 families were participating in the Eniwa Playcentre, attending in two groups which each had two morning sessions a week. Every fortnight a parent education morning was held, open to both groups.

The researcher attended a total of seven sessions (four at Picasso and three at Eniwa) in 2009 and early 2010, and invited a range of participants to be interviewed during or after the session (eight at Picasso, thirteen at Eniwa). All participants were married Japanese females between 20 and 40 years of age, and only two were living with extended families. The average number of children per family was two (range from one to four) and the ages of the children ranged from zero to four years, with a median age of two years old. They had been attending Playcentre anywhere from three months to five years. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The analysis centred around three themes, modified from Powell et al. (2005):

- Individual motivation: the reasons for participation in Playcentre;
- Education effects: changes in awareness brought about by the informal and formal learning opportunities offered at Playcentre;
- Network building: to what extent the networks constructed at Playcentre contributed beneficial social resources to the parents.

This project was part of a larger PhD study by the first author at Waseda University, Tokyo, in conjunction with the Japan Playcentre Association, and was approved by the ethics committee of the University. The supervisors in both Playcentres informed the parents of the details of the study, and further details were given by the researcher at the time of each interview. Consent by the mothers was given verbally to the researcher.

Results

The results showed that mothers were attracted to Playcentre because they were able to participate, and because they enjoyed spending time with their children. Active involvement in both the formal and informal education opportunities resulted in greater understanding of children's learning and development, and an increase in parenting confidence. It was also shown that strong social networks were formed that supported the mothers in their child-rearing role, and contributed to their psychological well-being. We discuss these findings further in the following sections.

Individual Motivation

A major trend was that Playcentres were seen as a venue for mothers and children to spend enjoyable time together. The atmosphere of the Playcentre had a positive impact on mothers' enjoyment and the emotional climate was an important factor in their decision to stay at Playcentre. The mothers referred to being cheered up, enjoying the mood of the sessions and

to being relieved of loneliness. Here are two examples of comments regarding the atmosphere of the Playcentre:

I was attracted by the fact that participants seemed to be having fun.
(Picasso)

The effect of the Playcentre is not something you can see, but something inside the heart. So it's kind of hard to put into words but, when there are Playcentre sessions and learning sessions, it puts you in a good mood. That's the biggest part I think. (Eniwa)

Mothers were strongly motivated to attend Playcentre because they could participate alongside their children as well as being affirmed as the primary educators and carers of their own children. This contributed to the building of relationships and a sense of community as will be discussed below in the section on social networks.

The mothers also valued the idea of collective nurturing of the children and gaining a wider focus of caring for children other than their own. Some mothers said that they had not previously become involved with other children because they did not want to cause trouble between themselves and other mothers. Eniwa Playcentre members specifically talked about their experiences at other facilities, where they felt unable to contribute ideas regarding child-raising which became a problem when friction occurred between children. To avoid such problems they would avoid interaction with others, ignoring other mothers and children and generally playing one-on-one with their own child/ren. After participating in the Playcentre and the education programme, they felt more comfortable with caring for other children as well. The mothers made comments such as that they now felt "other children were as wonderful as their own."

Education Effects

The majority of mothers felt that they had learnt about children's education, learning and development through participation in Playcentre and as a result had more confidence in their parenting. One mother said she had often compared her own child's growth and development with others, but participating in the educational opportunities and daily sessions made her realise that:

A child has a pace of his or her own, so now I take the long view. I know my child will learn how to do it sooner or later. (Eniwa)

Another mother specifically mentioned being better able to deal with her child's tantrums. Being encouraged to reflect on the ways that they educated and cared for children was a significant factor in the development of this knowledge:

Another attractive aspect is that we can share mutual realizations through the learning sessions and utilize them in the daily activities. (Picasso)

Some mothers said that this reflection was becoming a habit that was benefitting their parenting. Other mothers started to ask their own questions for reflection, such as "What kind of play is best for children?" and "How do you avoid telling a child "no"?"

Social Networking

A major effect of active participation in the Playcentres was the formation of social and community networks both within the Playcentres and extending beyond their boundaries in

time and space. Mothers talked of making new friends in the community and building social networks:

The good thing about the Playcentre – I guess it has to be the relationships with other people. In this day and age, you definitely need a way to make a lot of connections. I feel like I've made connections. I feel that sincerely.
(Eniwa)

These networks extended beyond the Playcentre, and were particularly evident in Picasso Playcentre which had been operating for seven years as opposed to Eniwa's one year. An example was of a mother hospitalised during her second pregnancy. A Playcentre member – not a relative - helped the grandmother with the eldest son and also offered emotional support. The second child died soon after birth, but at the time of the study the mother was pregnant again and attributed the support she received during that difficult time as being significant in her subsequent decision:

If I didn't have Picasso, I might not be carrying a child right now.
(Picasso)

The Playcentres were also seen as a community in themselves, to which the mothers enjoyed belonging. Many mothers commented on this aspect:

The child-rearing strengths of the large families and local communities of the past are back in a different form in the Playcentre. (Picasso)

It's like the Playcentre is the local community – that's what it feels like there...which is appealing you know. It's true, especially when you're rearing a child, that it's more comforting to have lots of children and mothers you know in the local community than to be an isolated family.
(Eniwa)

The focus of the networks formed was on support for parenting, which the Playcentre participants found to be useful and the relationships made to be satisfying. However it was acknowledged that these relationships, although sometimes substituting for lessened family relationships, were not as deep as relationships amongst family. This was generally seen as a good thing and called by members of Picasso "loose relationships". One mother described this phenomenon:

At the Playcentre, I like the fact that no one pries into anyone else's business. If you don't want to say everything about your own family, nobody minds. But when you want to get your troubles off your chest, you can say everything directly. All the members are kind enough to listen, and sometimes they even cry. Maybe what I like is that there's just the right amount of distance. (Picasso)

This agrees with recent research which found that links in child-related networks in Japan are effective when they are appropriately loose and possess both diversity and autonomy (Matsuda, 2008).

The collaborative nature of the Playcentres, where mothers were active participants rather than passive consumers, attributed to the development of the sense of community, and relationship building. This was a major difference between the Playcentres and other parent support services that some mothers had previously attended and was often commented on:

You get more of a 'let's actively participate and cooperate' attitude compared with when playing at a prepared place. The feeling of 'we each

do what we can and build up our own place' ties into affection for that community. (Picasso)

Child-rearing support services and events are already established, so actually there's no need for me to act on my own, but I'm not happy with them and they seem sad somehow. (Picasso).

Mothers were expected to help run the sessions at the Playcentres. Initially mothers often felt that this was a burden, but in hindsight they realised that they learnt a lot from the experience and felt it to be worthwhile. There were reports of mothers who preferred to leave the Playcentre rather than take on this extra responsibility, but for those that stayed the active participation was a positive feature of Playcentre through which they felt they gained greater understanding of their children and formed strong relationships with other mothers.

Discussion and Cross-Cultural Comparison

This study showed that Japanese Playcentres have the potential to help a mother break out of her 'child-rearing cell' by generating networks that provide parenting advice and education, practical support, friendship and social connectedness. It is interesting to note that Playcentres had a similar impact on Japanese mothers as on parents in New Zealand (Powell et al, 2005), even though they are very different cultures and societies. In this section we examine some of the similarities and differences in the impacts of Playcentre in the two countries.

In New Zealand it is the cooperative nature of Playcentres that generate support networks (Mitchell, 2006; Powell, et al., 2005; Woodhams and Woodhams, 2008). Strong relationships are built through sharing experiences and working together towards a common goal. This active participation was similarly a factor behind the generation of support networks for Japanese Playcentre mothers.

In general the government approach in Japan provided services where no more was required of mothers than attendance. This passive 'consumer' approach took a deficit view of child-rearing, where mothers were seen to want to be relieved of their burdens. It was not designed to foster parental empowerment (Nakatani, 2009). Yet the Playcentre mothers particularly expressed the view that they enjoyed being involved. Studies from both Japan (Matsuda, 2009; Ochiai, 1989) and New Zealand (Thesing, 2006) have shown that parents actively seek out support networks, and effective parent support initiatives in Japan have been shown to be those that create a sense of belonging to the group (Rebick and Takenaka, 2006). The Japanese government in its attempt to strengthen community-based support for families (NIPSSR, 2003) would do well to look to initiatives such as Playcentre which focus on a strengths' view of parents which encourage active participation and focus on empowerment.

It is paradoxical that an initiative of New Zealand, traditionally a culture that values independence and individualism, is meeting a need in Japan, traditionally a collectivist culture even though it that has been undergoing a transition to a more individualist society recently (Rebick and Takenaka, 2006; Tobin, Hseuh & Karasawa, 2009). However, characterising a culture as 'individualist' or 'collectivist' in binary terms is overly simplistic. Rosenthal (2003) argues for cultures to be viewed in terms of a continuum between these two extremes, and further that specific communities within an overall culture can be placed at different points along this continuum. In this perspective New Zealand can be seen as relatively individualistic, valuing such things as independence, personal freedom and uniqueness. The huge diversity of services within the early childhood sector is an expression of this cultural 'script' (Rosenthal, 2003). Playcentre in this context represents a community

whose values lie closer to the collectivist end of the continuum than those of New Zealand as a whole. That the basic culture still values individualism more than Japan can be inferred from the fact that in the study by Powell et al. (2005), parents did not talk about caring for other's children as a valued benefit and neither did the national survey ask for an opinion on this subject. This is not to say that this broadening of focus was not an effect of Playcentres in New Zealand, but rather that it was not considered of high importance. In contrast the Japanese mothers mentioned this broadening of focus as a useful and important effect of their participation in Playcentre. These different emphases can be thought of as examples of positioning along an individualist-collectivist continuum determining the valued goals of an educational institution (Rosenthal, 2003).

It should be noted that Playcentres were not introduced to compete with kindergartens, which are still designed to enculturate children into a Japanese group setting (Tobin et al., 2009). Rather it was seen as a support initiative for parents with children aged one to three years. This was where the gap in support lay, when full-time mothers no longer had access to work grouping and fewer had access to family grouping in close proximity. An additional benefit was the provision of a substitute group identity for some of these mothers, something that is beneficial to one's psychological well-being in a collectivist culture where status is determined by the groups you belong to. The way that some of the mothers in this study had come to strongly identify with the Playcentre community suggests that this was important to them.

An interesting, though subtle, difference in the perceived benefits of Playcentre participation between the countries was that Japanese mothers talked about positive emotional benefits such as being cheered up, enjoying the mood of sessions, and being relieved of loneliness, whereas New Zealand parents talked more about being valued as a parent (Powell et al., 2005). This probably reflected the current discourses in each country more than a real difference in perceptions.

In New Zealand, the emphasis was on quality, professional early childhood education *outside the home* as being beneficial to the child, and strong encouragement for women to participate in the paid workforce in order to 'contribute to society' (Kahu, 2008; Woodhams and Woodhams, 2008). In this discourse, parents, particularly mothers, can often feel devalued. Kahu (2008) found that the New Zealand government's Action Plan for New Zealand Women rendered the role of women as mothers invisible. Similarly the mothers she interviewed constructed motherhood as 'nothing', that is, as not doing anything worthwhile, and therefore the role of full-time mother was undesirable because of its lack of self-fulfilment – a significant barrier in an individualist-leaning culture. In contrast, in Japan the declining birth rate firmly positioned mothers of young children as valuable and government policies were directed towards encouraging women to take up this role, albeit alongside a career in paid employment. At the same time there was strong pressure for children to be at home with their mothers for the first three years of their lives in what Kahu (2008) and other researchers have termed an 'intensive mother' discourse (Kagohashi, 2005). Mothers in Japan were dealing with a discourse that positioned parenting as stressful, challenging and isolating (Kagohashi, 2005; Rebick and Takenaka, 2006). Within this discourse, support that helps parenting to be more enjoyable is seen as very positive.

Conclusion

This small scale study on the impact of mother's participation in Japanese Playcentres has shown that these initiatives were generating support networks and a positive climate for parenting. Playcentre engendered a sense of community that was valued by the mothers in

the Japanese collectivist culture. The success of the model has been argued to lie in the active participation required which views mothers as active agents in seeking the support, contrasting with the more common 'service provision' model of government initiatives that viewed mothers as passive consumers.

However it should also be noted that in this study, mothers who attended Playcentre in Japan might not be representative of the general population. Playcentres were not widespread in Japan, so mothers often had to travel some distances to attend one, and be prepared to participate in something that was not 'mainstream' which is a significant barrier in a culture where conformity is valued (Rebick and Takenaka, 2006; Tobin et al., 2009). Playcentres were also gaining a reputation as an innovative and autonomous group which attracted creative-minded parents (Ootaki, 2009). Further research might look for whether similar outcomes are found in other initiatives that encourage parental participation.

'Breaking out of the child-rearing cell' was seen to be achieved in the Playcentres through the generation of support networks. However, this could be further investigated with a specifically designed study that compared mothers' levels of child-rearing anxiety before and after participation in a Playcentre. Finally, it would be interesting to survey the mothers on whether or not participation in a Playcentre influenced their decision on the number of children in their family. After all, the underlying aim of introducing Playcentre in Japan was to increase the birth rate through supporting families and to provide a new meaning for the motto of Playcentre: Families growing together (Whānau tupu ngātahi).

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Junko Satoh has been teaching at Shukutoku Junior College for four years as a lecturer in the department of Early Childhood Education and Care Studies. She has been involved in the Playcentre movement in Japan for eight years and currently she is President of the Japan Playcentre Association.

Suzanne Manning has been involved in educating children and adults for 16 years as a Playcentre parent, supervisor, workshop facilitator and adult education convenor. She was part of a New Zealand Playcentre Federation delegation that was invited to speak at a Playcentre symposium in Eniwa city in Japan in 2009, where the connection with Junko was formed. She has since collaborated with Junko on two presentations in New Zealand.