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# **CHANGING TIMES FOR YOUNG MINDS**

## **Declining Class Size and *Shūdan Seikatsu* Ideology in Hokkaido Preschools**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
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## Abstract

Preschool educators and parents in the West commonly express the hope that young children become independent, creative individuals. In contrast, Japanese preschools work to achieve a harmonious group of children whose views and behaviour are mirrored by those of their peers. Studies point to classes as large as forty as an effective way of introducing children to “life in the group” (*shūdan seikatsu*), and to Japanese social values that will become essential as youngsters move into adulthood. While numerous ethnographies have been written concerning preschools in urban Honshu, how does this representation echo or differ from the contemporary experience of children, teachers and parents in rural Eastern Hokkaido? This remote area of Japan is currently facing economic decline, a dropping birthrate and depopulation which has resulted in preschool classrooms with as few as two or three children. Based on participation-observation fieldwork at five diverse preschools, this study seeks to map the relevance of *shūdan seikatsu* ideology to Hokkaido educators, and to identify how demographic pressures are changing classroom dynamics.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

On New Years Eve 1999, while people around the world welcomed in the new millennium with champagne and fireworks, my husband and I were desperately trying to calm our howling newborn son in a tiny flat in a northern Japanese town. It was mid-winter in Japan, and in Hokkaido, where we lived, the snow was relentlessly piling up outside in enormous drifts. We had arrived in Hokkaido sixteen months earlier, having been employed under a Japanese government scheme to teach English and “internationalization” to local school students.

Originally, we had been posted to different towns, my husband to a large eastern city, and myself to a tiny fishing village on the edge of a national park, where I was the only foreigner (*gaikokujin*) in town. Despite speaking no Japanese when we arrived, the isolation of our situations had proved a great incentive for us to learn the language as quickly as possible. We were eventually relocated together to a ski town close to the prefectural capital, Sapporo. While we had grown accustomed to the culture, food and even the sub-zero climate of Hokkaido, our greatest challenge was to yet come when I became pregnant in early 1999. Although we could now speak Japanese, trying to decipher the complicated *kanji* to find the obstetrics department, undergoing constant ultrasounds and weight checks accordant with typical Japanese ante-natal practices, and dealing with advice on what seemed to be endless superstitions surrounding pregnancy was bewildering. My son was born on the shortest day of the year, after a 43 hour labour, during which my husband was encouraged to get some rest before the long drive home over the icy mountain pass.

Even before my baby’s birth, my husband and I had begun investigating childcare as we were well-aware that my contract required that I return to work when my eight week post-natal leave expired.<sup>1</sup> Although we had not predicted too much difficulty in finding suitable care (after all Japan is a developed, wealthy country, we reasoned), we had drawn a blank by the time my son arrived. The locally funded day-cares (*hoikuen*) only accepted

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<sup>1</sup> In my case, the amount of ante and post-natal leave I was entitled to was specific to the job contract I had signed as a foreign national working in Japan. Legally, Japanese men and women are entitled to one year’s parental leave although not all those eligible take the leave due to work and social pressures (Roberts 2002:70).

children who had turned one year old by the start of the new school year in April, likewise kindergarten (*yōchien*) were for children aged from three years upwards. According to our friends, there were no nanny or babysitting services available in the town, and mothers of young children who worked usually enlisted the help of extended family members. With all our family living on the other side of the world, this was not an option and we began to feel increasingly anxious about the whole situation. We also had the distinct impression that several people disapproved of our search for childcare for such a young baby. We were also uneasy about it, precisely for the reason that our son was so tiny, but also we wondered how childcare practices in Japan would correspond with our own views.

Eventually, my husband was taken aside by one of his workmates, Takada san, who admitted that he knew of someone who might look after our son, but we would need to meet her and be interviewed. He also explained that this *hobosan* (caregiver) was unregistered and ran the day-care centre from her home, but that he was satisfied with the level of care having placed his own children there from time to time. The next day, Ohashi san greeted us in the foyer of her home, a modern, spacious house by Hokkaido standards. With the help of Takada san, who also happened to be an English teacher, we explained our dilemma. Ohashi san listened quietly, and then explained her fees, hours, and the child-rearing philosophies she advocated as evidenced by her bookshelf packed with texts by prominent Japanese and Western paediatricians. While I was keen to continue breastfeeding, and had established a routine to this end, Ohashi san dismissed such 'scheduling' as detrimental to baby's well-being, instead advocating days packed with piano songs, traditional Japanese food, communal naptime and plenty of opportunities to interact with the other children in the small lounge area assigned as day-care space. She also instructed that we should drop off and pick up our son at the same time every day, even if we finished early, to avoid upsetting the harmony of the group of two to six preschoolers in her daily care. Regardless of whether the child was away or sick, the charge for this service was to be ¥55,000 per month which was a little over NZ\$1,000 at the time.

We managed to come to an agreement over the breastfeeding issue, as I took advantage of Japanese legislation which allowed mothers two 30 minute breastfeeding breaks per day, plus my lunch break, to drive over snowy roads to breastfeed my baby several times a day. Ohashi san had declared my son would never accept this practice, but

she only occasionally had to heat breast milk for him which had been frozen as a back-up. We also rejected the notion that our child should stay at day-care if we were at home, and despite continuing to pay full fees, we gradually began picking him up whenever we could, as well as not sending him during the long school vacation periods. Although Ohashi san was firm but fair, and provided nutritious meals, toys, crayons and musical instruments, the space seemed incredibly small for a group of young children, especially during the long winters when everyone was confined inside. Privately, we disagreed with Ohashi san's view that socialisation was so important for our baby. Publicly, we subverted her authority, by limiting our son's time in day-care in favour of spending as much time as we could with him. Overall though, we were relieved to have found a satisfactory solution to our search for day-care, and sad to say goodbye to Ohashi san when we returned to New Zealand in mid 2001.

Before leaving we had agreed to new jobs in Eastern Hokkaido, and by March 2002, we were back in Japan and living in a small inland town. We now had two sons; our eldest was two years old while our second had been born eight weeks earlier in New Zealand. We had arrived at the end of the Hokkaido winter, and within two weeks, both children had contracted influenza. While our eldest was correctly diagnosed and given an antidote, our newborn became very ill and was hospitalized in the city, forty minutes drive from our town where there were no medical facilities. We once again needed urgent day-care for my older son, so I could be with my baby in hospital and my husband could begin his new job. The Board of Education managed to direct us to a public day-care on the edge of town where my son could be cared for. This marked the beginning of another round of Japanese preschool experiences, as my oldest remained at this day-care until he transferred to the local private kindergarten at four years old. Meanwhile my second son began at a private day-care centre in the city (which accommodated babies) while I did part-time work, transferring to the same local public day-care as my older child when he turned two, then spending his final months at a Japanese private kindergarten with his brother. In July 2004, I gave birth to my third son, who also attended private day-care while I worked part-time teaching English at kindergartens.

Like anthropologists Ben-Ari (1997a), Benjamin (1997), Lewis (1995) and Hendry (1986a) before me this study was sparked by observing the lives of my own three children

as they negotiated Japanese preschool. For me, the experience of being both mother and ethnographer was at once frustrating and illuminating, yet above all, it clarified for me the centrality of culture to early childhood education practices, and solidified my desire to study this subject in more depth. Once I began to review the literature surrounding childhood in Japan and the institutions of early childhood education, I found there had been numerous studies carried out which dealt with issues such as mother-child relationships (Caudill and Weinstein 1969, Caudill and Plath 1986, Chen and Miyake 1986, Latham and Garrick 1996), the Japanese preschool as a state institution (Rohlen 1989, Ben-Ari 2002), the preschool as a site of childhood socialisation (Lewis 1995, Tobin, Wu and Davidson 1989, Peak 1989, Sano 1989, Hendry 1986b) and for the socialisation of mothers (Fujita 1989, Allison 1991).

Other scholars delved into issues such as cooperation (Kotloff 1998, 1993), body projects (Ben-Ari 1997a), curriculum (Peach 1994), organisational frameworks (Ben-Ari 1997b) and academic achievement (Lynn 1988, Stevenson and Lee 1990) while the diversity of preschools has been discussed by De Coker (1990) and Holloway (2000). However, the term that cropped up in almost all discussions of Japanese preschools, was *shūdan seikatsu*, a form of socialising children which translates literally as “life in the group”. Scholars linked this key aim to classes as large as forty students (Tobin 1987; Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1990, 1991). I began to question how relevant this paradigm was to rural Hokkaido where preschools are facing classes with as few as three or four students.

Hendry (1993:225) notes that most anthropological studies of Japanese mothers and small children have been carried out in the Kanto region, which suggests there may be differences in other prefectures throughout Japan.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, other academics insist that the preschool system and the experiences of both parent and child is relatively

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<sup>7</sup> The majority of ethnographic studies of preschools have been conducted on Japan's main island of Honshu: Hendry 1986a [Chiba]; Kotloff 1998 [Kanazawa]; Boocock 1989; Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1989 [Kyoto]; De Coker 1990 [Kyoto]; Peak 1991 [Nagano]; Ben-Ari 1997a, 1997b [Kyoto]; Lewis 1995 [Nagoya, Tokyo]; Holloway 2000 [Osaka, Kobe] and most of them have concentrated on preschools in urban areas. An exception to this is the study by Hendry, which is based in part on fieldwork in preschools in rural Kyushu: Hendry 1986a [Kurotsuchi, Fukuoka prefecture].

homogeneous (Peak 1989; Ben-Ari 2002). While study of the indigenous Ainu<sup>3</sup> has long been a favourite with Japanese and foreign anthropologists alike (Ben-Ari & Van Brennan 2005, Eades 2005:82), there appears to be a lack of ethnographic research published in English which focuses on issues within the context of contemporary Hokkaido.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, I have been unable to locate any ethnographies solely focused on preschools which have been carried out in the prefecture.<sup>5</sup> This confirmed for me that the neglected study of preschools in Hokkaido warranted scholarly attention, and I hypothesized that I might find points of difference to the Kanto studies, due to Hokkaido's rural outlook, economic struggles and plummeting birth rates. Located hundreds of miles north of Tokyo, Hokkaido's sub-arctic climate and geographical isolation marks it as distinct from mainland Japan, and it is also the only region (apart from Okinawa) to have experienced colonisation of its indigenous people following the Meiji Restoration in 1868.<sup>6</sup>

These days, the island is more likely to be invaded by domestic tourists who have been lured to Hokkaido by travel brochures boasting glossy photos of snow-capped mountains, rugged coastlines and vast fields sprinkled with wildflowers. For many of these visitors, their time is spent in anonymous hotel complexes where they are protected from the sub-zero temperatures by sophisticated heating systems, their days punctuated by numerous soaks in the volcanic hot springs. Most don't linger long enough to look beyond the utopian image of Hokkaido, and perhaps they don't wish to.

While Hokkaido is certainly blessed with an abundance of picture-perfect scenes of nature, the current economic reality faced by rural Hokkaido residents is far from idyllic. According to data collected in 2004, the population of Hokkaido stands at 5,644,000

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<sup>3</sup> The number of Ainu in Hokkaido is presumed to be about 24,000 (Murphy-Shigematsu 1993), but could be as high as 300,000 as estimated by Ainu themselves. Official statistics are based on free choice, and many Ainu refuse to register in protest at the way the Government deals with their situation (Sjoberg 1993:152). For an overview of the numerous studies concerning Ainu in Hokkaido, see Chamberlain (1887), Landor (1893), Morse (1936), Hilger (1967a, 1967b), Peng and Geiser (1977), Hammel (1988), Sjoberg (1993), Niessen (1994, 1996), Howell (1994), Siddle (1995a, 1995b, 1999a, 1999b), Fitzhugh & Dubreuil (1999), Hiwasaki (2000) and Cheung (1996, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Exceptions to this are Mock's (1996) analysis of Sapporo hostesses and Bethell's (1992) research at a home for the elderly in central Hokkaido. Kolesova (2004) has focused on the efforts of Hokkaido's Popular Education Research Movement (PERM) in challenging Japanese educational policy.

<sup>5</sup> While Davies and Kasama's (2004) exploration of Japanese preschoolers' interpretations of feminist fairytales included a short period of ethnographic research in a preschool in Kushiro, their focus was more on the implications of gender than identifying cultural patterns.

<sup>6</sup> For historical information and more detailed analyses of the impact of colonisation in Hokkaido, see Morris-Suzuki (1994), Siddle (1995a, 1999b), and Ono (1999).

people. A great many of these citizens live on the Western side of the island, either residing in the capital city of Sapporo, or in the cluster of towns spreading out from it. While the general Hokkaido population has seen a small drop in the nine years between 1995 and 2004 (- 48,000), it remains essentially stable. In comparison, regions traditionally popular for ethnographic study, such as Tokyo and Kyoto, have seen their populations increase slightly by 604,000 and 8,000 respectively over the same period. What is demographically significant about Hokkaido, however, is that the number of children aged between 0 – 14 years, has dropped a massive 18.5% between 1995 and 2004. In Tokyo, this figure has not significantly changed, while the number of children aged up to 14 is down by 9% in Kyoto (Japan Statistical Yearbook 2006:49). This comparison alone goes some way towards explaining the huge waiting lists for children wanting to enter kindergarten or day-care in Tokyo, while in Hokkaido preschool directors talk of closing down or amalgamating institutions in order to remain economically viable.

Within Hokkaido, while the population of urban Sapporo has been increasing, the rural hinterland has taken the full brunt of the effects of the economic downturn and rapid depopulation. Tsutsuji, the village at centre of my fieldwork has seen its population decline by 726 people in the past four years alone, a significant drop of 7.7% in a town of only 8,617 (2006). It is worth noting that the total population figure includes not just residents of the town, but locals living in numerous hamlets and farms within the boundaries of Tsutsuji's geographically large district (564.32 square km, Takakura 1969:287).

Once upon a time, Tsutsuji was a thriving lumber town of over 18,000 inhabitants (Takakura 1969:287), where workers toiled to supply much of the timber needed for reconstruction across postwar Japan. These days, the wood arrives cut and packaged from cheaper sources like China. As local jobs decline, the town is clinging on to the few remaining sources of employment, such as the chopstick factory which supplies disposable chopsticks for school lunches. Modernity has greatly impacted on the landscape of Tsutsuji, and as national pressure groups work to raise awareness of the environmental consequences of disposable chopsticks, factory employees are realistic about the tenuous nature of their jobs.

My second fieldwork site, the nearby city of Yuri, has remained demographically stable over the same four year period, with a drop in population of less than 1% to its

current level of 110,126 residents. In comparison to the economic woes facing the farming villages, urban areas like Yuri are locally regarded as prospering in Hokkaido, although the empty main streets are a far cry from the bustling industrial centres of Honshu. But a closer look at the statistics reveals that while the overall population of Yuri appears unchanged, there are wide variations of growth and decline between different age groups. For example, the number of elderly (over 65 years) has climbed from 26,715 to 29,730 (+11%) between 2002 and 2006, while the number of preschool children aged between zero and four has dropped from 4,896 to 4,554 (-7%) during the same period.<sup>7</sup> With the economy of Hokkaido dependent on state-allocated funding (Japan Statistical Handbook:166), it is not difficult to predict the kind of pressures local government will soon face in dealing with this “coming up-ended triangle” (Roberts 2002).

It is within this context, that of modern-day Hokkaido, that my study examines the ideology and practice of five diverse preschools;<sup>8</sup> two working-class *hoikuen* and one Catholic *yōchien* in small-town Tsutsuji, a middle-class *yōchien* and an elite private *hoikuen* in the city of Yuri. Although each preschool will be described in more detail in subsequent chapters, it is worth outlining the background behind each institution (see also Table 1).

Hinode Hoikuen is located on the outskirts of Tsutsuji, and is administered by the local Board of Education which also provides funding from town taxes to supplement that received from prefectural and national sources. Most of the children are from farming families, although there are a few whose parents hold professional jobs (teacher, nurse) with long hours. The five teachers have all attended training courses approved by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. The physical setting of the *hoikuen* is pleasant enough, as it backs on to fields of wildflowers and there are adequate resources for the children. However, much of the long day at Hinode is spent in unstructured, free play which seems to

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<sup>7</sup> These statistics were obtained by personally visiting the Tsutsuji and Yuri town halls, where detailed and specific information is held regarding the two districts. Other sources, such as the Japan Statistical Yearbook provide statistical data on Hokkaido as a whole, which is skewed by the presence of Sapporo’s calculations.

<sup>8</sup> While other authors have variously written about nursery schools, childcare centers and so forth, I use the term ‘preschool’ here as an umbrella term, one that encompasses both the kindergarten (*yōchien*) and the day-care centre (*hoikuen*) as I have been unable to find an appropriate term in Japanese which includes both kinds of institution. I have also chosen to alternate between the English and Japanese terms depending on my emphasis.

have contributed to marking Hinode students as the most rambunctious of the five institutions.

With its modern exterior and prominent statue of the Virgin Mary, Tenshi Yochien is easily identifiable on one of the main streets of Tsutsuji. Part of a chain of Catholic preschools across Hokkaido, the ideology of Tenshi's curriculum incorporates not only Christian beliefs but Montessori educational philosophy. Most of the mothers of Tenshi students are full-time homemakers, and committed to advancing their children's social and educational causes. The daily routine here is highly organised, and includes individualised academic study in the morning, followed by structured group activities for the rest of the day. The teachers hold Teacher's Certificates which are granted by the Prefectural Boards of Education.<sup>9</sup>

Oka Yochien is the largest kindergarten in the city of Yuri, famous for its bright, spacious facilities and an enormous clock which reveals dancing animals on the hour. While the teachers here are generally younger than staff at the other preschools, they are well-qualified, very energetic, and spend their days planning exciting activities for the children. Oka's curriculum has a firm emphasis on 'fun' group life, and the preschool is a popular choice for middle class parents.

Unlike the other institutions, Mori Hoikuen is not licensed to offer day-care services. The *hoikuen* was established in the post-war years by parents who were frustrated by repeated requests for an official preschool. Their aim was to provide childcare during the peak agricultural summer months, and to stem a rash of accidents involving unattended children. Gradually the hours were extended to all year round. The village of Mori is very isolated, and when the local mine closed down thirty years ago, the population crashed leaving only a handful of families still farming the land. The *hoikuen* is now based in the community centre, having been moved there from its home at the Shinto shrine following the collapse of its roof during a snowstorm. Although Mori now receives limited funding from local government towards the salaries of its two young teachers, the bulk of its revenue comes from parents which is reflected in the scant resources available to the children.

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<sup>9</sup> For training methods of preschool teachers in Japan see Noguchi 1992, Ishigaki 1992, Shoji 1983.



In Yuri city, Chibikko Hoikuen is also outside the bounds of national and local government influence. Fully-funded by tuition fees, this private *hoikuen* caters to preschoolers of all ages but is especially popular with professional families willing to pay for a day-care service that also offers academic and moral training. Chibikko is run by a family originally from Tokyo, even securing a top Tokyo chef to cater for the children's daily meals. While previously the physical setting of the *hoikuen* was rather cramped, 2006 marked a move to a new purpose-built facility on the edge of the city. Except for a period of free play in the afternoon, the children remain with their class group as they negotiate various academic and sporting exercises each day.

The purpose of this research is to map the diversity of Hokkaido preschools, their familiarity and use of *shūdan seikatsu* ideology in a demographically changing society, and to use detailed ethnographic data to expand on the sometimes oversimplified models represented in the literature. As this is a small study, it is by no means exhaustive, and cannot possibly represent the myriad of preschools currently operating in Hokkaido, or throughout Japan. Rather, it can be seen as a first step towards a framework for more extensive research.

This thesis has been organised around a series of themes, which integrate literature, theoretical discussion and ethnographic material within each chapter. Following my discussion of methodology (Chapter Two), Chapter Three explores the cultural ideology of Japanese childrearing practices, incorporating Doi's (1973) work to argue the centrality of *amae* (dependence) to Japanese mother and child relationships within the *uchi* (home) setting. The second part of this chapter traces the contrasting historical origins of the *yōchien* and *hoikuen*.

Chapter Four commences with ethnographic descriptions of the five preschools within Holloway's (2000) classification framework before exploring the meaning of the term *shūdan seikatsu* ("life in a group"), and demonstrating how children's participation in the *shūdan* environment of the preschool contrasts with the indulgent *amae* atmosphere of the home. The second part of Chapter Four expands on this discussion through an analysis of how the aims of *shūdan seikatsu* are implemented and achieved by the preschools on a practical level, with a focus on celebrations as a pedagogical device to reinforce group interdependency.

Chapter Five discusses methods of social control within the preschool arena, which links to the supporting roles played by mothers, who are themselves being socialised by school and state. Chapter Six asks if large class sizes are necessary for *shūdan seikatsu* to be an effective form of socialisation, and discusses the challenge of individualism to this process. The chapter concludes by examining the impact of the birth rate on the power of Japanese parents as consumers of preschool services.



Figure 1: Girls brush their teeth before naptime.

Map 1: Japan



## Chapter 2 Methodology

*“Fieldwork in our professional folk model entails the following components: a prolonged phase in a society other than one’s own, hardships encountered upon entering the field, collecting information on the basis of participation and observation, and beginning to examine this data in the light of current theoretical formulations”*

*(Ben-Ari & Van Bremen 2005:7).*

The journey towards this thesis began during my five and half years spent living and working in Hokkaido, Japan. For three of those years, my family lived in the fieldwork site of Tsutsuji and I worked in preschools in the nearby city of Yuri. During this time, I not only became proficient in Japanese, but gained some insider status (Beckerleg & Hundt 2004:128) from my roles in the community as both teacher and parent. While observing and participating in the preschool arena, I became curious as to why my friends were selecting preschools for their children with high teacher/student ratios, and questioned why teachers were reluctant to reduce these ratios even as student numbers dropped each year. I also couldn’t understand why it was so important that my own children attend day-care when I wasn’t working, and that they practice endlessly as a group towards events staged for parents benefit. What was the purpose of the Japanese preschool, I wondered, and why did it look so different to my own experience of attending kindergarten as a child?

On my return to New Zealand, I resolved to find the answers to these questions and enrolled as a postgraduate student. My literature search<sup>10</sup> suggested socialisation to be the key goal for Japanese preschoolers within the ideology of *shūdan seikatsu* or “life in the group” (Lewis 1995, Tobin, Wu and Davidson 1989, Peak 1989, Sano 1989, Hendry 1986b, Ben-Ari 1997b). More specifically, scholars linked classes as large as forty with successful implementation of this paradigm (Tobin 1987; Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1990, 1991).

While large classes may still be the norm in urban Japan, preschools in rural Hokkaido are now facing reduced student numbers as the effects of the falling birth rate and depopulation become obvious. Do teachers in Hokkaido see introducing children to *shūdan seikatsu* as a fundamental goal of preschool? If so, how is this ideology

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<sup>10</sup> The literature search was conducted through library catalogues in both New Zealand and Japan, via web-based search engines, scholarly databases and through informal exchanges with participants in both countries.

implemented in practice? And if the whole purpose of *shūdan seikatsu* is precisely that, of a group, can children have the same experience in Hokkaido classrooms where there may be as few as four children in contrast to 'traditional' class sizes of forty preschoolers in urban Japan?

As I could not locate any academic literature specific to preschools in this region, it became clear that the answers to these questions lay in ethnographic fieldwork<sup>11</sup> in order to present an accurate, contemporary view, and to access resources in Japanese. I quickly decided that I would conduct my fieldwork in the area where I had previously worked and resided: Tsutsuji, a small timber producing town, and Yuri, a city which is still best known for its bountiful vegetable harvests. My association with this part of Eastern Hokkaido meant that I could eliminate the lengthy process of identifying and contacting a range of institutions until a suitable fieldwork site could be found. It also meant that I could be reasonably sure that staff at the preschools would agree to participate as personal introductions and connections are vitally important for those wishing to undertake research in Japan (Kurotani 2004:208).

Within my designated fieldwork sites, I identified a group of preschools which reflect the reality of modern Hokkaido. The five institutions I approached represent the diversity of Japanese preschools; a locally funded day-care predominantly serving the farming community, a private Catholic kindergarten, an elite private kindergarten partially funded by regional government, a private day-care centre used by parents in professional employment and an unregistered day-care caring for children of the working class. All the preschools visited were familiar to me, either through direct past contact or through introductions by Japanese educators. I felt that this familiarity could help towards a more natural view of the Japanese preschool classroom, in contrast to visits I had witnessed where behaviour of the children and staff was clearly choreographed for the guest's benefit!

Following consultation with my Japanese supervisor, I decided it would be culturally appropriate for me to formally approach the head of each institution in writing, explaining my research topic and asking for their permission and help to achieve my

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<sup>11</sup> Burgess (1980:1) has described this approach by saying that, "field research involves observing and analysing real-life situations, of studying actions and activities as they occur. The field researcher, therefore, relies upon learning firsthand about a people and a culture".

aims.<sup>12</sup> The directors or principals then explained the study to their staff, and to my great relief, all of the institutions agreed to take part in the research. I then compiled and sent each institution a preliminary list of topics I hoped to discuss during my three week visit in September/October 2006.

Prior to leaving for Japan, I concentrated on points of difference in *shūdan seikatsu* practice within the context of Hokkaido. It has been argued that the Japanese preschool represents a relatively homogeneous institution which has been shaped by state policy and ideology, and maintained by teachers' extensive use of standardised educational texts throughout the country (Ben-Ari 2002:121). Within the highly literate Japanese society, documents pertaining to preschools are generally produced by 'experts' in Tokyo, and present parameters of 'normal' childhood development which both inform and construct children's behaviour (Goodman 2002a:18). As the majority of teachers are constantly referring to these texts, they come to structure their day around official definitions of what is desirable or necessary for becoming a 'good' Japanese child (White & LeVine 1986).

This line of thinking implies that regional differences in child-rearing patterns and preschool education are minimal. Unlike the rest of Japan, Hokkaido is home to an indigenous people, the Ainu, who have experienced colonisation and exploitation by the Japanese authorities.<sup>13</sup> The island is also geographically distinct from Japan's three other main islands, and facing disproportionately greater economic pressures and depopulation which is reflected in falling numbers of preschool students. I began noting questions for participants to discover if these issues were impacting on the perceived homogeneous world of the Japanese preschool, or whether Hokkaido represented a divergence from this model.

I also wished to gain insight into the workings and relevance of *shūdan seikatsu* ideology to depopulated Hokkaido preschools, and before leaving New Zealand I compiled a series of questions which would be the basis for interviews with teachers, or could be left

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<sup>12</sup> This approach, and the subsequent research, was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (Human Ethics Approval Application – MUAHEC 06/037). Normally, each research participant is required to complete a consent form, but my ethics application argued that this was not consistent with the Japanese top-down system of consent. Furthermore, the Japanese kindergarten class, and indeed the preschool as a whole, is seen as a cohesive group, so requiring individual staff, parents and children to sign consent forms could have resulted in unnecessary confusion and stress. Instead, the decision to proceed was made by the head of each institution who discussed the project with teaching staff, who in turn explained it to parents and children.

<sup>13</sup> An exception to this is Okinawa, Japan's southernmost group of islands, home to the *Ryūkyū* people.

for them to fill in if time was limited (see Appendix). Once in Hokkaido, I undertook participant-observation at each of the five preschools for a minimum of two full days, arriving at 8.30 am as children were being dropped off, and leaving at approximately 5.30 pm. Participation observation methodology is widely regarded as the defining research method of social anthropologists (Dewalt & Dewalt 2002:1). Like Betty Lanham,<sup>14</sup> Catherine Lewis and Susan Holloway before me, I chose to focus my observations on the four year old class (*nen chu san*), as they represent the midpoint of the preschool experience. In the case of mixed classes, I observed the group as a whole, but tried to make regular spot checks on the *nen chu* members.

Interviews with staff were generally conducted during naptime (in the case of *hoikuen*), or after most children had left for the day (*yōchien*). With the exception of Mori staff, all the teachers filled in a question sheet in addition to oral interviews. While the interview topics proved a useful starting point, and in some cases, answered my queries altogether, there were some problems with their use. At the time of writing the questions, I sought to avoid using over-complicated language that might confuse interviewees. As all the interviews were conducted in Japanese, I was also conscious of my need to fully understand the dialogue. In retrospect, simple questions regarding preferred size of classes could be ambiguous as my idea of a large class of three year olds (anything from fifteen students upwards) was seen as a small class by some teachers.

Furthermore, as the interviews were all conducted on preschool premises, we were often interrupted by children who had woken up, needed the toilet or were waiting to be collected. Despite these drawbacks, I feel that the class observations combined with teacher explanation of sighted behaviour, staff discussions on the topic and individual interviews offer useful insights into Hokkaido preschools which are missing from academic literature. Although participants indicated that they were happy for me to use their real names, I wondered if this was more a result of my difficulties in explaining their rights to confidentiality. The research process was new to most of those I interviewed, and this factor combined with the impact participants' comments could have in a small community

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<sup>14</sup> Betty Lanham carried out pioneering research on Japanese child-rearing practices during the American occupation, including a period of participation observation of children at *yōchien* in Kainan, Wakayama. Her findings are summarized in Lanham (1962) and there is a good retrospective analysis of her methods and theories in Lanham & Garrick (1996).

lead me to use pseudonyms for people, places and institutions.

My contacts in the area also meant that my six year old son and I were inevitably invited out each evening to dinners in Japanese homes. Although this was ostensibly outside the bounds of my topic, these interactions presented a valuable opportunity to hear accounts of preschools by mothers who play an important role in the effectiveness of *shūdan seikatsu* ideology. Local people also ensured I was taken to listen to a seminar by a prominent Tokyo educationalist, organised lunches with knowledgeable retired principals, passed my list of questions on for comment to teacher training staff and used their personal contacts and status to obtain municipal statistics for me. These efforts gave me an expansive view of the preschool world which would have been impossible to gain in such a short time if I had arrived in the field 'cold'. Back at the institutions, while my observations and interviews with teachers were confirming that the *shūdan seikatsu* paradigm was still relevant, the impact of class sizes on this was beginning to fade.

On my return to New Zealand, all of the participants written responses were entered into my computer, and indexed under each question, so any trends could be easily identified. My Japanese supervisor had unexpectedly left Massey by this time, so help with particularly difficult *kanji* was provided by a local Japanese friend. All translations, and errors, however, are mine. Some of the results were unexpected. Despite arguments I had read in the literature, I discovered that class size was not seen by teachers as a factor in the efficacy of *shūdan seikatsu*. However, the dropping number of students did appear to be influencing parents' consumer power in the preschool sphere, and consequently, classroom practice.

Before I conducted my fieldwork, I had speculated that the presence of an indigenous group distinct to Hokkaido might be reflected in the preschool curriculum. However, it simply was not the case. Many of the younger teachers were completely blank on this subject, and while several of the experienced teachers agreed that exploration of Hokkaido's turbulent history could be useful, they pointed to an absence of teaching resources on the topic. All of the preschools were adamant that no Ainu students were attending their institution, which seems hard to believe considering that one of Hokkaido's



most famous Ainu *kankō kotan*<sup>15</sup> is only thirty minutes drive away. While the effects of depopulation are more evident in Hokkaido preschool classrooms than other parts of Japan, and would prove to have implications, other differences relating to de-colonisation, the Ainu<sup>16</sup> and even geographical isolation proved to be only minor themes in the end.

My fieldwork did, however, confirm for me that tensions between the ideology and practice of Hokkaido preschools reflect wider changes which have occurred in post-war Japanese society: the low birth rate, emancipation of women, prevalence of the nuclear family and the move from agrarian to urban lifestyles. The realisation that geography is largely irrelevant suggests that the experience of children, parents and educators in this rural region may serve as a precursor to similar changes in preschools in urban Japan in the future.



Figure 2: A girl chooses to role play as a nurse during free play time.

<sup>15</sup> *Kankō* means sightseeing in Japanese, while *kotan* is Ainu for village. See Hiwasaki (2000) for discussion of the emergence of the tourist village in Hokkaido, and the ways in which ethnic tourism has shaped Ainu identity in recent years.

<sup>16</sup> While government policy has been to assimilate Ainu into the mainland Japanese through modern schooling (Okano & Tsuchiya 1999:111), the education system has largely failed them (Mizuno 1987).

**Table 1: Characteristics of the five Hokkaido preschools studied**

	<b>OKA</b>	<b>CHIBIKKO</b>	<b>TENSHI</b>	<b>HINODE</b>	<b>MORI</b>
<b>Type of Preschool</b>	Private Kindergarten <sup>i</sup> ( <i>yōchien</i> )	Private Day-care ( <i>hoikuen</i> )	Catholic Kindergarten ( <i>yōchien</i> )	Public Day-care ( <i>hoikuen</i> )	Unregistered Day-care ( <i>muninka</i> )
<b>Number of Students</b>	162	75	49	39	5
<b>Ages of Students</b>	3 to 6 Years old	0 to 6 Years old	3 to 6 Years old	1 to 6 Years old	1 to 6 Years old
<b>Number of Staff</b>	12 10 females 1 male (principal)	14 8 females 6 males	7 7 females	4 4 females	3 3 females
<b>Classes</b>	Divided by age	Divided by age	Different ages mixed	Different ages mixed	Different ages mixed
<b>Opening hours</b>	Mon – Fri 8.30 am - 2 pm  <i>Azukari</i> <sup>ii</sup> 2-5 pm	Mon – Fri 7.30 am – 6 pm  Sat 7.30 am -12 pm	Mon – Fri 8.30 am – 2 pm  <i>Azukari</i> 2-5 pm	Mon – Fri 8 am – 5.30pm  Sat 8 am – 12 pm	Mon – Fri 8 am – 5.30 pm  Sat 8 am – 12 pm
<b>Monthly Fees</b>	¥ 16,000	¥ 30,000- ¥ 60,000	¥ 16,000	¥ 0 – ¥ 34,000 <sup>iii</sup>	¥ 10,800
<b>Meals supplied</b>	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

<sup>i</sup> Although Oka is classified as a private kindergarten, it does receive limited funds from both the local and regional authorities, which means it must acknowledge prefectural legislation regarding kindergartens.

<sup>ii</sup> *Azukari* is short for *azukari hoiku* (after-school care)

<sup>iii</sup> Hinode's fees are calculated according to parents' income levels, hence the wide variation.

## Chapter 3 The Path to Preschool

### *Japanese approaches to child-rearing*

*“The mother’s job is to prepare her children for life and to provide a bridge between the home and other environments. She achieves these goals by identifying the children’s qualities and by progressively exposing them to the values of social and institutional settings” (White & Levine 1986:67).*

Hendry (1986a) identifies the home, the neighbourhood and the preschool as crucial early “arenas and agents of socialisation” for young children as they journey towards “becoming Japanese”. While the socialisation process which occurs within the preschool will be discussed in more depth in subsequent chapters, it is worth outlining Japanese methods of child-rearing, as the home is the very first place this journey begins.

Traditionally, children under the age of seven, were seen as being among the gods (*nanatsu mae wa kami no uchi*) and various rituals connecting them with the supernatural were commonplace (Chen 1996).<sup>1</sup> While the government has introduced measures to educate parents on the ‘science’ of childrearing, many of these beliefs still persist today. When a woman becomes pregnant she is likely to bind her stomach with an *obi* from the fifth month of pregnancy, visit Shinto shrines to pray for an easy delivery and a healthy child (Hara & Minagawa 1996:22), carry a protective talisman (*omamori*) throughout the pregnancy,<sup>2</sup> and ideally, publicly announce the expected birth on the Day of the Dog, an animal which is believed to have easy deliveries (Hendry 1995:134). Above all, the pregnant mother is expected to provide a calm, loving atmosphere for her foetus (*taikyō*),

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<sup>1</sup> See also Jolivet (1997:115-117) for description of Shinto rituals regarding young children, and how this belief could be used to justify infanticide as children were “returned to the gods” before their existence became permanent at age seven. In contrast, others see the recent availability of contraception and abortion as major factors leading to modern parents’ rejection of this Shinto belief (Yamamura 1986:32).

<sup>2</sup> My Japanese friends were horrified when they found out I hadn’t taken this measure while pregnant with my first son, and promptly took me up to the shrine to remedy the matter! I also was the object of much concern within the neighbourhood for rejecting the wearing of the *obi*. I found out later that some people felt my difficult labour may have been the result of this action. In contrast, my husband and I were applauded for taking our son to be blessed at the Shinto shrine, following a friend’s gift of an expensive baby kimono expressly for this purpose.

which is seen as a vital basis for her child's later transition into wider society (Hendry 1986a:97). Controversially, some paediatricians even warn that mothers who carelessly contribute to foetal stress may cause the child to become anaemic or homosexual (Jolivet 1997:78-79).

After the child is born, its umbilical cord is preserved in a small wooden box, marking the first of many well-defined traditional rites of passage which take place during the early years. After arriving home, there is a naming ceremony (*nazuke iwai*), followed a month later by a visit to the local shrine (*omiyamairi*) and the baby's first taste of solid food (*kuizome*) (Yamamura 1986:30). While some mothers I knew still made the trip to the shrine (which were often unheated in the cold Hokkaido winter) most were content with commemorative photos taken at a local studio, where they dressed their baby boys in *samurai* or *Momotaro* costumes, and their daughters as princesses or ballerinas.

In Tsutsuji, most parents I knew marked the first birthday with a family celebration, and if the child was walking by that stage, a large *mochi* (rice cake) was tied to its back to make it fall over, and thus symbolically prevent the child from wandering beyond the family sphere.<sup>3</sup> The most important annual event for Japanese children is the celebration of Girls' Day (3 March) and Boys' Day (5 May) when elaborate dolls are displayed in the house for daughters, and massive fabric carp streamers fly from flagpoles for sons. As the child grows up s/he will probably participate in the *shichi-go-san* celebrations in November, in which children of three, five and seven years old are dressed in kimono and taken to the shrine to pray for protection and good fortune in the future (Hendry 1986a:38). What is significant about this is the way in which the child's milestones are linked to those of their peers, teaching them early on that they are part of a wider group, and thus forming an important part of the Japanese cultural landscape.

Japanese anthropologist Harumi Befu identifies four main patterns of child-rearing that he suggests are followed by most Japanese. Firstly, Japanese mothers avoid overly stimulating their babies, preferring to rock them quietly, spending more time in close physical contact than their American counterparts. Secondly, the Japanese mother avoids separation from her baby, even if it means her husband must sleep in another room, or that she must forego social evenings out with friends. Thirdly, Japanese mothers generally feed

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<sup>3</sup> See also Hendry (1986a) for a discussion of this ritual.

on demand, to reinforce the baby's emotional dependence on her. Finally, Japanese mothers avoid punishing young children, preferring to reason, cajole, or even bribe their youngsters with sweets (Befu 1971:151-157).

Foreign scholars have also identified a difference in the way Japanese mothers interact with their child. American William Caudill,<sup>4</sup> who conducted a longitudinal cross-cultural study of mother and child behaviour in Japan and the United States, concluded that the Japanese mother views the baby as an extension of herself, therefore unnecessary verbal communication is limited in favour of more vitally important physical contact (Schooler 1996:145-146). This concept has become popularly known as 'skinship', a word based on English, and put into *katakana*.<sup>5</sup> Although the term has Western connotations, it was actually coined in protest of American influence on child-rearing methods in the postwar period when the Japanese were encouraged to bottle feed, sleep babies in cots and use prams. This was a complete contrast to the ways Japanese mothers had historically acted, and led by Japan's version of Dr Spock, Dr Michio Matsuda, 'skinship' marks a return to traditional methods (Matsuda 1973). This was a concept that would be often mentioned by the Japanese teachers I spoke to during my fieldwork, and it is also notable as one of the many ways Japanese parents, offspring, and the educational sphere continue to be affected by imported Western ideologies.

Japan is awash with parenting paraphernalia: magazines, videos, songs, and television programmes to name a few. While the 'return' to skinship was seen as reverting back to traditional methods, it also requires a great deal of time on the part of the modern mother. The advocacy of skinship by paediatricians saw a return to beliefs such as a 'good' mother should give birth in pain to create a strong, lifelong bond, babies should sleep with their mothers and be breast-fed on demand, disposable nappies should be rejected in favour of the more labour-intensive cloth version, and nutritious homemade foods prepared during weaning. They also urged mothers to abandon all professional

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<sup>4</sup> The full results of Caudill's study are contained in four core papers, Caudill & Weinstein (1969), Caudill (1972), Caudill & Schooler (1973), and Caudill & Frost (1974).

<sup>5</sup> Katakana is a phonetic alphabet reserved for words borrowed from foreign languages, e.g. skinship is written as スキンシップ. While the Japanese insist the word is still ultimately English (or German or French etc) the pronunciation of it renders it almost unrecognizable to foreign ears.

activity for at least five years, to allow full commitment to the task of child-rearing.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, in my own experience, it was often remarked by Japanese friends that the lengthy, painful birth of my first son was an experience I should wear as a badge of honour. In most rural Hokkaido hospitals, pain relief during delivery is not available, and several mothers I spoke to echoed the belief that, although excruciating, a difficult birth is ultimately positive as it strengthens the connection between mother and child. Conversely, my husband and I were roundly criticized for using a baby cot, and visitors to the house would often exclaim “*kawaisō*” (oh, poor thing) at naptime. This community system of approval and disapproval means that while mothers are the primary agent for socialising children in the home, they are also constantly being socialised themselves into embodying *ryōsai kenbō* or a good wife/wise mother (Fujita 1989).<sup>7</sup> As we will see later, this expectation and pressure on mothers has been used both by the government to promote the birth rate, and by women to subvert pro-natal policies.

Implicit in the cultural ideology of the mother and child is the belief that the construction of this relationship is fundamental not only to the family, but builds aspects of character seen as uniquely Japanese. Deterioration of the mother-child relationship has even been linked to childhood illness and general social malaise (Jolivet 1997:101). According to psychiatrist Takeo Doi, central to this belief is the concept of *amae*, which is difficult to translate accurately into English, with the closest meaning being “dependency”. He argues that “*amae* is a key concept for the understanding not only of the psychological makeup of the individual Japanese but of the structure of Japanese society as a whole” (Doi 1973:28). *Amae* is seen as essential for babies and young children, allowing them to feel secure in their mothers love. Even as they grow into adults, this dependency is encouraged, in contrast to the West, where children are praised for becoming independent.<sup>8</sup>

In their landmark monograph *Shitsuke* (Hara & Wagatsuma 1974), the authors analysed the ways in which Japanese and American scholars studied childhood, concluding that the major difference lay in the way maturity was viewed in terms of becoming independent. While Americans associated maturity with “becoming an independent

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<sup>6</sup> There is a good explanation of the various theories expressed by Japanese paediatricians such as Kobayashi Noburu, Oshima Kiyoshi, Hirai Nobuyoshi and Kyutoku Shigemori in Jolivet’s book (1997:77-106).

<sup>7</sup> For detailed analysis of the concept and impact of *ryōsai kenbō* on Japanese womens’ lives, see Uno 1993a.

<sup>8</sup> In New Zealand, independence was cited as a key aim for children by members of the Auckland Kindergarten Association (Interview with Principal of Westlake/Forrest Hill Kindergarten, 22 June 2006).

individual”, the Japanese scholars felt that “a mature person knows when, how, and on whom to be dependent or not dependent” (Hara & Minagawa 1996:11). In fact, someone who tries to be too independent can be seen as having failed to understand how to *amaeru*.

The early years at home are also the time when children learn to distinguish behaviour appropriate for the setting. For Japanese society, an essential element of socialisation is the classification of *uchi* and *soto*, which roughly translate as ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. This may be a physical distinction, such as within or outside of one’s home, but also extends to members of one’s family as opposed to members of the outside community, and to members of a person’s wider groups, such as the neighbourhood, kindergarten, school or workplace, as opposed to other people beyond those groups.<sup>9</sup> For young Japanese, the acknowledgement of this distinction begins by repeating their mother’s ritualised greetings, which are given both by those leaving or entering the house, and those seeing off or receiving a guest or a family member home, and even small children will quickly learn to utter them at the appropriate time (Hendry 1995:43-44).

“The home, or *uchi*, is the private, intimate arena in which one can relax, let all of one’s feelings show, and expect indulgence and sympathy from other members of the family. Within the *uchi* a healthy amount of self-indulgence, regressive behaviour, and mild aggression are not only cheerfully tolerated but also encouraged as an indication of intimacy and trust. However, in the *soto*, or outside world, one must learn to assume a genial and cooperative public persona, in which individual feelings and desires must be subjugated to the harmony and activities of the group” (Peak 1991:7).

As the child learns to discriminate between these two social spheres, s/he also comes to realise that *uchi* is a place where *amae* will be accepted and even praised by mother, as opposed to *soto* where *amae* behaviour is inappropriate and discouraged (Azuma 1986:8). In contrast to the relative freedom of the *uchi* environment, when interacting in the *soto* world, one is expected to show *enryo*, which translates roughly as “restraint” or

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<sup>9</sup> *Uchi* is the informal name for *ie*, the traditional Japanese family system which was officially abolished in 1947 in favour of the more ‘democratic’ *uchi* structure. Nakane (1970) argues that Japanese society gives little weight to kinship, but places more on those included within the social group. The *ie* is a group residing within an established frame of residence which is characterized by its vertical structure and strong patriarchal control. What is significant in this context, is that the human relationships within this group are seen as more important than all other relationships outside it. In other words, wives and daughter-in-laws who have married into the *ie* hold greater importance than one’s own female kin who have married into other households.

“holding back”. Doi suggests that *enryo* is, in fact, an inverted form of *amae*, where one must not assume too much of another’s good will (*amaeru*) or else run the risk of being thought rude and consequently disliked (Doi 1973:39).

To be able to function smoothly in Japanese society as an adult, it is essential that children learn to distinguish between the *uchi* and *soto*, and adjust their behaviour accordingly. While Japanese mothers promote *amae* behaviour within the family home, they expect children to learn to display *enryo* towards peers, neighbours and members of the wider community. For most Japanese children, the first time they encounter this expectation is when they enter preschool (Peak 1991:16). Tobin (1992:25) goes further, arguing that the socialising role of the Japanese preschool is even more complex, as it “helps children develop and integrate this twofold selfhood not by offering a world completely unlike the world of mother and home, but instead by offering a world that is simultaneously home (*uchi*) and not home (*soto*), front (*omote*) and rear (*ura*), a world of both spontaneous human feeling (*honme*) and prescribed, formal pretense (*tatemae*)”.

Most academics agree, however, that attendance at some form of preschool is an important first step for young Japanese towards mastering essential social behaviour and values. This sentiment appears to be shared by Japanese parents, judging by the high percentage of children enrolled at preschool even though it is not compulsory to attend. On a national level, the number of children enrolled at officially recognised preschools has dramatically risen in the post-war years, from 1.138 million attending kindergarten and 830,000 in day-care in 1965, to 1.76 million kindergarteners and 2.48 million day-care attendees in 2003 (Japan Statistical Yearbook 2006:699). This number would be even higher if unregistered day-cares and baby hotels were to be included in the figures.

In Hokkaido, there were 132,000 children enrolled at 1408 preschools in 2004. The number of *hoikuen* has steadily risen to 822, compared to 586 kindergartens reflecting the changing need for child-care services for working women (Japan Statistical Yearbook 2006:699). However, in a land where mothers are widely recognised as the best caregivers for children (Fujita 1989), the rise of the preschool is fairly recent. It is worth mapping how the *yōchien* (kindergarten) and *hoikuen* (day-care centre) have come to occupy such a prominent place in Japanese society.



### ***The historical origins of the Japanese yōchien and hoikuen***

*“The preschool is a core institution in Japan, viewed as providing essential experiences that enable young children to obtain social and intellectual skills needed to function successfully in Japanese society. As such, it serves a conservative cultural function – both preserving and transmitting Japanese social values to the younger generation”*

*(Holloway 2000:2).*

While the dropping birth rate has seen the kindergarten (*yōchien*) and the day-care centre (*hoikuen*) come to resemble each other more and more, the historical origins and aims of these two institutions were distinctly different. The two key definitions associated with Japanese early childhood care and education are *kyōiku* and *hoiku*. While *kyōiku* is translated as education in English, the word can be broken down into its *kanji* characters, with *kyō* meaning teaching and *iku* meaning bring up. In contrast, *hoiku* is made up of *ho* which means care and protection, and *iku*, bring up. For some, Japanese institutions’ interpretation of these aims highlights a key difference between *yōchien* and *hoikuen* (Ishigaki 1992), and the contrasting practice of early preschools certainly supports this distinction.

The first national kindergarten, which was founded in 1876, was attached to Tokyo Women’s Normal School and followed the theories of educationalist, Froebel, which was seen as a way of introducing Western ideals by Meiji Japan (Shoji 1983). Until 1897, educational methods used in foreign countries were favoured by the national kindergarten and by Christian kindergartens established by missionaries (Ishigaki 1992). In 1899, the Act of the Content and Facilities of Kindergarten Education was passed, which identified four educational forms: play, song, speech and handicrafts. In 1926, this act was replaced by the Kindergarten Act, which was eventually modified so kindergartens could be free to organize their own curriculum, in line with what was actually happening in their classrooms. During wartime, 1937-1945, kindergarten content changed to include worship of the Imperial family and the national flag, instruction in distinguishing enemy planes, and the playing of war games. The School Education Law of 1947 marked a new direction in preschool education, outlining aims as diverse as playing with dolls, observation of nature,

free play, health education and celebration of annual events.

This was eventually pared down to six main areas with the issue of the Guidelines for Kindergarten Education in 1965. Enforced by the Ministry of Education, the core content of kindergarten education was identified as health, society, nature, language, music and rhythm, art and craft. By late 1989, these guidelines were revised to reflect social change, with an eye “to bring[ing] up generous people who can cope with changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Ishigaki 1992:117). Despite Western perceptions (Cummings 1989), the aims of preschool education have never promoted academic ability, but have evolved to reflect the prevailing social conditions.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to the historical path followed by kindergartens, the *hoikuen* or day-care centre had quite a different beginning. The roots of the modern Japanese day-care facility can be seen in the *takujisho* (day nurseries) founded in Kyoto in 1875 to serve the needs of women working in weaving and dyeing factories. The level of care at these nurseries was minimal, “so that women could work, reflecting a different purpose from the education-oriented kindergartens” (Shwalb et al 1992:332).

The need for childcare for the children of the poor working class was also noted by a young schoolteacher in 1900, who observed preschoolers roaming the streets unsupervised in the Tokyo slums. Moved by their plight, and that of their mothers who were struggling to earn subsistence wages to support their families, she was inspired to establish Japan’s first modern day-care centre (Uno 1987:65-6, Uno 1993b:56). Unlike the educational emphasis of the *yōchien* curriculum, the *hoikuen* concentrated on improving children’s eating habits, personal hygiene and morals (Boocock 1989:45). During World War I, the government increased spending on day nurseries, in an effort to support impoverished mothers and women employed in the war effort, and by 1919 the first public day nursery was established in Osaka, followed by others in the slums of Tokyo, Kobe and Kyoto (Shirai 1985). With the forced conscription of women for factory work during World War II, temporary *hoikuen* were established in any available space, including temples, shrines, libraries and schools. While many of these closed at the end of the war,

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<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive history of early childhood pedagogic concepts in Japanese preschools, see the excellent article by Ishigaki (1991) which discusses prominent theorists and how their views influenced Japanese educational trends.

the Japanese government (under the American occupation) passed the School Education Law in 1947, which placed *yōchien* under the control of the Ministry of Education (*Monbusho*),<sup>11</sup> and the Child Welfare Law, which made *hoikuen* part of the Ministry of Health and Welfare (*Kōseisho*) (Boocock 1989:45). For many scholars, this remains the fundamental difference between the two forms of preschool in Japan, with the *yōchien* seen as preparing children for school, while the *hoikuen* serves the needs of the poor and working women (Shwalb et al 1992:336, Smith 1995: 69, Boocock 1989:46, Hendry 1986a:126).

In 1989 and 1990, following reports by international media which focused on the image of Japanese children as young as two heading off to cram school (In Japan a tot's first taste of schooling is 'examination hell' 1984:46), the Ministry of Education issued new guidelines which stated preschools should view spontaneous play as their primary aim, and refrain from academic instruction (Ishigaki 1991). While this was a radical departure from earlier authoritarian structures and practices, some preschools had difficulty putting 'free play' into practice, which resulted in chaotic scenes such as these described by a teacher in an education magazine in 1990: "When I visited some day nurseries, children were playing by the side of a busy road. It was said that neighbours had to warn children against playing on the railway line. There was a rule not to lead children, so nobody stopped the children's fighting and a pecking order by force was created. Even for the very young children, it was a free choice to take or not take a nap. Classroom decorations were abolished because it was said to be artificial. The children then scribbled a lot of graffiti on the wall" (Davies & Kasama 2004:97). Ten years later, it appears that some institutions were still grappling with the means to apply the concept of free play, leaving teachers confused and unsure that the quality of their programs had improved as a result of the guidelines implementation (Holloway 2000:184-6).

While some scholars write that as far back as the Edo period theorists such as Yamaga Soko (1622-1685) and Ekiken Kaibara (1630-1714) were recognizing the educational value of play (Ishigaki 1991, Shoji 1983), others argue that the behaviour represented at these preschools is relatively recent, and such institutions in fact represent

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<sup>11</sup> *Monbusho* has since been renamed *Monbukagakusho* (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology).

cultural values accepted by modern Japanese society (Holloway 2000:3, Davies & Kasama 2004:76). What is clear, however, is that most modern Japanese preschools now accept free play as an essential part of the preschool experience. Astute principals realise that play is not just about having fun, but that since playground interactions are “deeply embedded in children’s collective, interpretive reproduction of their culture, socialization is not only a matter of individual adaptation and internalization, but a process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction” (Corsaro 1985:1). With this in mind, how have the social forces and ideologies outlined in this chapter come to shape the Japanese preschool of today?



Figure 3: A teacher assists two year old children with one of the earliest routines to be mastered at the preschool: learning to stow one's shoes correctly in the *genkan* area.

## Chapter 4 The Ideology and Practice of *Shūdan Seikatsu*

### *Ideological diversity within the Japanese preschool*

*“Does the Japanese preschool represent a pocket of freedom in an otherwise tightly controlled society, or is the preschool experience merely a downward extension of the academic rat race?” (Boocock 1989:41)*

In her research which sought to examine how the 1990 Ministry of Education guidelines were promoting more individualised instruction, Holloway (2000:18) came to identify and classify preschools into three types: relationship-oriented, role-oriented and child-oriented. I found this model a useful lens through which to examine the five Hokkaido preschools selected for my study.

Holloway (2000) noted that children at relationship-oriented preschools were encouraged to play with others, with little teacher intervention, and spent a great deal of time mastering the routines of group life and social rituals. The teachers focus on showing each child how rewarding it can be to perform these routines, as opposed to reprimanding them for failing to comply. At the role-oriented preschools, the curriculum was academically focused, with strict discipline, and little opportunity for children to exercise free will. Finally, at the child-oriented preschools, much of the day was devoted to free play, with few group activities. Teachers had a more individualised approach to children, and gave no direct instruction about the day's activities.

In terms of my research, I would identify Oka as a relationship-oriented preschool, staffed with young, smiling teachers who “approach their objective of preparing children for enthusiastic participation in group life by focusing on three essential experiences: having fun, learning routines, and forming friendships with other children (Holloway 2000:41). Entering the kindergarten grounds at 9 am on a sunny morning, one is struck by the numbers of happy children busy in the sandpit, on the climbing frames or pulling friends around in brightly-painted wagons while jaunty music pipes from the outdoor speakers. Each child is wearing a coloured cap which makes them instantly identifiable as a member of their class (orange for Kiku class, pink for Sakura etc), and most have a

corresponding coloured name badge pinned to their clothing. Over at the swings, children waiting for their turn chant up to ten, which is the designated time for change-over, and then swap places without any fuss or instruction from the teacher. In one corner, a three year old boy is wailing about the failure of his mud pie. In frustration, he kicks out at the other children who try to placate him, but to no avail. One of the teachers from the six-year-old class eventually wanders over but does not reprimand him for his behaviour, but sits down and pours water back and forth over the pie, all the time smiling and encouraging until the boy once again commences play.

Inside the *yōchien*, the hall is full of children manoeuvring large wooden blocks, bouncing balls, spinning hula hoops and skipping ropes. Children run in and out of classrooms which have desks piled with clay sculptures in progress, and floors strewn with plastic fruit, soft toys, lego and books. Even the surfaces in the staffroom are covered in paper, ribbons, tape and scissors as three little girls work at making fairy wands and streamers for their hair, while a group of boys construct swords and ninja masks. When they have trouble with the stanley knife they ask the receptionist to help them. She does so willingly, then goes back to answer a call amongst the rowdy din of children's voices.

At 9.50 am the clean-up music bursts out of the loudspeakers, and the children rush to put away their materials, often needing to work together to pile up the heavy wooden blocks or the gym mats. By 10 am, the assembly music has begun and the children are lining up according to coloured tape markings on the ground. The line-up sequence goes from shortest to tallest, and has been ascertained at the beginning of the year when all children were measured and weighed. Even though some children may have grown since this time, they maintain this sequence, reprimanding amongst themselves any child who may be standing out of order. At 10.10 am the music stops and the duty teacher steps up to give the day's inspirational talk and to lead the children in morning exercise, after which they will return to their classes to begin a fun activity prepared by the teachers.

Preschools in rural Hokkaido are generally lucky in the sense that land, which is so precious in other parts of Japan, is relatively abundant here. Like Oka, Chibikko and Tenshi also feature spacious dirt grounds and bright, airy classrooms. But while the physical surroundings may be similar, the atmosphere is quite different. Chibikko and Tenshi can be classified as role-oriented, where "children must be brought up to perform their role in life

with diligence, confidence and competence” (Holloway 2000:62). This approach does not necessarily mean submerging the individual for the group, rather that identifying one’s role is compatible with maintaining one’s individuality (*kosei*), and ultimately contributing to a harmonious society. In these institutions, “the need for self-discipline is purposely highlighted and enduring minor hardship for the sake of conforming to the rules of the group is seen as character-building” (Holloway 2000:52).

The role-oriented preschools are also the most likely to teach literacy or offer some kind of academic instruction, a move welcomed by education-orientated parents. Ironically, these same parents are criticized by the directors of role-oriented preschools, who see them as contributing to the decline of postwar Japanese society through their materialistic, permissive and individualistic lifestyles (Holloway 2000:64). While the directors of Tenshi and Chibikko shared these views, they were also trying to support parents on many levels, and were fervently pacifist, rejecting any notions of using role-oriented instruction to promote nationalistic causes.

At Tenshi, children are dropped off between 8.30 and 9 am by parents, or arrive on the kindergarten bus which is painted with cartoons and smiling faces. After exchanging their outdoor shoes for their indoor ones, and hanging up their bags, children proceed to their classroom where various activities are set up for them. In line with the Montessori philosophy of the kindergarten, all the activities have been pre-approved as enhancing children’s brain development. Children can choose from solving wooden puzzles, sewing yarn into patterned cards, completing hiragana charts, threading beads, identifying odours in metal canisters, and even writing numerals on long scrolls of paper which are clipped together and then unrolled again each day – some children’s lists are into the 800s! The atmosphere is one of quiet industry, with the homeroom teacher sitting cheerfully beside the children, ready to help or encourage as required.

It is also a fact that there are far fewer children here than the 162 pupils of Oka. Although there are three classrooms in Tenshi, only two are currently in use as home rooms by the 49 children enrolled. At 9.30 the children are instructed to clean up by their teachers, who line them up and lead them down to the hall for assembly, which will be followed by the lessons of the day, which may include painting, musical or craft instruction.

Over at Chibikko, children have begun arriving since 7.30 am, emerging from late-

model SUVs driven by their parents who are rushing to professional jobs in the city. Many of the boys go outside to throw baseballs, the girls chat to their friends over drawings, and the toddlers wander amongst toys to get cuddles from obliging older children. The amicable hum of conversation is silenced at 9 am, when all 52 of the children aged up to five gather for the morning assembly. After a finger play and a story book, the older children lead the younger ones out to their classes then return for *taisō* (morning exercise). The teachers stand at the back while two four-year-old girls go to the front, and begin to lead the children in a stretching and dance routine conducted to the theme of “Fame”. The teachers do “Head, shoulders, knees and toes” first in Japanese, and then in English, as the children sing and mimic the actions.

This is followed by a round of flashcards depicting flags of various countries. The children call out confidently in unison, “Denmark, China, New Zealand, Nigeria...”, and are reminded by teachers that even though “we may live in different countries, and look different, we are all the same inside, and around the world we are all friends” (*sekai de minna otomodachi*). Before heading to their respective classes at 9.40 am, children are encouraged by the duty monitors (*tōban*) to do their best, to which they heartily reply “*gambarimasu*” and place a sticker in the appropriate calendar space in their attendance books.

Hinode and Mori appear to be more child-oriented, in the sense that the children were left pretty much to their own devices, although the daily routine did include a regular morning assembly, naptime and lunch together. However, unlike the wealthy child-oriented Kansai institutions that Holloway visited, with their abundant equipment and spacious grounds, Mori especially had very limited resources reflecting its status as an unofficial *hoikuen* in an impoverished, rural area. While Hinode was better-equipped, the building facilities were worn, with none of the computers of Chibikko, or television and DVD sets of Oka and Tenshi. In order to stretch resources, some of the toys had even been handmade by the teachers during the children’s naptime. In child-oriented schools, the emphasis is on “enhancing the complementary relationship between individual competence and group strength” (Holloway 2000:97) so that ‘strong’ children can use their abilities to create a ‘good’ group. Hinode and Mori were the most problematic of the five preschools to fit into Holloway’s framework, as they represented the most permissive of all institutions in terms



of allowing children to direct their own play, but it wasn't yet clear if they had achieved a cohesive, cooperative group in their classrooms.

At Hinode the doors open at 8 am, but children continue to trickle in over the next hour after being greeted at the *genkan* (foyer) by teachers who help them to change their shoes and stow their containers of cooked rice and bags of bedding. Despite an entire roll of only 39 pupils aged up to six years old, the noise is deafening as the children race about the hall, which contains a mini trampoline, bins of balls and hoops. The classrooms are also a hive of activity, with tiny wooden blocks scattered about the floor, and 'playing house' games in full swing. Unlike Oka, the staffroom at Hinode is off-limits to the kids. It holds no interest for them anyway, lacking the bulging cupboards full of ribbons, cellophane and coloured card available to Oka pupils.

Several of the older boys are involved in *tatakau-gokko* (play fighting), which has become more and more intense and threatens to spill over and destroy the carefully constructed wooden towers another group is making. While the tower-builders complain loudly to the teacher, she ignores them and continues to play at hairdressers with two girls. The older boys continue to throw punches and hurl insults at each other, until eventually the teacher drags them apart, admonishing "stop punching!" At 9.30 am, the teacher plays a simple tune on the piano which is the cue to tidy up the hall, and line up. The teacher offers the morning greeting, to which the children reply, before they join hands for a game. While one teacher plays the piano, the other teachers attempt to get the children to join hands and walk around in a circle. Several of the children resist, and start crying, but the teachers ignore this, continuing to "wash" them as per the game. One child continues to wail throughout, despite the teacher tickling and rocking him. At 9.45 am, the children head to their classrooms, where they are free to play until lunchtime.

The *hoikuen* at Mori is surprisingly difficult to find, despite being the sole preschool in this tiny farming hamlet. The physical surroundings are, in fact, only one room at the end of a corridor in the community hall. At the *genkan*, there are no extra shoe racks for child-sized footwear and the dilapidated complex appears to be deserted until you catch a glimpse of elderly women arranging flowers in one of the front rooms. The five children enrolled here arrive at 8 am, with the two sets of siblings arriving after the youngest child who

comes with the teacher, his mother. There are two young female teachers here, plus the principal who is in her eighties.

The atmosphere is very subdued, even the children's voices are quiet and restrained as they pick their way around the meagre piles of lego and beads on the linoleum floor. Two of the boys lie under the futons in the cupboard and whisper together. At 9.35 am the teachers instruct the children to pack up the toys, and push the tables together. There is no bouncy music, or even piano cues to liven this up. One teacher reads a book to the group, and then pulls out a small, portable keyboard on which she plays a few tunes. Today, for the first time ever, local library volunteers have come to give a *kamishibai* (paper theatre) presentation to the class. The children listen appreciatively until to the end, when it is time to go outside for free play. The playground is a sad collection of rusted equipment, and most of it is broken anyhow, so the children instead draw in the dirt with sticks until it is time for lunch.

In Holloway's study some teachers in child-oriented schools said that they were trying to replicate the *amae* atmosphere of home, but adapting the relationship dynamics to a group setting (Holloway 2000:21). Despite the poor resources, Mori most seemed to represent an *amae*-based setting, typified by an incident during a group walk, when the youngest child cried "*okāsan, okāsan*" for his mother, who eventually abandoned her role as *sensei* (teacher), and carried him on her back even as she urged the other children not to give up. In contrast, at role-oriented Chibikko, most of the staff have children at the centre, including the principal's grandchildren. At no time did those children forget to address their parents with the correct honorific of *sensei* (teacher) or *enchō sensei* (principal), even in the face of distress. Outside the *soto* setting of the *hoikuen* however, they were a very warm and loving family, with the children using the *uchi* language of *okāsan* (mother) and *obāsan* (grandma) with no hint of confusion. Obviously, they were well on the way to mastering the intricacies of Japanese social interaction in contrasting environments.

Even within this small group of Hokkaido preschools, the axes of variation are clearly recognisable. While the diversity of Japanese preschools has been examined by a few scholars (Boocock 1989, DeCoker 1990, Holloway 2000), much of the literature on this subject has focused on the prevalence of free play, the lack of teacher-instigated discipline and the generally noisy, wild atmosphere of the classroom (Tobin 1989, Peak

1991, Lewis 1995). While these descriptions certainly have parallels with life at Hinode, they bear no resemblance to Chibikko where fights are quickly broken up, and children are encouraged to be polite, studious and respectful.

In a widely-read expose on the Japanese education system, White (1987) notes that public kindergartens provide no lessons in literacy or numeracy, and even the most elite kindergartens offer only a basic introduction to letters and numbers. While this may be true of Mori, what then do we make of Chibikko where teachers drill their two year old charges in *hiragana*, or of the meticulously copied sheets of numbers and characters in the desks of pupils at Tenshi? Similarly, the positive, pro-active methods of fostering collective identity and emotional attachment to the group witnessed by Kotloff (1998) at a preschool in Kanazawa, is a mirror image of scenes at Oka, yet not necessarily representative of the other preschools in this study. Despite these ideological differences, within each of the five preschools the influence of *shūdan seikatsu* methods can be found. What exactly does this term mean and how does it influence preschool life?



Figure 4: Girls practice *hiragana* and fine motor skills.

### ***Shūdan seikatsu: socialising children to ‘life in the group’***

*“Learning to participate in shūdan implies learning to switch between two codes of behavior – one appropriate to participation in the family and one appropriate to the group” (Peak 1989:97).*

As the economic miracle of postwar Japan pushed the country into the mainstream Western media, articles and news stories began to look towards the education system. Could this be a contributing factor to the phenomenal rise of the Japanese economy? Foreign scholars were sent to investigate this theory, leading to reports of the academic success of Japanese students (Husen 1967, Comber & Keeves 1973, Stigler 1983, Stevenson & Lee 1990), while the popular press offered supposedly stereotypical images of children as young as two attending cram school (Simons 1987, Efron 1997). It seemed that a key factor must be intensive academic instruction, starting even at the toddler stage where children are forced to compete for admission into elitist, regimented preschools (Summer camp readies Japan’s kindergartners for ‘exam hell’ 1987:1).

In contrast to these images, more thorough fieldwork-based studies have since indicated that the real aim of early education lies in socialisation processes, not rigorous academic instruction (Peak 1991, Sano 1989, Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1989, Hendry 1986a, Lewis 1984). While academics once thought early social skills were learned in the Japanese home, scholars such as Peak (1989) believe that the explanation lies with *uchi* and *soto* which has been explored in many ethnographies dealing with adult society in Japan (Hendry 1995, Lebra 1976, Nakane 1970, Vogel 1963).

The explicit socialising function of the Japanese preschool is recognised by both parents and teachers, who accept that a ‘bridge’ is needed between the culture and behaviour of the home and that of the outside world (Peach 1994). Teachers do not expect pupils to commence school with any understanding of appropriate classroom behaviour, just as parents feel it is not reasonable to manage children’s actions at home according to the rules of the preschool environment. The two environments are naturally seen as quite distinct (Peak 1991:11). Instead of leading children in intensive academic lessons, “the

schools emphasize teaching socially appropriate behaviour through a gradual process of socialization in group activities” (Peach 1994:3).

The profound difference between the behaviour of children at home, and the behaviour expected at preschool can be attributed to *shūdan seikatsu*, with *shūdan* meaning group or collective, and *seikatsu* meaning life or daily living. Put simply, the preschool is *shūdan seikatsu* and the home is not. While the English meaning of group could also theoretically be extended to include the family, in Japanese terms “the defining characteristic of a *shūdan* is not the number of people involved but the expectations governing their interpersonal behaviour” (Peak 1989:97). The family cannot be a small *shūdan* as its members are free to express their own feelings and desires within the *amae* environment of the home, where it is quite appropriate to expect understanding and indulgence from the other members for any selfish behaviour. In contrast, at the preschool, participation by children in the *shūdan* environment means that they must realise “that their own desires and goals are secondary to those of the group. A certain degree of *enryo* or restraint in expressing one’s own feelings and a diffident self-presentation are appropriate” (Peak 1989:94).

This is in sharp contrast to the indulgent *amae* atmosphere of the family home, but mothers interviewed by Peak (1989,1991) were adamant that *enryo* could only be acquired through interaction with peers in the *shūdan* setting of the preschool, where children’s *wagamama* (personal desires) must be sacrificed for the activities and harmony of the group. Parents in Tsutsuji seemed to feel the same way. Despite being a full-time housewife, one Tsutsuji mother I spoke to had decided to put her only child into day-care to avoid ‘spoiling’ the girl. The *hoikuen* rules decreed that little Yuko attend from 8.30 am to 4 pm, during which time the mother waited at home until pick-up time. As she was unable to have more children, the mother told me that the *hoikuen* was an opportunity for Yuko to make friends, have fun, and most importantly, learn to interact in the *shūdan* environment before she started elementary school. She felt that it would be unfair and selfish of her as a mother to deny Yuko this chance, despite spending each morning of the first six months peeling a crying child from her skirt at the *hoikuen genkan*.

The *shūdan* lessons Yuko is learning in the preschool environment are even more pertinent at a time where many Japanese children do not have siblings or watchful

neighbours to curb their impulsive *wagamama* behaviour.<sup>1</sup> As the post-war Japanese family has moved from the extended to the nuclear, so has the neighbourhood environment changed for Japanese children. While the neighbourhood was once an important agent of socialisation (Hendry 1986a:57-61), many urban Japanese youngsters now grow up in high-rise apartment complexes, with little opportunity to interact with other children prior to entering preschool. In fact, some scholars point out that the social skills once gained in the neighbourhood context are now being acquired at the various extra-curricular classes and groups that are popular for children (Imamura 1987:76, Tsuneyoshi 2001:72).

While the *shūdan seikatsu* image is a positive one for many Japanese, this so-called 'group orientated behaviour' has been widely negatively portrayed in the international press (Sayle 1998), leading to perceptions such as "Japanese children go into preschool overindulged and undercontrolled and come out overcontrolled, unimaginative, and spiritless" (Tobin quoted in Finkelstein 1991:77). With this in mind, the teachers I spoke to were anxious to clarify the role of *shūdan seikatsu*, and careful to emphasise it was not some kind of 'mind control' that resulted in the children being turned out as 'little robots'. As Finkelstein notes "contrary to prevailing stereotypes, the primary function of *hoikuen* and *yōchien* is not to break children's spirit or will but to help them acquire a more group-oriented, outward-facing sense of self than they received in the first three years of life" (Finkelstein 1991:78).

While most teachers and parents can see the benefits of the *shūdan seikatsu* ideology, it does not necessarily mean that the transition from home to preschool is a smooth one (Peak 1991, Hendry 1986a). For many children, the first few weeks after entering *hoikuen* or *yōchien* are traumatic, as they learn to master many basic techniques which have previously been done for them by their mothers.<sup>2</sup> In the *shūdan* environment of up to forty children in a class, the teacher largely makes herself unavailable to the demands of her many small charges, defining her role as *sensei* as opposed to mother. The intentionally high student/teacher ratios in the Japanese preschool classroom function to

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting here that unlike the rather negative connotations of the English translation (selfish or personal desires), *wagamama* does not imply a shortcoming in one's character. The meaning of the word combining *waga* ('own' or 'self') with *mama* ('as it is') implies an untrained state, yet to be socialised (Hendry 1986a:90).

<sup>2</sup> Much of the first term is spent practicing things such as putting on and removing shoes, buttoning up clothing, setting the table for one's lunch, and organising one's belongings at arrival and home time.

prevent intense dyadic relations between the two parties, ultimately preventing teachers from acting like a mother and children from reverting to dependent sons and daughters (Tobin 1987:539). It soon becomes clear that “the worlds of preschools and home, of teacher and mother, are viewed as largely discontinuous ... teachers are not parents, and to the degree a Japanese teacher allows herself to slip into a motherlike stance toward a child, she has compromised her role as a teacher” (Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1991:111).

And despite Western media sources which describe mothers desperately trying to get their children accepted into ‘escalator’ kindergartens linked to prestigious universities, most mothers are not overly concerned about institutions’ academic reputation. Hendry (1986a:63) found that generally factors such as convenience and children’s friendships were seen as more important than ideology. While Smith (1995:49-50) agrees that socio-economic factors such as per capita educational spending, prefectural income, occupation have no impact on *hoikuen* attendance, he argues that, in contrast, *yōchien* attendance is directly linked to educational stratification, a kind of ‘cultural-capital’ that ultimately gives children an academic advantage.

In Tsutsuji, Tenshi is the only kindergarten available, although there are public day-care centres, but mothers often mentioned the convenience of the free bus service for students, and the large hall which provided a place for children to run around during the snowy winter months. Mothers who chose one of the two *hoikuen* were usually attracted by the long opening hours, and the lower income-adjusted fees. Some specifically chose one day-care over another, even if was further away, so that children could be with their friends or cousins. One mother told me that she had consciously sent her child to a crowded day-care on the other side of town, as the number of children in the class was around forty, therefore her daughter would be able to make “lots of friends” instead of the handful of potential friends available to her at the day-care at the end of the street where classes of five to six children were common.

However, there were some definite divisions between the *yōchien* and *hoikuen* mothers in Tsutsuji. *Yōchien* mothers were often dismissive of the lack of instruction over at the *hoikuen*, believing the children to spend their days bullying and running wild with little intervention by teachers. One mother even told me on the first day of elementary school that the children who had previously attended *hoikuen* were clearly identifiable by

their behaviour! Conversely, many of the *hoikuen* mothers felt the *yōchien*, and the families which used it, represented an elite group which excluded those mothers who couldn't afford either the fees, or the time off from their jobs to attend the frequent kindergarten events and meetings. Ironically, until recently, Tsutsuji parents in demanding professional positions (such as teachers, doctors and local officials) have had little choice but to use lower-socio economic public day-cares like Hinode because of their long opening hours. It is the very same reason local farming families patronise this *hoikuen*, as there are none of the accommodating private institutions like Chibikko which are available to Yuri parents.

The tensions between *hoikuen* and *yōchien* mothers were highlighted for me during a children's wooden toy display put on in the town gymnasium by the local council. An accompanying survey asked parents for their comments on the educational benefits of the display, a public arena in which one *yōchien* mother had taken the opportunity to promote the connection between brain-stimulating activities, a structured curriculum and kindergarten attendance, in contrast to the free play of the *hoikuen*. Her comments were widely discussed and very upsetting to the many *hoikuen* mothers who had also taken their children along to the event. In fact, the Ministry of Education has stated that the function of *yōchien* is not to teach academic skills, but the reality can be quite different. Parents in Tsutsuji quite clearly know this, but often have to choose preschools based on their personal circumstances.

Despite the clear ideological and class differences between Tsutsuji families who use the *yōchien* and *hoikuen*, both groups appeared united in their faith in *shūdan seikatsu* as a valuable tool in preparing their children for Japanese life. Many chose to place their children in *hoikuen* that seemed, to my eyes, to be overcrowded with student-teacher ratios of 30:1 instead of selecting centres where one teacher cared for a handful of children. On a personal level, when I first arrived in Hokkaido I was uncomfortable placing my young sons in the busy *hoikuen*, but like many other working parents, I had no other options available to me until my children were old enough to enter the kindergarten at age three. I now realise that my New Zealand upbringing meant that I valued creativity, individualism and teacher involvement for my sons. I had never heard of *shūdan seikatsu*, and I certainly did not see any benefits in a class of forty children and one teacher. I believed the Western



“universal truth” that the smaller the class size and the smaller the student/teacher ration, the better (Tobin 1987:533). In contrast, most Japanese parents I met were puzzled by my questions on this topic. With such an emphasis on the individual, didn’t New Zealand parents worry their children would end up selfish and demanding, they asked. As time passed, I began to see what “life in a group” was all about, and the implications for both my own children and their peers.



Figure 5: Children lay out their *bentō* and utensils at lunchtime.

### ***“Nakami ni irete”*: the *shūdan* environment in practice**

*“Because the cultures within and outside the home are so different, and because it is culturally inappropriate for mothers to train children in behavior and attitudes appropriate for the outside world, the Japanese have come to believe it is the responsibility of the school to socialize children to the cooperative and self-effacing norms of what the Japanese call “shūdan seikatsu” or “life in a group” (Peach 1994:3).*

For many researchers, their first visits to Japanese preschools were notable for the unexpectedly high levels of noise and supposedly chaotic scenes (Peak 1991, Lewis 1995). These images were in direct contrast to the stereotypical views being proffered in the West at the time, that of Japanese children quietly and obediently being drilled in their lessons by an authoritarian instructor. Other reports portrayed individual Japanese youngsters as lost in a homogeneous sea of matching uniforms, hats and backpacks (Smith 1995).

In fact, for the Japanese preschool with an explicitly stated aim of socialising children to life in the *shūdan* environment, the building of strong, cooperative groups is paramount. In many Western cultures, however, the emphasis seems to be on children gaining independence: “American culture views independence and autonomy as a norm, as a positive goal towards which individuals should strive. It assumes that individual competition and independence are part of ‘human nature’. This belief is so firmly fixed in our macrosystem that many of us would find it hard to consider an alternative” (Garbarino & Abramowitz 1992:56). In contrast, Japanese society views appropriate dependence as an essential skill for youngsters to develop (Doi 1973). This is not necessarily a uniquely Japanese phenomena as studies have identified family policies which promote group interdependence in Swedish (Myrdal 1968) and Danish cultures (Wagner 1978). However, the case of Japan is notable for the way child-rearing practices, parental involvement and the education system see appropriate dependency as supporting the process of *wakaraseru* (‘getting the child to understand’) as opposed to more authoritarian methods in order to achieve a *sunao* (compliant, cooperative) child. “A child who is *sunao* hasn’t yielded his personal autonomy for the sake of cooperation: cooperation doesn’t imply giving up the self, as it may in the West, but in fact implies that working with others is the appropriate

setting for expressing and enhancing the self' (LeVine & White 2003:180). In this way, while preschool children learn to suppress their own desires within the school environment, they are also learning interdependency skills which will be valuable for their own personal development and success.

So, on a practical level how are these goals implemented and achieved by the preschools? An analysis of the daily routines of the *yōchien* and *hoikuen* visited is a useful way to identify strategies employed by teachers and administrators. Even before children begin attending Oka, they are given a glimpse of the potential fun they could have at kindergarten through a series of one-day visits (*ichi nichi nyūen*). Children arrive at 9.30 am with their mothers, where their temporary teacher presents them with a colourful name badge in the shape of a flower or animal. This will link them to other visiting children in the same group. Already the youngsters can identify others who will be in their class once the free play time is over. At assembly the newcomers are encouraged to line up with their group, and are welcomed by the 'regular' children with a ritualised greeting, promising to play together, be happy and make good friends.

After completing a morning exercise routine, conducted to an energetic tune appropriate to the time of year (e.g., *donguri* acorn music in autumn, *sakura* cherry blossom songs in spring), the children file out to their classrooms, where the teacher plays the piano to signify everyone should sit down. Whole-hearted (*genki, hakihaki*) participation in activities is seen as a particularly valued quality, and the calling of the roll (*shusseki*) means a crisp, clear answer is required from children. As LeVine & White (2003:180) note, "the style in which one does one's work indicates affective commitment and is considered almost as important as the product of the performance". For the newcomers, this is a nerve-racking experience but the rest of the class waits patiently for their response, even if it means that the teacher has to finally go up to the reticent child, cup a hand behind their ear, and exclaim "*Hai, genki desu*" for them, while signaling for the class to clap at this "answer". Once the child enters preschool for real though, they are gradually expected to master important greetings such as this, even if it means making a class of forty children wait for up to ten minutes for the desired result. My middle son was not very proficient in Japanese when he entered kindergarten, and despite constant prompting from teacher and classmates, refused to answer his name for two terms. On the day that he finally

acquiesced, his teacher told me that she broke down in tears! In fact, mastering the ritualised greetings (*aisatsu*) that mark social interactions in Japan is the most commonly cited object of training (*shitsuke*) at the preschool level (Hendry 1986a:73).

At Oka, the calling of the roll is preceded by the 'good morning' song and greeting which is lead by two duty monitors (*tōban*) summoned to the front of the class. Each child takes on this role at least once a term as per a rotating flip chart on the wall, yet many children can barely disguise their excitement and pride as they make their way to the front. To signify their special status for the day, handmade stuffed felt animals are pinned to their clothing, and the class uses honorific language to address the *tōban* as they bow and ask for their classmates' protection and help. As Lewis (1995:106) notes, "the *tōban* system seemed to capitalize on children's natural interests for attention, prestige, and a chance to lead others and seemed to give children a chance to experience the pleasure – and headaches – of responsibility". The jobs expected of *tōban* vary, but might include leading the class in greetings or songs as described above, distributing work materials, deciding when the class was quiet enough to begin an activity, and ensuring all students were correctly dressed at home time. Although conducted with varying degrees of ceremony, the *tōban* system was a feature of all the preschools I visited, and as such, serves an important function: to allow even the shyest child the chance to be a leader, and to create empathy for authority while simultaneously developing a 'good-child' (*ii ko*) identity.

For the children at Hinode and Mori this mid-morning point of the day signifies a return to the free play of earlier. For the students of Oka, Chibikko and Tenshi, however, this is the time to begin a teacher-directed activity with other members of their class group. Over at Tenshi, it is time to practice for the upcoming kindergarten concert (*happyōkai*). Unlike, the mumbled, uncertain efforts I have seen of children in New Zealand kindergartens, Japanese preschool concerts are full-scale productions, timed and perfected to the minute. In fact, the first time I saw one of these, I couldn't fathom how teachers had managed to get a bunch of three year olds to sing, conduct a dance routine, and act out a play! While Hinode children are dressed in hand-sewn costumes while performing in the local agricultural centre, Chibikko rents out the cavernous city hall for their concert, where children's dance routines have been honed by a professional choreographer. Despite these

differences among preschools, across the board the results are still spectacular by Western standards.

In a normally vacant classroom at Tenshi, the *nen-chū san* (4-5 years old) have been assembled by a teacher and her assistant. The teacher begins by noting, “even though I didn’t ask you, some children are already sitting up so nicely”. The other children quickly snap to an upright position, before she tells them that the class is about to ‘begin work’ (*shigoto o hajimarimasu*) and bows to the children. They respond by bowing, chanting in unison *onegai shimasu*, a ritualistic means of requesting a favour from someone. The children begin acting out a play, but as the time goes on, those members of the class not ‘on stage’ begin to get bored and chatter. The teacher stops the actors and addresses the class, saying “You need to listen to your friends to know when your turn is, because when it’s for real, the teacher won’t be telling you what to do. You need to rely on each other”.

In the classroom of the *nen-chō san* (5-6 years old), the children are trying to master their instruments, identical sets of *kenban hāmonika*, a kind of keyboard with a flexible tube into which the children must blow whilst pressing the keys. The teacher demonstrates the musical notes, the children copy and practice the tune until the teacher rings a bell for everyone to stop. To my mind it is quite a complex task, but the children doggedly repeat the notes until signaled to halt. Someone is still playing. The teacher comments “We all need to do it together or we can’t make beautiful music – we need to make sure our friends have mastered the piece. Some of us are still learning the notes, so please let’s try hard not to blow our instruments even if we have mastered it ourselves”. She signals for them to commence practice again, and moves about the class, listening to each child individually, offering instructions and correcting their fingers over the keys. At the end, the teacher asks for a show of hands from those who have perfected the piece. About half the class raises their hands. The teacher says “Some hands are still down, so those of you who put hands up, would you mind taking some time (during free play) to show the others how to play the music (*oshiete itadakimasen ka*)? Thank you”. The language she has chosen for this request is formal and humble, not usually the kind directed at children from her superior position. Over the lunch break, I notice several of the more able children instructing their grateful classmates in the art of the *kenban hāmonika*.

At all the preschools I visited, the children begin preparing for lunch about 11.30 am. At Hinode, the teacher asks the children to first lay out their futons for the nap which will follow lunch. The children work together to carry tables out to the hall, then unpack their individual chopstick sets (*hashi*) and lay out the container of rice they have brought from home before heading across to wet their own wash cloths (*oshibori*) under the taps. The three year olds line up to go to the toilet, while the older children play a musical chairs game (*isu tori*) using hoops on the ground to determine in what order they will sit down at the table. A little girl complains to the teacher that a boy has been roughly shoving another child. The teacher does not look over towards the perpetrator, instead replying, “mmm, can you tell him not to push like that (*oshiete agenasai ka*)?” using language commonly directed at children or someone of lower status. Meanwhile, the *tōban* are busy retrieving the food trolley from the kitchen and placing bowls of food on the table. At locally-funded Hinode, the food is prepared by a full-time cook, but families are expected to contribute by supplying cooked rice each day for their child. By lunchtime the rice is cold, but the children don’t appear to mind as they tuck into hot miso soup with tofu and mushrooms, boiled carrots and corn, lettuce and tomato salad and a slice of pork dipped in miso paste. They are also given barley tea to drink, the liquid served hot in winter and chilled in summer.

Once all the food is out on their table, the children seated there begin to eat after first mumbling “*itadakimasu*” but without waiting for a ~~for~~ a class lunchtime *aisatsu*. This is unique to Hinode, as every other preschool I visited required the group to pause and give thanks for the food. Children are strongly encouraged not to leave any food behind, and to eat quietly and neatly. In fact, manners surrounding mealtimes was cited by the teachers interviewed as of paramount importance in socialising children, one of the few issues they felt might warrant disciplinary action. The children are not allowed to drink or receive a piece of fruit until their plates are clean. While the rest of the class finish eating, and tip their discarded grape skins into a scrap bucket, Hiroko still hasn’t started her meal despite the teacher sitting beside her, gently chiding at first, then later insisting she try the food.

In Japanese preschools, teachers are expected to remain seated with students at lunch times, consuming the same hot meal supplied at the *hoikuen*, or eating from their home-made lunchboxes (*bentō*) just like their students in the *yōchien*. This not only allows

staff to remind boisterous children to eat quietly, it means that they can monitor and influence what the children are consuming, and at the same time act as a model for good table manners. In the preschool environment, it is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure children have a healthy diet, a responsibility they take very seriously. At Hinode, this role is actualized in the form of the *renraku cho*, a notebook taken from home to school each day and into which teachers write detailed notes about each child's daily diet, bowel motions, demeanour and ability to play with classmates. The teacher at Hinode tells me that Hiroko's mother is very worried about her refusal to eat, and has put pressure on the staff to rectify the problem. The teacher sighs, and says, "Hiroko always starts eating when the others have finished and won't be swayed by what the rest of her class is doing. She is very stubborn (*ganko*), quite a difficult child (*muzukashii ko*)".

By 12.45 pm, the teachers have wiped down the tables, the curtains have been pulled, the lights dimmed in the classroom, and the other children are lying on their futons. Only Hiroko is still sitting alone in the hall, forlornly picking at her food. From the staffroom, the teacher glances over at Hiroko, stating "We try to get them into a routine, and those kids who are in routine eat and sleep without any problem. However, when we have a child like Hiroko who is still eating when everyone else has finished, it means it takes me longer to get the others asleep, then they wake up late and it just puts everyone out". Despite this, the teacher doesn't appear angry with Hiroko, even though she has taken up almost all of the valuable quiet naptime during which teachers usually update the *renraku cho* or discuss preparations for upcoming events. I ask if teachers have ever considered just packing up the food at the end of lunch, and letting Hiroko go hungry, but they reply: "No, it is important for her to be grateful for the food she is given and to learn to eat correctly along with her classmates". Teachers interviewed by Hendry (1986a:76) expressed the same aims for their pupils, with one principal commenting that she could tell how disciplined the children were by watching them eat.

In the small farming hamlet of Mori, *hoikuen* staff are also preparing for naptime. As one child is away today, there are only four students, who are sent to clean their teeth and put on their pyjamas. The youngest child is only one year old, so the principal comes to his assistance when he is still struggling with his buttons after several minutes of trying. The children each have home-sewn bedding bags, which contain a pillowcase and towels to

use as sheets and blankets. The four futons have been pushed together and the children spread their towels out over their sleeping space. The teacher pulls the black-out curtains, turns off the light and lies down between them, patting their backs and softly humming a lullaby. Within thirty minutes the children are all asleep, and even the teacher says she has nodded off for a while. She tells me that co-sleeping helps to make the children feel relaxed and safe, speeding their journey towards slumber.

Over at Chibikko, the scene is much the same except the scale is much larger. The entire floor of the spacious upper hall is covered in futons, upon which around sixty children are lying. The soothing sounds of a Mozart CD fill the air, and some of the younger children are already asleep despite the hot, humid conditions in the room. Several teachers move quietly amongst the children, stopping to stroke the hair of those who remain restless. As at Mori, half an hour later only the sound of rhythmical breathing can be heard. One teacher remains in the room with the children, writing notes into the pile of *renraku cho* on the desk, and reminding those who wake up before 2.30 pm to either go outside and play or choose a book to read silently. While it may seem that co-sleeping replicates the *amae* setting of the home, Ben-Ari argues instead that this shared physical experience helps children to internalize the distinctions between the family and the outside world. "Napttime is one form through which day-care centres effect the transfer of strong relations from the family dyad to the peer group. There is a transfer here – or an addition – of the warmth, the comfortableness, and the commitment and involvement of children in the dyad at home to the wider group" (Ben-Ari 1997a:52). Ben Ari suggests that practices such as napttime function to instill particular traits and qualities connected with 'being Japanese'.

At Oka, the children do not take a nap, as the official finishing time for them is 2 pm. After devouring the rice balls (*onigiri*) and tidbits of meat, vegetables and fruit placed in lunchboxes by their mothers, the children are free to play until 1.20 pm, when it is time to tidy up. A group of little girls is squatting around a pile of daisies they have picked, trying to twist the flowers into decorative hair accessories or necklaces. Nanami stands and watches the group for a while, making no attempt to join the play, and the others, likewise, don't encourage her to enter their circle. After about ten minutes, she steps up and asks "irete?" (can I join your group of friends?) in a sing-song voice. The girls reply together in an equally melodic tone "i-i- yo" (yes, go ahead). Nanami promptly squats down and begins



making a daisy chain. This scene marks an important social interaction which takes place all over playgrounds in Japan: a formal request for entry into the group. Columnist and long-time resident of Japan, Kate Elwood (2003), has described how she remained oblivious to the importance of following protocol as a means of harmonious group relations (*ningen kankei*) until she witnessed her preschool daughter uttering the 'magic formula' on the jungle gym one day. Following this procedure guarantees a smooth path into play in progress, as I have never seen children refuse a request. While the language of this exchange may become more sophisticated as young Japanese enter adulthood, the sentiment remains the same.

The children at Tenshi have also been allowed outside to play, and about half of them are engrossed in digging at the sandpit, while others are engaged in a vigorous game of soccer with the principal. At 1.00 pm the teachers call the children inside, where they go to the toilet, wash their hands and line up in the gym for their daily calisthenics (*taisō*). The duty teacher stands at the front to model the exercises, reminding children that today's routine is new, so they must pay attention to avoid crashing into their neighbours. At 1.40 pm, the children are back in their classrooms, where they begin collecting their belongings to go home. The teacher asks, "is anyone's singlet poking out?", and the children check not only their own clothing but the state of their classmates, helping to tuck in and smooth where required. The children put their hats on and stand ready for the goodbye song, each carrying a lunchbox bag, the home contact notebook bag, and a bag containing their art smock over their shoulders.

At 2.00 pm the kindergarten bus arrives to collect about half the students, while a cluster of mothers wait quietly in the *genkan* for their children to be released. Other children are lead off by teachers on various walking courses which drop them near their homes. A smaller group is lead to a vacant room by the *azukari sensei* (after school care teacher), where they will remain, watching videos and playing, until their parents finish work. Even in this supposedly informal space, teachers will remain watchful of the children's behaviour, noting how they are interacting with their peers. Ben-Ari (2002:116) in his analysis of preschools texts, notes that most teachers are required to fill in a chart for each child (*jidōhyō*), recording information such as physical, linguistic and motor development, but also "in the section on social relations (*shakaisei*), [teachers] record how

the kids play together in their group, whether they cooperate, whether they keep to the rules and if they can behave like everyone else". In this way, teachers can regularly monitor how well their pupils are managing to adapt themselves to the preschool environment.

By 3 pm at Chibikko, a few children are still sleeping as their classmates step over them, packing up the futons and folding their towels. The teacher sits at the piano and begins playing a calming melody which acts as a musical cue for the children to sit down against the wall. Two or three children are still getting dressed when the music ends but their teachers and classmates wait silently until they join the group at the wall. "*ii desu ka?*" (Can I proceed?) chants the teacher. "*ii desu yo*" (Yes, go ahead) chant the children in reply. As the group clap slowly to music (*ichi, ni, san.*, 1,2,3..), the children form straight lines. After a finger play, it is time for a snack (*oyatsu*) which today happens to be a lollipop. The *tōban* for each class distribute the candy, which the children make no attempt to unwrap. One of the girls in the three year old class has been to Tokyo Disneyland over the weekend, and has brought back *omiyage* (souvenir) cookies for her immediate classmates. The *tōban* pass them out, while children in the other classes look over, admiring the pretty packaging, but they do not ask the three year olds to share their unexpected bounty. The giving of *omiyage* will come to have multiple meanings in the adult world, but already these three year olds are learning that a family trip marks them as representing their kindergarten *uchi* group in an external environment, and the gifts they bring back, however trivial, symbolise a positive effort on the behalf of the whole group (Graburn 1983:58).

The teacher taps three times on a piano key, and the children chant "*ah, yokatta...*", and as she taps again, they chime together, "*oshii oshii itadakimasho..*" (let's give thanks for this delicious snack) before launching into the *oyatsu* song. When they finish singing, they bow together, stating "*arigatō gozaimasu*", then unwrap the lollipops and stick the sugary treat in their mouths. Musical cues are used extensively in Japanese preschools, to signify both the beginning and end of activities, and to change the pace or mood of the classroom. All preschool teachers are required to be able to play the piano, and each classroom contains a piano, or at the very least, a portable keyboard for this purpose (Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1989:56).

For some of the children at Chibikko, the subsequent 'goodbye' song signifies time to go home, either in the day-care mini-van or the family car. For other children, this is when they begin extra-curricular lessons, for which their parents pay additional fees, often to specialist teachers contracted for this purpose. At Chibikko, the children already have a very busy schedule with instruction in dance, swimming, athletics, English, piano, skiing, and painting. After school classes capitalise on those skills, either offering more intensive opportunities to practice, such as one-to-one English lessons, or to develop extra skills like computing. Parents who pay up to ¥ 3,500 for a weekly thirty minute English class for their two year old child told me that they felt the cost to be a valuable investment in their child's future. In fact, many of the classes have been instigated at the request of upwardly mobile parents seeking a competitive edge for their offspring. Over at Oka, pressure by parents has resulted in after-school English lessons being offered for the very first time (October 2006). The classes are taught by a Canadian instructor, which carries much more prestige than an English-speaking Japanese teacher. The overwhelming demand had not been anticipated by the kindergarten administration, who have long preferred the lessons of *shūdan seikatsu* to academic instruction.

It is getting dark by the time the last parents pick up their children from Chibikko, although at the other preschools the pupils are generally collected by 5.30 pm. The teachers mop the floors, clean the toilets, and sweep out the *genkan* before finishing off any resource preparations. Tomorrow is another busy day.

Although the Hokkaido preschools I visited are academically and ideologically divergent, all of them employ pedagogical strategies that are compatible with the goals of *shūdan seikatsu*. Tobin (1987:547) identifies them as "(1) delegating authority to children, (2) intervening less quickly in children's fights and arguments, (3) having lower expectations for children's noise level and comportment, (4) using more musical cues and less verbal ones, (5) organizing more highly structured, large-group daily activities such as *taisō* (morning group exercise), (6) using a method of choral recitation for answering teacher's questions rather than calling on individuals, and (7) making more use of peer-group approval and opprobrium and less of the teacher's positive and negative reactions to influence children's behavior".

This part of the chapter has described how these strategies are utilized daily at a practical level in the preschools. There are also less regular activities and rituals which have the underlying purpose of socialisation towards 'becoming Japanese' (Hendry 1986a). The following section examines the ways special events seen as intrinsically Japanese are conducted in preschools throughout the nation. Such celebrations not only reproduce a state constructed national identity, but represent opportunities to reinforce key goals of *shūdan seikatsu*, such as cooperation and interdependence.



Figure 6: While the children are asleep, a teacher takes the opportunity to complete the daily task of updating the parent-teacher contact notebooks (*renraku cho*).

## *Celebrations and special events*

*“Ceremonies and festivals ... are now nationally standardised, with only minor regional variation. The same occasions are remembered at home, at kindergarten, and reports about them appear on television. As well as learning daily habits, and the art of group interaction, then, the children are also being nationalized; they are beginning to be Japanese citizens” (Hendry 1986a:143).*

At the beginning of each school year, preschool teachers all over Japan plan a detailed curriculum for the following twelve months.<sup>1</sup> In Hokkaido, as in Tokyo, Kyoto or Fukuoka, rituals which emphasise group cooperation, and festivals which celebrate traditional customs are entered on the preschool calendar. Every month there is a well-known event for children and parents to look forward to. During my time as an English teacher in Hokkaido kindergartens, I had to explain at length to puzzled administrators why New Zealand didn't have nationally-celebrated monthly festivals that would fit neatly within the Japanese curriculum model. In much the same way, Holloway was faced with disappointed mothers at a discussion with members of the preschool's Mothers Club. “The mothers asked me which holidays are celebrated in American preschools. I replied that most holidays are not celebrated because the schools try to avoid favoring any particular religious or ethnic affiliations. A palpable sense of disappointment hung over the room. After a moment of silence, a mother asked: “What do the children have to look forward to?” ...the mothers left the meeting with a feeling of pity for American preschoolers growing up in a “ritual poor” culture” (Holloway 2000:43).

Ironically, many of the old traditions and rituals celebrated so enthusiastically at kindergarten have been cast aside or forgotten by the adult population but they endure as important socialisation and pedagogical devices in the preschool sphere. One such example is *setsubin*,<sup>2</sup> which takes place on 3 February each year. In some private homes, children and their parents still throw beans (or more recently, unshelled peanuts sold at the supermarket) out the door, chanting *oni wa soto, fuku wa uchi* which is believed to cleanse

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<sup>1</sup> The school year generally begins on 1<sup>st</sup> April with an entrance ceremony, and finishes mid-March with a graduation ceremony for children who are moving on to primary school.

<sup>2</sup> *Setsubin* (or *mamemaki* as it is sometimes called) marks the beginning of spring.

the home of evil spirits, and invite benevolent ones inside. At the preschool, teachers take this opportunity to use the ancient Shinto *setsubun* ritual as a lesson on morality through a staged event which initially terrifies children, but ultimately leads to greater instances of socially acceptable behaviour.

Children spend the week leading up to *setsubun* making bright red and blue *oni* (devil) masks, complete with wiry red hair. On the day, children don their masks and the whole school proceeds to the assembly hall where teachers ask children for a show of hands as to what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. The teachers make a point of noting: "We are all good children (*ii ko*) here, aren't we? But during the twelve months since the last *setsubun*, worms (*mushi*) have been multiplying inside of us, making us forget our *aisatsu*, be selfish with our toys, neglect our friends and disobey our parents, right?" The children all enthusiastically agree, especially since the blame has been so obviously externalised away from them. With teachers leading them in the *oni wa soto..* chant, children are urged to cast out the mischievous *mushi*, and to return to the 'pure white soul' (*hakushi*) they were born with (Ibuka 1976).

The curtains are drawn, and the children are left clutching their bags of peanuts in the dim light, when suddenly a group of masked *oni* burst into the room. These are often young men, friends or relatives of the teaching staff who have been coerced into helping out for the day. The *oni* represent malevolent spirits, and they run about the room, bellowing and snarling, and waving their spiky wooden batons. It is truly a terrifying sight, and several of the younger children burst into tears, clutching at their teacher for support. The teachers encourage the children to renew their chanting so their voices can be heard over those of the *oni*, and on a rehearsed cue, the peanuts are flung en masse at the hideous creatures. The bravest of the children band together, eventually chasing the defeated *oni* out the door. Once the chaos has died down, the teachers clap their hands rhythmically for classes to regroup, before asking the children if their *mushi* have gone and remind them not to let them back into their hearts. As Hendry writes (1986a:112), this use of fear and supernatural forces means that the mere mention of the *oni* would often be followed by instant compliance by misbehaving children!

Other special events represent an opportunity for teachers to show the importance of a harmonious group through role playing and demonstrations. At Oka, the staff sometimes

acted out a play for the children, and their interpretations of classic themes were revealing in the ways they reinforced the benefits of cooperative group behaviour versus individualistic actions. For example, when acting out the play 'Little Red Riding Hood' the wolf is not killed by the woodcutter, but begs to be forgiven for his bad behaviour and to be accepted back into the group. Teachers ask the children to respond to the wolf's plea, and prompt the children to agree, chanting in unison, to allow the wolf back into the fold. Of course, the similarity between the errant wolf and a child who has committed an offence in the playground is not lost on the preschoolers.

This "rewriting" of Western classics in order to emphasise the importance of the group, and the benefits of cooperation within group members, was also observed by Carolyn Meyer during her visit to a Japanese kindergarten. Meyer knew the story of 'The Three Little Pigs' as one that ends with the wolf plunging to his death down the chimney of the lone surviving little pig's brick house. The Japanese version is quite different. "The first and second little pigs lose their houses but escape with their lives. They flee to the home of the third little pig, and the three of them work together to capture the wolf. The emphasis is on cooperation. Japanese children ... point out that if the pigs had worked together in the first place to build one house, the problem could have been avoided" (Meyer 1988:95).

At Hinode and Tenshi the play most often chosen for children to perform is the story of the giant turnip (*ookii na kabu*) which could not be prised from the ground by one person alone. One by one the villagers (mother, father, brother, etc..) join the line pulling at the vegetable, until finally they manage it after a tiny mouse joins the efforts of the group. The teachers point out to the children that although the mouse believes his input will be negligible, he finally makes the difference. While this is a Russian fairytale, it has been appropriated by Japanese teachers to show the equal value and importance of all members of the group. The ancient folktales of Japan also contain themes of cooperation and harmony. Probably the most popular children's story is that of *Momotaro* (the peach boy). *Momotaro* emerges from a peach as a baby, and when he grows up he sets off to battle demons who are threatening the local community. While he is both brave and successful, the uniquely Japanese aspect of this story is how *Momotaro* enlists a group of helpers, who quarrel at first, but encouraged by their leader, ultimately cooperate together to overcome evil (Hendry 1986a:132).

Folktales and legends are also the basis for many of the special events which are regularly carried out at the preschool. Despite ideological and socio-economic differences, the annual schedule of events for Hinode, Tenshi, Chibikko, Oka and Mori is remarkably homogeneous, and includes traditional festivals such as *hinamatsuri* (girls' day), *tanabata* (milky way festival), *mochitsuki* (pounding rice cakes for New Year) and Western celebrations such as Christmas (*kurisumasu kai*) and a group birthday party for all children born that month (*otanjōkai*). Some teachers even considered the infrequent earthquake drills and fire practices (*hinan kunren*) to be special days that children looked forward to! However, in terms of scale, the two most important events on the preschool calendar are the sports day (*undōkai*) and the end-of-year concert (*happyōkai*).



Figure 7: Two boys prepare for the *yosakoi* dance performance at the *undōkai*.

Just as the students at Tenshi had been preparing for the *happyōkai* in September, weeks before the December event, children in all five preschools begin intensive practice for the *undōkai* well in advance. Children spend hours out in the hot sun jogging around the track, honing marching routines, and mastering ball skills. On wet days, placards and posters are prepared. There are even cheering practices scheduled for the whole school to ensure the clapping and calls of *gambatte* (go for it!) are sufficiently jovial! While sports days in the West recognise individual ability and promote competition between athletes, the Japanese version involves cooperation between team members to win an event. Children do



not race as individuals, but as representatives of a larger group, such as their class or year (Hendry 1986a:142). In the case of a sizable preschool like Oka, the children wear their coloured class caps which make their group instantly identifiable to the crowds of parents trying to catch a glimpse of the action. In smaller preschools like Hinode and Mori, children of all ages are split into two teams: the red caps and the white caps. There are also separate age-appropriate events, such as the dress-up race for the three year olds, where the participating children are enthusiastically cheered on by their 'red' and 'white' team-mates on the sideline.

Every child wins a prize for making it to the finish line, in fact, in pre-race speeches, teachers emphasise that "even if you fall in the dirt, and scrape your knees, get back up again... your classmates are all supporting you to complete the course". Perseverance (*gambaru*) is a highly regarded quality in Japan and is deemed more valuable than natural ability (Singleton 1991). One of my most poignant (and yet, somewhat disturbing) memories of a Japanese sports day took place at Mori where a physically disabled boy resorted to crawling along the ground to finish the race. Although his classmates had finished much earlier, the entire school and spectators remained completely focused on encouraging this child to the end, calling out "you can do it!", "not much further" and clapping wildly. Although the boy was dusty and bruised by the time he dragged himself across the line, the palpable look of pride across his face was unforgettable. For others, the pressure by teachers and peers to *gambaru* at something they are deficient at can lead to stress and anxiety, such as the four-year old boy described by Allison (1996) who was so traumatised by the obligation to perform at the kindergarten *undōkai*, his mother considered taking him out of the school.

Parents are not exempt from participating, and don red or white sashes as they run the relay, tackle the obstacle course and undertake the tug-of-war, all cheered on by their children. Other races involve parents cooperating with their sons and daughters to move enormous wooden blocks over paper-maché walls, or completing the wheelbarrow race. Other spectators, such as grandparents and siblings, are also invited to take part in events specially designed for them, and all participants come away with some kind of prize or candy. While it may seem that the *undōkai* is predominantly held for the children's enjoyment, teachers at the preschools stress that this event is vital in building strong family

and community ties. One teacher commented that: “When the parents come to watch the *undōkai*, it is like the children are giving their parents a present, by showing them how strong and well they are growing up. It is truly a wonderful thing, and you can see the look of happiness on everyone’s faces”. At a different preschool, a teacher said “The sports day is the kind of experience that, even when you become an adult, you look back and think how much fun we had, and how lucky we all are”. Even once the balls and streamers have long been packed away, participants cherish the collective memory of the *undōkai* which is seen as an essential, yet auspicious, childhood experience for the Japanese preschooler. In Japan, the *undōkai* is not merely a chance for those with athletic talents to shine, but an event laden with cultural purpose and meaning.

Celebrations and special events help to bind the ties between class members ever more tightly, promoting awareness of how each member’s strengths and weaknesses can function towards a harmonious ‘whole’. These collective experiences extend beyond the class group to include teachers, parents and communities, and embody desirable social behaviour centred on group cooperation and participation. Through the recognition and performance of regular ritualised events the ideology of *shūdan seikatsu* is reinforced with considerable homogeneity throughout the five preschools, and quite probably throughout Japan.

While such times are eagerly anticipated by Japanese preschoolers, the school day is not always so fun-filled. When any group of children spends long periods together, conflict inevitably arises. How do Japanese educators deal with disciplinary issues, especially in large classes which, to the outsider, would seem difficult to manage. The next chapter discusses methods of social control employed by educators and children in the *shūdan seikatsu* environment.

## Chapter 5 Models and Mirrors of Socialisation

### *Methods of social control*

*“Japanese allow preschoolers to form groups and create their own sources of group cohesion with a minimum of adult interference. It seems to matter little of Japanese preschool teachers whether the resulting groups resemble a flock of screaming banshees or if individual members misbehave” (Smith 1995:43).*

Many anthropologists (Hendry 1986a, Lewis 1995, Peak 1991, Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1989) look at a schedule dominated by free play, little apparent disciplinary action by teachers, and consequently deafening noise levels as a defining feature of Japanese preschools. I have to agree that when I first entered Oka during the morning free play period, I was struck by the *mêlée* of squealing children and the thundering of footsteps, balls and hula hoops. Despite simultaneously trying to deal with children, visitors and phone calls, the secretary and teachers didn't seem in the slightest bit concerned about the cacophony going on around them.

In fact, cultural assumptions and differences define what constitutes problematic behaviour and appropriate methods of discipline (Smith 1995, Lanham & Garrick 1996, Sato 1998). While American teachers (and I suspect New Zealand teachers too) find hyperactivity and hitting to be particularly troubling, Japanese teachers see excessive reliance on the teacher and non-participation in group activities as undesirable behaviour (Peak 1989). Children who run about the Japanese preschool, shrieking and yelling, are not regarded as *mondai ji* (problem children) but seen as expressing energy and enthusiasm conducive with being a child. In fact, this behaviour is even believed to contribute to strength of character in later years. Teachers cheerfully tolerate high levels of noise and activity, and avoid direct use of their authority to discipline individual children, instead ignoring inappropriate behaviour or encouraging the class to govern their own actions.

Hitting is also treated as relatively inconsequential by Japanese teachers, who will generally ignore fights, intervening only if the incident has gone on for a protracted length of time. Even then, teachers are not motivated to identify and punish the aggressor, but seek

to re-establish harmony and elicit an apology from both parties. "Japanese teachers do not consider hitting a 'crime' or a demonstration of anti-social tendencies. Rather, it indicates social immaturity and frustration at an inability to verbalize one's feelings" (Peak 1989:108). When educationalist Nancy Sato enquired why naughty children were not punished during her fieldwork observations at a Tokyo elementary school, the teacher answered that "punishing a child pushes him further away. If you want to get him to work with you, you must open your heart (*kokoro*) and bring him in ... students with behaviour or academic problems are the very ones who need more opportunities to socialize, to increase self-discipline, and to assume responsibilities in order to improve" (Sato 1998:128).

While American and Chinese teachers taking part in a cross-cultural study were shocked by the levels of violence and unruly behaviour recorded between children in a Japanese preschool, the Japanese principal felt that fighting, especially among boys, served an important developmental purpose. "If there were no fights among four-year-old children, that would be a real problem. We don't encourage children to fight, but children need to fight when they are young if they are to develop into complete human beings... When children are preschool age they naturally fight if given the chance, and it is by fighting and experiencing what it feels like to hit someone and hurt them and to be hit and be hurt that they learn to control this urge to fight, that they learn the dangers of fighting and get it out of their system" (Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1989:33). Children who provoke fights are seen by Japanese teachers as giving other children a valuable opportunity to practice resolving conflicts themselves, and to assist in mediating disagreements between their classmates. Teachers may even employ more direct strategies in order to provoke conflict, such as putting out fewer toys or crayons than there are children, forcing them to learn to cooperate and share the limited resources (Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1989).

At all the preschools I visited, only one teacher specifically mentioned hitting as undesirable behaviour, but added that "if children apologize afterwards it's ok though, as they need to get rid of that energy". The eighty year old principal at Mori also seemed to support the opinion of the principal in Tobin's study, lamenting the fact that modern children with few siblings have little chance to let off steam. "In the past, kids did a lot of fighting ... there were lots of them, and they were very active (*genki*). Today's kids might

be better behaved but they are weaker. In the old days, kids were noisy but healthy, they ate well and always remembered their greetings (*aisatsu*). These days, kids don't have the physical strength, they play computer games and don't run around wild and free like they used to. I remember that the kids would climb straight up to the top of the temple roof (laughs)... it was naughty, but they were strong. Even if they fell off, they never cried".

While hitting and hyperactivity are tolerated in the Japanese classroom, staff do not support a child's over-reliance on the teacher or refusal to participate in group activities. In their observations of preschool children in Japan and the United States, Lanham and Garrick (1996:104), found the way the teacher related to the class the most striking difference between the two settings. While American children sought attention and praise from the teacher, the Japanese teacher limited her participation in children's interactions, leaving it up to class members to assist those who required help.

For children who have spent their early years being completely indulged at home by their mothers, the transition to preschool life can come as a rude shock. Rather than having mother's constant help in dressing, feeding and even wiping bottoms, at kindergarten children are expected to gradually master these tasks themselves. Teachers do not chastise an uncooperative child, but maintain their distance by busying themselves with the rest of the class, all the while acknowledging the request but encouraging a reticent child to continue trying by themselves (*jibun de gambatte*). "Establishing in children a self-reliant (*jiritsu*) and "independent" (*jishu*) attitude is fundamental to creating a distinction between the *amae*-based world of the home and the group life of the preschool. Making a sincere effort to perform one's own role and master proper personal habits of daily life is one of the most important functions of *shūdan seikatsu*. Over-reliance on the teacher is in direct opposition to this" (Peak 1989:115). Tobin, Wu & Davidson (1989:38) have suggested that large classes of up to 40 children also prevent the teacher from spending inordinate amounts of time with one child, instead encouraging individuals to undertake tasks themselves or consult with their peers for help.

Along with over-reliance on the teacher, Peak (1989) regards non-participation in group behaviour as a serious offence within the Japanese preschool sphere. She notes that this issue is of concern to educators, not just because group activities form the basis of preschool life, but because children's non-participation threatens teachers who are

themselves well-socialised products of the group-oriented culture of Japan. Plus, as Lewis (1995:74-100) recognizes, the fixed small groups of the preschool class function to manage the children more effectively, while also providing emotional and academic support. In some preschools teachers will actively “match” personalities, so that the more able sit beside those who are struggling, or shy children are near sociable classmates. In other institutions, the process is more random, such as at Oka where the “seating lottery” designed by the teacher is an event children look forward to each new term. If children remain reluctant to participate, Japanese preschool teachers take a ‘wait and see’ approach, often allowing children to roam about the grounds freely until they decide to join their classmates. Rather than seeing a child as deliberately misbehaving, teachers generally believe that such children “don’t yet understand the fun of being together with others” (*minna to issho ni iru tanoshisa ga wakaranai*) (Peak 1989:116).

At the crux of the Japanese concept of discipline is belief in the “good child” identity, which assumes that all children are basically good and should be given ample opportunities, both within the family and outside it, to reinforce this positive self-image (Lewis 1995, Singleton 1991, White & LeVine 1986, Yamamura 1986). Teachers are reluctant to label children as ‘naughty’ or ‘disobedient’ but instead maintain that misbehaving children simply lack sufficient understanding of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.

Furthermore, as in the previous example of the *mushi* in the *setsubun* ritual, blame is externalised onto outside forces which the child cannot control. As a baby in Japan, my middle son had long periods of screaming which would probably be identified as colic in the West. Finally at my wits end, I took him to the local community health centre<sup>3</sup> to garner some support and suggestions. The *hokenfusan* (community health nurse) was very sympathetic, but she could think of no Japanese equivalent to colic and therefore had no practical solutions to offer me. She went on to cheerfully state that it was baby’s job to cry and my child was obviously a very hard worker! However, she did mention that if I was really struggling, perhaps I could enlist the local Shinto priest to come over and drive out

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<sup>3</sup> The *hoken fukushi kaikan* is similar to the Plunket Centre in New Zealand, where mothers can take their children for health checks, for advice on nutrition and dental care, and to discuss any childrearing problems or concerns they may have.

the *kan no mushi*<sup>4</sup> that was provoking my child to wail incessantly.

Holloway (2000:156) suggests that the Japanese concept of discipline has its roots in Shinto beliefs, where children may have inadvertently acquired some *tsumi* (impurities) which can easily be eliminated by the appropriate ritual. With the blame externalised away from the perpetrator, Western attempts to “correct” a child’s behaviour are seen as futile by Japanese parents and teachers. “Japanese rely on excuses that acknowledge young children’s bad behaviour as undesirable or wrong, but deny personal responsibility for conduct; Americans apply justifications that admit personal responsibility but deny the act’s wrongness” (Smith 1995:40). Japanese preschool teachers work on getting children to understand why certain rules are essential to life in a group, rather than trying to make them comply through force or coercion (Lewis 1995:133-4).

This belief is typified by an incident I witnessed in the four year olds class at Oka, where the teacher had discovered some boys had destroyed another child’s origami display. Aki *sensei* picks up the crumpled cranes from the floor, but waits silently until all the children are sitting down and their chatter finally subsides. As she holds up the crumpled paper, the teacher asks, “What do you think has happened to our beautiful cranes?” Various children call out “it’s been squashed”, “someone has ripped it”, “it’s all broken now”. Aki *sensei* looks sadly at the cranes, and says, “I wonder how the cranes are feeling now...” Responses such as “sad”, “upset” and “lonely” come from the class. The teacher says, “Right, they must be feeling that way. So, how we can stop this from happening again?” The children eventually come to a consensus amongst themselves that the display is there for looking at, so “we have to help our friends not to touch things”. Aki *sensei* nods encouragingly, and then proceeds to lead the children in the “good morning” song. While it clear who the perpetrators are, no-one has moved to identify or punish them. In fact, the problem has been ‘owned’ by the group, who proceed to solve it.

Aki *sensei* had also called upon the children’s feelings through personification of the paper cranes. As Lewis (1995:136) notes: “When teachers appealed on behalf of the ‘feelings’ of objects, or people, they were asking for children’s help – and in a way that

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<sup>4</sup> The expression *kan no mushi* implies that children are the victims of their *mushi* (insect, worm, vermin or flea) which provoke them to cry or have tantrums. Although the child is seen as innocent, an exorcism (*mushi kiri*) can be carried out by a Shinto priest at the temple, with the aim of placating the *mushi* and easing the child’s distress (Jolivet 1997:116).

masked the conflict between the desires of child and teacher. In contrast, a direct request would have underlined this conflict". This approach was in evidence during the school lunch at Chibikko, where the children were served potato salad made from potatoes donated by the grandfather of a class member. The principal made a point of telling this to the class, adding that the grandfather had since passed away, so "let's pray for his happiness and give thanks for his life by eating up these delicious potatoes he so kindly grew for us". It seemed to have the desired effect, as the children tucked in heartily to lunch, several of them calling out "Granddad's potatoes are so yummy". The principal remarked to me, "Some of the children don't like potatoes, but they will try and eat them today for the sake of *oji-san* (grandfather)".

While we can see that Japanese teachers use a number of strategies to manage behaviour in the preschool environment, peer control is most often used as a means of resolving conflicts and problems among children. While this is seen as a desirable outcome within the overall aim of *shūdan seikatsu*, it can also have negative consequences. Lewis (1995:140-2) has questioned whether teachers who allow children to continue physical fighting are not somehow condoning violence as a means of problem solving. Like Lewis, I found it difficult to whole-heartedly endorse this approach, and I felt uncomfortable witnessing some of the fights that went on in two of the preschools in particular. Allison (1996) found that mothers were also concerned by the laissez-faire policy of their children's preschool but felt unable to confront the school authorities over the issue of bullying for fear of alienation by staff.

As the current debate surrounding the rising levels of violence in Japanese schools rages on (Kanetsuna, Smith & Morita 2006, Nesdale & Naito 2005, Yoneyama & Naito 2003), some scholars have suggested bullying (*ijime*) in Japanese educational institutes has long been a problem, one that is sanctified by teachers, parents and classmates who pretend indifference to the victims of violence (Murakami 1991:196). At the same time, reports of incidents of abuse in preschools have also risen substantially, especially in unregulated institutions and the infamous baby hotels (Goodman 2002b).

While none of the teachers I spoke to condoned bullying, one of them made an interesting connection between the shrinking class size and children's failure to find 'personality matches' resulting in social isolation occasionally leading to violence. It is



difficult to say how widely this view is shared, but it is a curious twist on the belief that greater student numbers equates to more discipline problems. It also raises the possibility that declining class size may have an effect on the ability of teachers to maintain control through the dynamic of the group. In contrast, other teachers indicated that smaller classes are more manageable and harmonious, but acknowledged that children may feel somewhat exposed without the security of numerous peers.<sup>5</sup>

While preschool teachers may use various methods to control behaviour within the classroom, they rely on their colleagues and parents to support progression towards the goal of a fully-socialised child. This does not mean that teachers expect parents to enforce consistent behaviour in both the preschool and at home, but that mothers, in particular, must act as both agents of socialisation and allow themselves to be socialised as the education system demands. The following section examines the role of mothers as they fulfil this expectation, and identifies the ways in which their actions contribute to children's assimilation of *shūdan seikatsu* ideals.



**Figure 8:** Children's coloured caps mark them as members of different classes.

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<sup>5</sup> Tobin (1989:182) found that some educators believed that a large class represented a “kind of safety or haven in the group”, whereas in a small class “certain children may begin to feel uneasy in school and to exhibit school phobia” due to unavoidable and prolonged interactions with teaching staff.

### ***Agents of socialisation: the role of parents and teachers***

*“Regardless of society, adults communicate the attitudes and beliefs that form the ideological basis of their society to their offspring at very early ages. Preschool teachers are part of an institution that plays an important role in teaching the dominant ideology of any state” (Smith 1995:43).*

While the preschool may be the main arena where *shūdan seikatsu* is conducted, the peripheral roles of parents and teachers as agents of socialisation cannot be underestimated. However, it is not just the children who are being socialised into embodying characteristics and behaviour seen as intrinsically Japanese, parents and teachers are participants as well as agents of this process. Often young, female and childless, teachers are products of the state’s economic and political agendas, while the role of ‘parents’ usually translates to the efforts of ‘mother’ who is herself expected to embody the good wife/wise mother (*ryōsai kenbō*) construct (Uno 1993a, Fujita 1989).

While Peak (1991) argues that Japanese mothers’ role in the socialisation of children to school is minimal, scholars such as Field (1995) contest that the school institution works to instill in mothers the importance of daily routines and rituals that mobilise children towards later academic achievement. Allison (1996:138) incorporates the ideas of both of these scholars, suggesting that “the position of mothers vis-à-vis the educational imperatives aimed at their children is, in my view, therefore contradictory; mothers impose a behavioral regimen onto the child consistent with that of school but outside its parameters, yet they also cushion the child from this regimentation with nurturance and comfort”.

There is no doubt that the responsibility for children falls squarely on the mother. In post-war Japan, the move from an agrarian to an industrial society, from extended family living to nuclear family households, and the rise of the workaholic salaryman father means that the full burden of childrearing is borne by the Japanese mother (Buckley 1993, Imamura 1987). Over and above the arduous early years spent at home raising children, mothers realise that once their child enters preschool demands on her time will continue to be made by the education system. Imamura (1987:19) states that: “Children’s education is

based on the premise that mother will be free to devote a lot of time to helping the child". For the mothers of preschoolers this translates to making themselves fully available to participate in the PTA activities, to attend regular *sankanbi* (open days) to observe their children's progress, to help with cleaning classrooms and kindergarten grounds, and to participate in various daytime meetings, events and lectures on childrearing at the kindergarten (Hendry 1993:229).

Mothers are also expected to produce numerous objects for use at preschool, such as personalised hand-sewn smocks, cushion and seat covers, and bags for lunch-boxes, shoes, and notebooks of pre-defined sizes and materials (Allison 1996). I can recall being overwhelmed by the exhaustive list given to me by the preschool my son enrolled in when we first moved to Tsutsuji. Many of the objects were things I had never heard of, and couldn't even imagine what they might look like, such as the *oshibori bako*, a container in which to carry one's pre-dampened flannel. I ended up placing the flannel in a zip-lock plastic bag, which my son took to preschool each day, until his teacher called me aside to tell me how sorry she felt for him! One of the problematic issues was the *oshibori bako*, which the teacher dug from other children's bags to show me how it should look: plastic, round, compact, with a lid and covered in cute, childlike designs. Once I realised what I should be looking for, I was able to locate *oshibori bako* in a department store in the neighbouring city, which had rows of products dedicated to preschool paraphernalia: lunchboxes, chopstick cases, hat bags, clay sets, instrument cases, swimming bags, flasks and plastic sheets for picnics, umbrellas, and fabrics for sewing the bags, all embellished with superheroes or fairies.

Then there are the regular requests for obscure objects or fiddly home-made decorations which must be brought to preschool the very next day. At Tenshi, I was amazed when I was given written instructions for an extremely complicated pop-up Christmas card to construct overnight. The teacher explained that the cards would be attached to the presents given out by Santa, and that our efforts would show the children how much their parents cared for them. I was bemused to see that, despite spending three frustrating hours late at night folding, pasting and embellishing, my two sons merely glanced at the cards before ripping open their presents. In fact, all the children seemed to do the same! I suspect this exercise wasn't really about the children at all, but as Allison (1996) suggests, a means

of managing, shaping and monitoring a mother's behaviour, to ensure she is meeting the expectations placed on them by the education system. As far as I know, despite the short notice, none of the mothers neglected to make the cards, and some of them even added extra personal touches such as glitter or hand-made pom-poms to make their work stand out. Those mothers were not only praised by the teachers, but set the standard for other mothers to aspire to.

However, the ultimate test of a "good mother" would have to be the daily production of the *bentō*, or lunch-box. Much has been written about these seemingly innocuous prepared meals which children carry with them to preschool. Anthropologist and mother Gail Benjamin (1997) writes of being puzzled by the number of mothers' questions about the *bentō* for the first day of a school trip. To Benjamin's eyes it initially seemed like a trivial matter in the context of their children spending a week away from home. In fact, as Peak (1991:94) writes, the *bentō* is "a powerful symbolic representation of ... *amae*" in the conflicting environment of the group. In this way, lunch-time "can be considered symbolic of the shaping of the *amae*-based feelings of the home in the direction of greater self-discipline and social acceptability". The conflicting set of values of the *bentō*, those of the home (*uchi*) and those of the outside world (*soto*) means it is a topic of much discussion and concern amongst mothers.

At Oka, teachers often noted poorly assembled lunchboxes, and attributed them to lacklustre mothers. Not only is the mother judged on her ability to produce an aesthetically-pleasing, wholesome *bentō*, the preschool child is expected to consume it in its entirety during the ritualised school lunchtime. At Tenshi, I saw teachers resort to spoon-feeding a five year old boy the remains of his *bentō*, holding his head back, telling jokes and gently prodding at his closed mouth until he finally opened it enough to receive the heaped spoonfuls. For just as it is the mother's responsibility to make a delicious *bentō*, and the child's job to consume it wholly and cheerfully, it is up to the teacher to ensure that this operation is correctly carried out within the preschool arena.

Child-rearing magazines regularly carry articles on the topic of preschool *bentō*, complete with glossy photographs of beautiful, nutritious lunchboxes, full of *onigiri* (rice balls) adorned with seaweed or sesame patterns, delicate vegetable flowers, and sausages cut into the shape of an octopus. Department stores also have whole sections devoted to the

art of the *bentō*, selling gender-specific plastic lunch cases (Dekaranger or Thomas for boys, Sailor Moon or Hello Kitty for girls) with matching drink bottles, quilted bags to protect the lunch-case, colourful animal-topped plastic toothpicks for dainty tidbits, patty cases, plastic grass, paper flags and moulds for turning out those intricate shaped *onigiri* (rice balls). From a mother's perspective, I personally found the daily *bentō* preparation rather daunting, realizing early on that even as a foreign mother I would still be judged on my 'performance' against the Japanese ideal. One *yōchien* director I spoke to was still marvelling years later about an American mother she had met, who "had just slapped peanut butter in bread" every day for her son's lunch. As Benjamin notes (1997:109) "The box lunch is a bridge from home and *amae* to school and group life. Box lunches prepared by mothers are expected to be individual, appealing to the child, elaborately prepared, and presented as a symbol of the mother's attention to her own child". As mothers, we were often reminded by the teachers to make the portions smaller so children mastering chopsticks could easily retrieve and consume the food, or to try something new if our *bentō* contents were becoming repetitive. For some mothers, this was an expectation they felt they could not meet, and several of the mothers in Tsutsuji gave the daily *bentō* chore as a reason why they opted to send their child to *hoikuen* instead of *yōchien*.<sup>1</sup>

The extensive demands *yōchien* place on mothers means that, in general, the *hoikuen* is the only option available to families where both parents are working. Mothers who hold jobs outside the home have to face not only the stress of juggling work and childcare commitments, but also the disapproving attitudes of extended family, neighbours, and sometimes even of their own colleagues and the *hoikuen* teachers.<sup>2</sup> Disapproval of mothers who "dump" children under the age of three in day-care is particularly high as this act is seen as fundamentally opposing the chance to promote dependence (*amae*) and affection between mother and child (Fujita 1989, Jolivet 1997). This belief is often

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<sup>1</sup> The *yōchien* (kindergarten) is the only preschool which requires children to bring *bentō*. The *hoikuen*, as befits its social welfare roots, serves a hot lunch to children each day. Within educational institutions, the *bentō* is quite specific to kindergarten as once children enter elementary school they eat school lunch (*kyūshoku*) daily with their classmates.

<sup>2</sup> See Jolivet (1997:169-180) for sobering accounts of working women. The titles themselves give some indication of the pressures they feel from various sources: "Nothing irritates me more than to hear my colleagues telling me that there's really no point in working if it means leaving my children in a crèche", "I get very upset when a housewife asks me why I work and tells me she feels sorry for my children", "I sometimes ask myself what on earth possessed me to have children", "Now that my husband is home earlier, I've started to live again", and "For me there is nothing like work as an antidote to stress".

explicitly stated to women seeking childcare, such as feminist Yoshiko Tomizawa (1996:196), who went to negotiate with the ward mayor for a place for her eight week old baby. Her request, and those of other women with her, was refused on the basis that it was “unnatural” for women to leave children under the age of three babies in day-care. Mothers who do manage to find a day-care centre that will accept infants under three risk severely damaging the personal development of their child according to popular belief (Takahashi 2003:102).

Hendry (1986a:31) writes of day-care centres where even the headmasters believe that “their charges would be better off at home”, already labelled as children destined to fail as parents themselves in the future. Prominent paediatricians have also condemned those mothers who, “obsessed with work”, irresponsible and spoiled with their labour-saving devices, make crèches responsible for their child’s upbringing (Jolivet 1997:103).

Furthermore, mothers, whether they are based at home or working, have little chance to escape their childrearing duties, as unlike New Zealand, babysitting services are rare, expensive and considered unsettling for the child (Imamura 1987:35). Much of the opposition to babysitting services operating in city facilities is based on the belief that child care is the mother’s responsibility, and mothers who seek childcare to attend classes or group activities are sometimes labelled as selfish or weak (Imamura 1987:70).

In the face of such strong social pressure, some women with young children stop work altogether or reject joining the labour force. “In Japanese discourses on childcare little is said in terms of ‘social rights’, such as a woman’s right to work or a child’s right to social care. Childcare in Japan has long been discussed simply in terms of what is best for small children and who are the people most appropriate to provide it” (Takahashi 2003:102).

Those working women who do manage to find suitable day-care facilities for their young child still face social expectations that they perform various tasks set by the *hoikuen* that mark them as ‘mother’. While the demands are not as great as those made on *yōchien* mothers, the *hoikuen* mothers must nonetheless prove that they understand the ideology of the preschool. One such expectation comes in the form of toilet training. *Yōchien* children, who do not start preschool until they are at least three years old, are generally expected to

have been toilet trained at home by their mothers before they begin attending.<sup>3</sup>

At the *hoikuen*, toilet training is undertaken by the staff but mothers are expected to contribute to this process. At Hinode, a notice was sent home in my one year old son's bag which announced toilet training was to begin the following week, and would mothers please supply the following items: 20 pairs of appropriate size underwear (no padded training pants allowed), 15-20 pairs of trousers, 10 pairs of socks, two changes of sheets, and a rubber-backed futon cover. Apparently all five children in the class were to commence toilet training at the same time, which seemed incomprehensible to me as their ages ranged from 21 months to two years old. The teacher explained to me that the method was simple: children were left for a short time in wet or soiled underwear to make them physically uncomfortable, and therefore aware of the need to use the toilet. The fact that their peers were also undergoing the same training would encourage the children to master toileting quicker. In fact, it took about three months for all the class to become fully toilet trained, to my mind still a remarkable achievement at such a young age.<sup>4</sup>

For the mothers at Hinode, their child's mastery of toilet training meant another reason to celebrate as it finally signalled the end of an arduous task: the supply of freshly laundered clothes each morning. During the toilet training process, mothers would arrive to pick up their child after work, and also to retrieve an enormous bag of soiled underwear and clothes to be washed and dried ready for the next day's training. Many of the mothers I spoke to would tackle this task late at night, once she had prepared the dinner, helped with homework, bathed the children and put them to bed. In winter, one could dry the clothes overnight by hanging them above the constantly running kerosene heating source, but in summer it was difficult to get the clothes dried and few people seemed to own clothes-driers. Although this was a daunting task, especially for the full-time working woman, and mothers often jokingly complained amongst themselves about the logistics of all that

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<sup>3</sup> In reality, there are always a couple of children in the *yōchien*'s junior class who have not mastered toileting. This is a cause of some annoyance to teachers, who do not see toilet training or changing nappies as the kindergarten's responsibility. In fact, one principal confided in me that she felt the growing number of children attending in nappies indicated both a lack of ability and laziness on the part of modern mothers.

<sup>4</sup> While New Zealand mothers generally begin toilet training from two to two and a half years old, Japanese mothers begin much earlier. Early writings on Japan concluded that toilet training was started early, and severely, which some scholars believed contributed to various negative traits such as hypochondria and excessive cleanliness, see Benedict (1946), LaBarre (1945), and Gorer (1943). Other writings contradict the severity of toilet training, but agree that it begins early, see Sikkema (1947) and Pease (1961).

scrubbing and hanging out of clothing, no mother ever refused to carry out the task assigned to her. It was implicitly assumed by the teachers, and duly accepted by the mothers, that everyone would comply with the *hoikuen*'s request.

Despite the many explicit and implicit demands made of mothers, the Hokkaido teachers interviewed were quick to point out that their greatest expectation of mothers was for them to love and show affection for their children (*kodomo e no aijō*). Many of the teachers also urged open communication between mother and child, and that parents not compare their child's skills or abilities with others in their class. In contrast to ten or twenty years ago, all of the teachers interviewed felt that the role and participation of parents had changed, often to the detriment of their children's development. Teachers commented that modern parents were neglecting the simple pleasures of childhood, such as making time to play games and read to their children. In reality, many of the *hoikuen* mothers I spoke to said that they were just too exhausted after full-time work at the office or on the farm to contemplate playing with the children when there was so much more work waiting to be done at home.

The *yōchien* mothers, on the hand, generally have more leisure time available to them, and for some, this was reflected in the extra effort they put in, beyond the daily preschool routines, to show teachers that they were 'good mothers'. At Oka, an example of this behaviour occurred during the first week of each term, when children brought in objects they had made over the holiday break. Many of the exquisitely formed sculptures, dolls, vehicles, instruments and toys on display had quite obviously been produced by mothers, with last minute flourishes and their names added by the children! At Tenshi, I was caught out by ignorance of the 'good mother' ideology, following a notice sent home which asked that each child bring a box of any shape or size to kindergarten the next day. The box was to form the basis of an original handmade collection box which mother and child would make together at the *sankanbi* (open day). Based on prior experiences at the *hoikuen*, I had assumed that an open day would mean we would be instructed in design by the teacher, but in fact, all the other mothers arrived at the kindergarten clutching impressive creations which only required their child to draw on eyes or adhere some stickers for the collection box to be complete. While I had diligently followed the instructions on the notice, it was clear that with our naked tissue box, my son and I had



made some kind of blunder. Needless to say, the following year, I was up all night constructing a cardboard dinosaur so my son wouldn't have to face the disappointed faces of his peers and teachers again!

While reading and writing is officially taught once children enter elementary school, Hendry (1993:230) notes that despite mothers initially claiming their children had acquired academic skills “naturally”, many upwardly mobile parents regularly play academic games and offer access to educational television programmes which could explain why the majority of children are able to read *hiragana* by the time they leave kindergarten. Certainly the mothers of the higher socio-economic preschools I visited (Oka, Chibikko and Tenshi) seemed to play educational games with their children, or else paid for extra lessons, despite denying that they were doing anything special to advance their children's academic opportunities. Conversely, the mothers at lower socio-economic Hinode and Mori felt the education system to be relatively egalitarian and seemed confident that their children would pick up the skills they needed once they started school.

While not yet so prevalent in rural Hokkaido, the intense competition between mothers that has escalated in the post-war period has resulted in a new sub-group, that of the *kyōiku mama* (education mother). Such mothers take their job of child-rearing very seriously, supporting every step of their child's education, starting from choosing the most advantageous kindergarten, and continuing until the child has gained entry into a prestigious university. Many of these mothers are modest about their impact on their child's future, however, “to Japanese women, motherhood is a profession, demanding and prestigious, with education of the child the number-one responsibility. Cutthroat competition in postwar Japan has made her job harder than ever. And while many critics tend to play down the idea of the perpetually pushy mother, there are those who say that a good proportion of the credit for Japan's economic miracle can be laid at her feet” (Simons 1991:59).

The emergence of the *kyōiku mama*, combined with the dropping birth rate, has resulted in a change in the balance of power between mothers and teachers. Where once the teachers issued directives to grateful parents, modern mothers are more informed and have greater expectations for their children. An experienced teacher at Oka lamented the fact that

where once parents would sleep overnight outside the kindergarten in order to gain a place for their child, mothers these days come armed with a checklist to compare institutions.

At all the Hokkaido preschools in this study, parents are encouraged to drop their children at the foyer, and are only permitted to view classes in progress during special school events or open days. In this way, the teachers maintain control over the socialisation process within their sphere but their power over mothers appears to be changing. Despite teachers and mothers' claims that close and open communication is desirable, in reality, the vast majority of problems are rarely discussed (Fujita 1989, Allison 1996). Peak attributes this to two reasons, firstly, that teachers and mothers take a long term view of children's behaviour, believing it would eventually change, and secondly, that the frank communication about children is sacrificed "to an unwritten but more fundamental goal of preserving social harmony between mother and teacher" (Peak 1989:101). This certainly seemed to be the case in my son's experience at Hinode, where I was shocked to witness constant physical bullying of him at an open day. Although the bullying had been carried out by one particular child over the space of many months, the teacher told me that she hadn't bothered to mention it as the perpetrator came from a broken home and she was hoping he would eventually tire of the behaviour. After a year, the bullying still continued and my husband and I eventually moved my son to Tenshi, although we had to justify our actions not only to the teachers but to local Board of Education officials.

According to Ministry of Education statistics, the majority (99.6%) of teachers serving in Japanese preschools in 1986 were female. They were also young and single, but generally stopped work once they married or had their first child (Peak 1989). Twenty years later, these figures are reflected in the Hokkaido institutions visited, with the vast majority of teachers under twenty eight years old, and only Chibikko employing men in a teaching role. Holloway (2000:86) found that teachers were very reluctant to offer an opinion on even trivial matters, perhaps reflecting the fact that although well-trained and generously remunerated, most teachers are young women with little confidence. I found the same thing at Oka, where even simple questions went unanswered and at Mori where the two young teachers seemed quite puzzled by most of my queries. Conversely, the experienced female principals of Tenshi and Chibikko were able to chart and analyse

developments in society and pedagogy, while the principals at Hinode and Mori represented more traditional views of preschool education.

Holloway (2000:12) found that almost every preschool director she spoke with held a pessimistic view of children's experience in modern Japanese society. "They expressed great concern about the absence of the father from daily family life, the reluctance of mothers to provide adequate discipline and training in acceptable behaviour, and the loss of grandparents as a loving and supportive presence. They regretted that urban Japanese children rarely encounter nature, are not allowed to play freely with friends, and are too sedentary." The Hokkaido principals certainly echoed these views, and were especially critical of young parents who placed their own desires over the best interests of their children. These comments were despite the fact that, unlike the average Tokyo dweller, the children of rural Hokkaido live in the midst of spectacular natural scenery with ample opportunities for outdoor activity, and that traditional, three-generational households are not uncommon.<sup>5</sup>

In this light, it seems that the experience and/or adequacy of modern parents is a major factor in both encouraging appropriate development outside of the classroom and supporting teachers to achieve socialisation goals within the preschool arena. Significantly, while their pedagogical and ideological views varied, all of the teachers agreed that *shūdan seikatsu* training is a vital part of 'becoming Japanese' and that the experience of participating in the preschool class gives modern children the best chance of realising this aim.

Until recently, the ultimate *shūdan* experience was said to be typified by classes of up to forty children and one teacher, as expressed by Tobin (1987:549) who writes that "Japanese believe that their preschools, with their large class sizes and high student/teacher ratios, offer the spoiled and overly individualistic mama's boys and girls of today's increasingly middle-class, urban, nuclear-family-oriented Japan, the chance to experience

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<sup>5</sup> At the three Tsutsuji institutions, principals identified approximately 20% of students as living in households where grandparents were present. Traditionally, grandparents played an important, direct role in child-rearing in the extended family household, helping to ease the demands of child-care and acting as a counterpoint to overly strict behaviour by parents (Cummings 1980:92). Today, young families often live in apartment complexes, isolated from this valuable source of support and consultation, leading some to speculate that without the older generation to guide them, modern parents have abandoned their traditional disciplinary role in favour of indulging their children's unacceptable behaviour (Fukutake 1974:43).

the pleasures and responsibilities of life in a group and thus to become, in Japanese terms, fully human”. While the Hokkaido fieldwork shows that *shūdan seikatsu* remains an important goal for educators, how do parents feel about this aim and the prospect of their child being one of forty students? Is it necessary or even desirable to have such a large class group? It is to the issue of the evolving preschool class size that we must turn for the answers to these questions.



Figure 9: A class of only four students practices for the upcoming preschool concert (*happyōkai*).

## Chapter 6 Demographic Changes and Ideological Shifts

### *Class size as a means of supporting group values*

*“I suspect that most of you [mothers] think that small class sizes, such as five or ten children per teacher, are better for your children. I do not think so. Among 20 or 30 peers in a class, the children are more motivated to learn by competing with each other. Therefore, class sizes of five or ten students are not good at all. Of course, parental overprotectiveness (kahogo) is not good. Children aged four to five need a group”*  
*(Preschool director interviewed in Holloway 2000:164).*

The first time I ever encountered the notion that large class sizes and high student/teacher ratios might be desirable was the first morning of kindergarten for the three year old students of Tulip class at Oka. The walls of the large, airy classroom were covered in cute, anthropomorphized animals doing daily chores, a ‘train’ whose passengers held up the names and dates of each student’s birthday and a giant cherry blossom tree to symbolize the arrival of spring, despite the melting snow and bitter winds outside. The children’s chairs had been arranged in a semi-circle at the front of the class, and the ten students were perched nervously on them as the roll was called by Rumi *sensei*.

As I watched, the assistant teacher remarked to me “*Sabishii ne*” (oh, they look so lonely). I was rather confused by this comment, as while the children certainly looked uncertain about the experiences ahead of them, as befits newcomers, the atmosphere in the classroom seemed so wonderfully peaceful, especially in comparison to the other classes where the din of 30 to 40 children could clearly be heard even in this room. I was also thinking how nice it would be for the children to have so much more of the teacher’s attention available to them, plus how much easier it was going to be from a teaching point of view with fewer students. In the staffroom later that day, I heard the principal despairing about the disappointing number of new enrolments, which I could understand from a purely economic viewpoint, but what did the teacher’s comment mean?

Eventually I asked Rumi *sensei* if she was looking forward to teaching such a small class, after the thirty-eight students she was responsible for the previous year. Her answer

surprised me: “Of course, it is easier for the teachers but it is not good for the children at all. Ten students is not enough for them to learn about group life, and there are too few different personalities for them to find ‘a match’, either a friend to play with or an enemy to spar with, plus it is really difficult to engage in the usual kind of class games with so few children. They are really going to be disadvantaged at first, but we will have to try and find a way to help them”. I couldn’t help but thinking how different her views were to my own culturally-constructed opinion that the fewer students, the better. But, I wondered, had the Japanese education system always been based on the belief that large classes were important for attaining the *shūdan* environment? And what were the implications for kindergartens like Oka where rolls were falling in line with the dropping birth rate?

In fact, the practice of forming large classes is based on a system initially borrowed from the West, and dates back only around one hundred and thirty years to the Meiji Restoration (1868). Prior to the Meiji era, Japanese education was limited to the elite and conducted in small groups which emphasised practical training and intensive tutorials (Rubinger 1982). Anxious to embrace modernity, the Meiji Government sent officials to America and Europe in order to study, among other things, the education system which was revised again under American direction during the Occupation period following World War II (Shoji 1983). Therefore, “the large class size, which seems to epitomize ‘group-oriented’ Japan, is a product of the Western restructuring of education subsequent to World War II” (Holloway 2000:2) and whose maximum numbers have, in fact, gradually decreased.<sup>1</sup>

While researchers such as White (1987:67) accept high student/teacher ratios as a ‘natural’ part of Japanese educational culture, others dismiss the idea that large class sizes function to provide children with the *shūdan seikatsu* group experience (Smith 1995:52). Perhaps the truth lies closer to what Japanese teachers and parents perceive to be important for their children. As one report comments: “The contemporary Japanese education system is traditionally Japanese less in the sense of being a legacy of the distant past than in the sense of promoting what the Japanese believe to be important traditional values. Large class

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<sup>1</sup> Although classes of forty students seem incredibly high, class sizes in elementary schools have slowly been decreasing. At the time of World War II, class sizes of 60 children were normal, by 1958 it was 50 children before the maximum number of children was reduced to 45 in 1963, and then to its current figure of 40 students per class in 1980 (Nemoto 1999:50). With a ratio of one teacher, Japanese day-care centers are currently permitted to have up 30 children per class, and kindergartens 40 children (Lewis 1995:9).

size and large ratios have become increasingly important strategies for promoting traditional Japanese values and for combating what many Japanese believe to be the dangers of Western-style individualism” (Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1991:116).

Or as Smith (1995:52) argues, “Japanese teachers themselves *think* that is good for children to learn to relate to large numbers of age-mates although (1) there has never been any research conducted to test this hypothesis in Japan and (2) both social psychological research on group size as well as common sense would suggest that there must be limits to the benefits of increasing group size”. While research on this may be scant, the Hokkaido preschool teachers interviewed, like Rumi *sensei*, appeared to have given this issue some thought. Most described the large class as giving children the chance to experience “all facets of life as a member of society”, where you could “make lots of friends” and “really feel what its like to enjoy the pleasures of life in a group”.

The opportunity to make many friends was the reason most often cited by local mothers who chose preschools with large numbers of students. Sachiko, a friend of mine in Tsutsuji, used this logic to explain why she had chosen to send her daughter to a populous day-care on the other side of town, when there was an uncrowded day-care at the end of her street. Both centres were subsidised by the local authorities, occupied the same amount of physical space and utilised similar equipment, but at the latter there were far fewer children. While I reasoned that a child with many classmates would not necessarily befriend them all, Sachiko remained adamant that little Tomoko would have the best chance of finding life-long friends in a large group of children with varied personalities and characteristics. Her comments seem to echo those of Rumi *sensei*, that the group setting not only exposes children to others with different values but provides every child greater opportunities to find their friendship “match”.

Interestingly, nobody explicitly mentioned high student/teacher ratios as a means of forcing children to resolve conflict within their peer group, despite the reality that it is difficult for teachers to notice or break up fights in a large classroom. This seemed to be implicitly accepted by teachers at the larger preschools, however, as it was mentioned that “children should learn how to deal with all kinds of situations, good or bad, just like in the outside world”. None went so far as a principal interviewed by Tobin et al who commented: “It is no doubt true that if we had smaller classes, as in the United States, our teachers

would be able to break up many of those kinds of fights more easily. But would that be a good thing? Perhaps one reason we have big classes is precisely to assure that there will be fights of this kind.” (Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1991:113).

While not advocating violence in the classroom, experienced teachers at lower socio-economic Hinode identified changing teaching styles, smaller classes and growing economic wealth as eliminating many of the opportunities for children to experience peer conflict and cooperation. “Once upon a time, our curriculum was based on *settei hoiku* (a set curriculum) where all children did the same activity at the same time. We had only one set of blocks for all the children so they had to work together if they wanted to play. These days, every class has their own set of blocks and toys which has lead to children wanting to do only the things they enjoy (*suki na koto*). They need to learn to do things they dislike as well, little by little to try everything, like in the old days when there were no toys in the classroom and the children all had to undertake the same activity together in the hall. Although we still try to follow that system, in reality the last ten years has seen our curriculum slowly change towards *kankyō hoiku* (holistic education). With so much time allotted to free play, modern children just want to do the same things they like, day after day”.

Unlike most staff at the other preschools in this study, the teachers at Hinode were older, very experienced and all of them mothers<sup>2</sup> which gave them a unique viewpoint. Their comments resemble those given by staff in urban Tokyo preschools, where Holloway (2000:68) found that: “One element common to all schools is the notion that children should be exposed to many experiences rather than participating primarily in activities that they already like”. In reality, *hoikuen* like Hinode are controlled by the political and ideological structures of its funding agencies, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and the local Board of Education. Similarly, ideological conflict between the Ministry of Education and *yōchien* (Holloway 2000:81) and between schools, parents and teachers is commonplace (Woronoff 1996:116-123).

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<sup>2</sup> Hinode falls under the jurisdiction of the local Board of Education which decrees that teachers with young children are not permitted to teach at the same institution as their child. I wonder if this decision avoids the potential for an *amae*-based relationship to disturb the *shūdan* environment, yet private Chibikko and unregistered Mori allowed mothers and children to be together. The teachers at Oka did not have children, so that policy was never discussed, but staff were strongly encouraged to leave after they got married.



At a Buddhist preschool, Holloway (2000:164) identified large class sizes as a strategy to overcome children's individualism and weakness. Teachers there felt that children were more motivated to learn when they were competing with up to thirty classmates and that the ensuing competitiveness served as an antidote to maternal coddling. Teachers at the Hokkaido preschools agreed that the *shūdan* environment promotes competition, but put it in a more positive way, such as this comment made by staff at Hinode: "It is important for children to learn to *gaman* (be patient), obey rules and for them to have the chance to watch other children doing things they can't yet do but will eventually try if there are other children around them – they will be able to build up their abilities in a group setting".

Teachers at Mori also felt that this was important, plus they added that the experience of 'life in a group' would prepare children for a smooth transition to school, where classes generally consist of 30 to 40 students. The experience of a friend of mine seems to support the idea that failure to encounter *shūdan seikatsu* before starting school could sometimes have disastrous consequences. Tako was one of five children who grew up in Tokyo. With so many children, her mother had little time to fuss over her, but her older sisters provided her with substitutes for maternal *amae*. Unlike her brothers and sisters, Tako never attended any form of preschool, but felt that she had encountered a form of *shūdan seikatsu* (and its reverse, *enryo*) through watching and replicating her older siblings' behaviour. At six years old, she entered primary school for the first time, but the boisterous class of forty children was a terrible shock to her. For several months, she struggled on but found she had no idea how to act in this alien, and seemingly hostile, environment, eventually refusing to attend school. She comments that, "I now realise that the problem was that I had never really experienced *shūdan seikatsu* before I started school. I had no idea how to behave in that setting and I guess I still acted like the spoilt youngest child, which isolated me from my peers. When I think about it now, I am angry at my mother for being so selfish as not to give me that chance". It is hard to say whether the lack of exposure to *shūdan seikatsu* was completely to blame, but significant that Tako identified this as the cause, and that she was still regretful years later about her 'failure' to assimilate.

While Tako struggled in a class of forty students, Nemoto (1999:50) argues that children learn effectively in large classes because they have been so 'standardized' by the homogeneous social and ethnic culture of the Japanese education system.<sup>3</sup> He contends that Japanese children's learned ability to assimilate themselves quietly and effectively into the group is in marked contrast to Western countries where individualistic, self-assured students and a de-centralised curricula require small classes to avoid discipline problems. While it appears that *shūdan seikatsu* is an integral part of Japanese early education, and while it may be true that Japanese children's experience of *shūdan seikatsu* at preschool level can ease the transition to school, are large classes really required for this socialisation training to be effective?

Recent studies have pointed out that preschools in affluent urban areas such as Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto actually benefit from small class sizes and lower child to teacher ratios, while the more isolated and rural preschools are located, the higher the ratios become (Smith 1995:53). Institutions in wealthy communities not only have the resources to keep class sizes low, teachers spend more time interacting with children on an individual basis. In contrast, children at preschools in working class districts have fewer facilities available to them and spend more time in group activities with their numerous classmates (Holloway 2000:25). Finally, less-educated working class parents in rural areas are more likely to accept the arguments of *shūdan seikatsu* and correspondingly large classes, in contrast to well-educated urban parents who question these values (Smith 1995:56).<sup>4</sup> These studies suggest that views about class size are more a product of differing socio-economic levels than of cultural or pedagogical constructs.

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<sup>3</sup> In 1986, Prime Minister Nakasone outraged the Ainu of Hokkaido by stating that Japan is comprised of a single ethnic group (Hanami 1995:135), going on to claim that racial and ethnic heterogeneity is to blame for American educational problems, in contrast to his country where such problems do not exist due to Japan's "unique and homogeneous race" (Smith 1995:20). Although not so explicitly expressed, much of the literature on the Japanese preschool assumes this premise, overlooking the existence of ethnic diversity in the classroom.

<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Tobin (1989:185) found that most parents were confused by questions asking whether they considered student/teacher ratios when selecting a preschool for their child. He concluded that Japanese parents do not equate educational quality with class size, rendering this line of questioning irrelevant.

But could this model be applied to institutions in rural Hokkaido?<sup>5</sup> Within the five preschools the reality of class size was varied and complex, making it difficult to effectively compare one group of students (for example, the four year olds class) across the institutions studied, so for the sake of clarity each preschool will be examined in turn.

The facilities and equipment at Tenshi are modern and meticulously maintained by both teachers and students. As part of a national chain of Christian-based preschools, Tenshi is somewhat protected from economic fluctuations and low student numbers, but the principal confessed that she was worried about how the low birth rate would impact on the school. Even though there are only 49 students currently enrolled (down considerably from past years), the school has elected to close one classroom and maintain two classes of approximately 25 children rather than create three classes of 16 students despite having adequate teaching staff available. Children aged three to six are deliberately mixed in the two classes, although they are sometimes separated for age-appropriate projects.<sup>6</sup> According to its glossy pamphlet, Tenshi lists among its aims: “Providing experiences which guide children towards embodying love for humanity and God, and which teach them to rely on one another within the *shūdan seikatsu* environment”.

The pamphlet also mentions the opportunity for individuals to build up their academic abilities through carefully selected Montessori educational activities which children can choose from during morning study time. In the small logging town of Tsutsuji, Tenshi is locally regarded as the most prestigious preschool, attracting children whose parents strive to be upwardly mobile. Significantly, it is also the only kindergarten still operating although there are a handful of day-care centres like Hinode and Mori. The school as a whole is small, compared to Oka and Chibikko in Yuri, so teachers do have opportunities to interact with individual children during free play and study time, but while acknowledging there were some advantages to fewer class numbers the principal was committed to instructing and disciplining children through the *shūdan* structure. Therefore,

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<sup>5</sup> The limitations of applying of this model should be acknowledged. Firstly, unlike Smith and Holloway’s fieldwork sites in urban Japan where long waiting lists for preschools are the norm, institutions in Hokkaido are facing dropping enrolments and rising costs. Secondly, it is difficult to apply a framework based around fluid concepts such as ‘wealth’ and ‘class’, and developed in urban Japan, to rural Hokkaido where residents’ lifestyles are simultaneously exoticised and patronised by their Honshu neighbours.

<sup>6</sup> The structure of classes at Tenshi is reminiscent of the *sempai-kōhai* system used in Japanese business organisations where senior members of the group act as mentors or role models for junior members (Rohlen 1974, Rohlen 1991).

despite being classed as an affluent preschool, Tenshi advocated a high number of group activities within relatively large classes of twenty-five, although there are limited opportunities for individual children to select and undertake academic tasks.

Just two kilometers across town, working class Hinode *hoikuen* is registered to care for 80 children, but presently there are only 39 students enrolled. For Hinode, the luxury of organising classes along pedagogical ideals is faintly ridiculous, even though the school is financially supported by the local authorities. Dropping enrolments mean that the older classes have been forced to amalgamate, unlike the conscious mixing of ages at Tenshi above. At the time of the fieldwork, one teacher was responsible for the 15 children in the combined class of four, five and six year olds. Whereas a range of ages works well in structured role-oriented Tenshi, at Hinode teachers see this as a limitation rather than the ideal. They note that students' wide range of abilities makes it difficult to design activities that will appeal to all the children, which has resulted in long periods of boisterous free play becoming the norm. Teachers remain committed to *shūdan seikatsu* ideals regardless of class size, but indicate that classes segregated by age would enable them to more easily attain this goal. Unlike Tenshi, Hinode does not have sufficient staff to supervise children in separate age-appropriate activities which further adds to their frustrations.

While Mori once catered to over fifty children, with only five students attending today it is clear that they also have little choice about optimal class sizes. Like Hinode, Mori caters to a lower socio-economic region, and acts as a day-care centre to support working-class families with limited education. Staff at Mori advocate the peer disciplinary role of *shūdan seikatsu*, but allow long hours of free play with few structured group activities and very limited resources. With two teachers supervising only five children, Mori's student/teacher ratio looks enviably low, but like Hinode, this institution identifies itself not as benefiting, but being disadvantaged by reduced student numbers.

In the city of Yuri, Oka places paramount importance on the *shūdan* experience, with little of the concern about academic instruction seen at Tenshi and Chibikko. Oka is seen as one of the leading kindergartens in the area, a belief which is reflected in its high

student numbers.<sup>7</sup> The owner of Oka is a high-profile businessman who has been relentless in maintaining the quality reputation of the preschool, and who has come up with several innovative ways to attract new students. With classes as large as 40 children at times, Oka remains committed to the *shūdan seikatsu* paradigm despite recently making concessions to upper-middle class parents in the form of extra-curricular English lessons. Oka classes are split by age and in 2006 the four-year-old class numbered thirty-five children to one teacher. As Oka is predominantly a private institution (although it receives a small portion of funding from regional authorities), one suspects that management support for high student/teacher ratios is also financially motivated. The young teachers at Oka seem convinced though, (especially as they are subject to a great deal of pressure by the owner) as it is at this preschool that I first witnessed Rumi *sensei*'s "lonely" class of three-year-olds.

Last is Chibikko, whose students are cared for in a new purpose-built centre on the edge of the city. Chibikko is a family-run institution which operates as a business, entirely without support from local, regional or prefectural funding agencies. Reflecting this, fees at Chibikko are also considerably higher than at public kindergartens or day-cares. Economic autonomy also means that the directors of Chibikko are at liberty to implement their own curriculum structure, free from the policies or constraints of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare or regional authorities. It is significant, then, that the principal here not only preferred smaller classes to larger ones, she had gone a step further by limiting the total number of students to seventy or eighty.

Despite acknowledging that it was necessary to maintain minimum numbers to remain financially viable, the principal saw Chibikko as providing a quality environment, one where respect and self-control are expected of children, but where empathy and affection is also obvious. As they moved through the day's extensive curriculum, the orderly conduct of children at this preschool was immediately noticeable, with little of the fighting or yelling witnessed at the other institutions. Catering to wealthy, professional families and with student numbers ranging from eight to 15 per age-segregated class, Chibikko certainly seemed to support the notion that affluence equates to lower

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<sup>7</sup> At the time of my fieldwork (Sept/Oct 2006), and following an aggressive marketing campaign, Oka was once again the largest preschool in Yuri city after seeing a rival institution attract more students in the previous two years.

student/teacher ratios. But it could also be explained by the fact that the principal was highly educated, unconstrained by national curriculum, and an advocate of the successful small group training methods of pre-Meiji Japan. As she pointed out, in those days, groups of 12 to 15 were considered ideal, not only as a means of education but also as a form of introducing students to *shūdan*-style discipline and codes of moral conduct.

This examination of the practice of class sizes in the Hokkaido preschools reveals that reasons influencing this issue are varied and complex: *shūdan seikatsu* ideals, economic pressures, state and regional agendas, ideological, cultural and religious beliefs. Socio-economic factors may contribute to class size in some preschools but this theory cannot be conclusively applied to all the institutions visited. Similarly, it is clear that while *shūdan seikatsu* may be a factor in creating large (or small) classes, it is not the *only* issue considered by the directors and principals who make such decisions. Smith (1995) and Holloway's (2000) claim that the quality of preschools in working class areas is lower can be upheld, along with their assertion that less educated parents more readily accept large classes as a tool of *shūdan seikatsu*. However, their argument linking wealthy communities with small classes is more problematic.

In contrast to urban Honshu, fewer students in rural Hokkaido indicated economic hardship in all the preschools except Chibikko. Working class Hinode and Mori have low student/teacher ratios, yet seemed to suffer the most from teacher inattention and student boredom, in spite of long periods of unstructured play and many opportunities for individual children and staff to interact. Tenshi is oriented towards middle class families in a small town, and appears to equate medium to large classes with *shūdan seikatsu* ideology despite having low total student numbers and classroom space which could be used for more individualised instruction. Oka attracts middle class families in one of Hokkaido's larger cities, and actively promotes the values of *shūdan seikatsu*, both through high student numbers and extensive group activities. Only Chibikko, also situated in the city and positioned as a private day-care for the upper-class, endorses small, select classes of highly-disciplined children and is the sole institution which clearly appears to support Smith's (1995) argument that affluent well-educated parents and staff favour low student/teacher ratios.

But do teachers actually support their preschool's practice of high or low student/teacher ratios (and the ideology informing this) decided for them by higher authorities? Out of the twenty teachers interviewed, half said they preferred smaller classes, one third had no preference seeing benefits and disadvantages of both large and small classes, and only two favoured large classes. In contrast to the model that links large classes with *shūdan seikatsu* (Tobin 1987), most teachers said a small class would enable them to best assist each individual child, guide and encourage students, and limit the number of physical altercations in the classroom. In a comment reminiscent of the *amae*-based mother-child relationship, one teacher even added that: "A small class means that I am able to show each child love and affection". Those teachers who had no preference explained that large classes meant that children could experience the joys of *shūdan seikatsu* with their many friends, while smaller classes meant that children would receive greater teacher attention in a more controlled classroom environment. The teachers who favoured large classes were from Oka, where *shūdan seikatsu* methods are most enthusiastically embraced and practiced. They reiterated the belief that large classes are an effective (and fun) way to introduce children to *shūdan seikatsu* ideals essential to Japanese life, and that large student numbers equate to many childhood friends.

Clearly, for the majority of the teachers interviewed large class sizes are not desirable, but there is some ambiguity in the way participants define 'large' and 'small'. As mentioned in my discussion of methodology, I realised somewhat belatedly that the key question for teachers is the number of students per class they consider ideal, and why, rather than if they prefer big or small classes. Teachers interviewed about this issue by Tobin, Wu & Davidson (1989) also initially expressed a preference for small classes, but when pressed further admitted that while fewer students might be more manageable for teachers, large classes were better for students. "In the eyes of Japanese preschool administrators, then, very small classes and low student/teacher ratios produce a classroom atmosphere that emphasizes teacher-student over student-student interactions and fails to provide children with adequate opportunities to learn to function as members of a group" (Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1989:37).

With this in mind, teachers were asked what they considered to be the ideal preschool class size. From those teachers who had no preference or favoured small classes,

the optimum number of students was most often given as one teacher to a class of ten to fifteen students of the same age. The lowest class size expressed was by a teacher at Mori who thought five students would be best.<sup>8</sup> Only the Oka teachers, who had originally advocated large classes, felt that thirty to forty students would be best.<sup>9</sup>

As discussed earlier, teachers and principals are unanimous in the importance of *shūdan seikatsu*, but can 'life in the group' really be learned in classrooms where there are as few as three or four children? Their answers were surprising. All of the educators interviewed said it was possible to implement the *shūdan seikatsu* paradigm even if there were very few students. They point out that the salient issue is not the number of children needed to make a group, but the very fact that the environment and codes of the preschool differ markedly from that of the home. In other words, the very contrast between *uchi* (inside world) and *soto* (outside world).

The young teacher at Mori (whose child also was one of her five students) comments that "I think the behaviour is very different at home to preschool. For example, at home my son often won't clean up his toys but he does it happily at *hoikuen*. That's the rhythm of *shūdan seikatsu*". A teacher at Hinode adds "While the kinds of games they can do may be limited when there are fewer children, the way children interact here at *hoikuen* is completely different to the dynamics between brothers and sisters, so even if there are only four children it is still possible to experience *shūdan seikatsu*".

While noting that *shūdan seikatsu* was possible in small groups, some teachers expressed that there could be limitations to so few students. At Tenshi, the principal noted that: "Even if there are only a few students they can definitely experience *shūdan seikatsu*, but I think that in a larger group, children's mutual relationships become stronger". A teacher at Hinode adds, "I don't think it's so easy for them to experience *shūdan seikatsu* daily [in a smaller group], but combined with interactions with other *hoikuen* and participating in the local community I think it's possible. Also, even if their own class is

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<sup>8</sup> This just happens to be exactly the number of children at her rural *hoikuen*.

<sup>9</sup> In contrast, informal conversations I had with parents revealed that they generally supported larger classes than the teachers; 15 to 20 children per class. These parents could be termed working class or middle class, which according to Smith (1995:56) could explain their belief in large class sizes. This is an issue which could be explored through further study.



small they can deepen their understanding of *shūdan* principles through mixing with other children of various ages in the other classes”.

In fact, while classes in rural Hokkaido preschools are indeed shrinking they are more and more starting to resemble the pre-Meiji style of educating the elite in small group tutorials. Although limited to the upper level of society, lessons at that time shared the same goals of *shūdan seikatsu* mentioned by teachers today: cooperation, empathy for others, learning to obey rules and show self-control even in the face of adversity.

So, if class size is not a major factor, what could really be a threat to the enculturation of *shūdan* ideals by Japanese children? A comment by the principal at Mori gives some clue: “In this country, it is important to consider others, so I think *shūdan seikatsu* is very important otherwise children risk becoming individualistic (*kojinteki na ko ni natte shimau*)”. Is individualism really a problem in the preschool setting? Who seems to be promoting this move towards individualism? While acknowledging the huge changes in Japanese society in recent years, teachers lay the blame squarely at the feet of modern parents. It seems the issue is less about class size than changing parent-teacher power dynamics as a result of the low birth rate.



Figure 10: A foreign instructor teaches English to a group of two year old children.

### *The role of koseika in the shūdan seikatsu paradigm*

*“While experiencing shūdan seikatsu children learn the rules of society, they grow up embodying these codes of conduct. Also, in joining together with their peers they acquire the skills of cooperation, compromise, empathy and patience”*

*Comment by the principal of Tenshi.*

*“The word for ‘individuality’ (kosei) ... has become an ideal, and is sought in the pursuit of personal interests and achievements, perfectly acceptable as long as they don’t interfere with one’s obligations to others” (Hendry 1987:53).*

Studies point to Japan as a collective society, where social maturity is evidenced by one’s ability to sacrifice individual freedoms for the harmony of the group (Benedict 1946, Dore 1958, DeVos 1973, Reischauer 1988).<sup>1</sup> Certainly, exposure to *shūdan seikatsu* in preschool is seen as a first step towards children achieving this aim (Lewis 1989, Peak 1991). However, recent research has indicated that while stereotypical views of collectivistic Japanese culture may still be valid for the older generation, Japanese youth are displaying increasing individualism (Matsumoto, Kudoh & Takeuchi 1996).

This trend has also been noticed by the wider community, and several of the Hokkaido teachers expressed fears for the education system if children cannot learn to suppress their own desires in the classroom. As one commented, “I think it’s very important in today’s world that children come into contact with *shūdan seikatsu*. These days, it seems that Japanese people have mistaken the meaning of respecting individuality (*kosei sonchō*) for freedom to do as they wish”. Others embraced the principals of individuality (*koseika*) as long as it could be incorporated into the overall goal of group cohesion: “I think it’s important both to experience *shūdan seikatsu*, and to cultivate the personalities of each individual within that group. Within this setting, we learn that we are most powerful when we work together. It is very important that children realise what we

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<sup>1</sup> This premise has been challenged by Mouer & Sugimoto (1986) who argue that the myth of Japanese collectivism serves the purposes of the power elite while suppressing the objections of the lower class.

can achieve when we work as one, and conversely that if one person takes liberties it can destroy the balance of the whole group”.

While teachers endeavour to foster the strengths of each student within the group ethic, not all children embrace the lessons of *shūdan seikatsu* over perceived individual freedoms. The monthly *hoikuen* reports I received about my eldest son constantly referred to the fact that he preferred to play alone and resisted calls to join in group activities. These comments were listed under the heading of ‘points to work on’ whereas I didn’t recognise his behaviour as problematic at all. After two years in day-care, my son finally began to participate more fully in preschool life, leading to comments about his conduct being recorded under the ‘goals achieved’ section of the report. Just as my son had gradually been socialised into displaying appropriate Japanese behaviour, I had come to accept the ‘naturalness’ of this.

For a few children, this transition never occurs. The daughter of a friend attended a tiny *hoikuen* for the first four years of her life, before her mother moved her to a crowded *yōchien* in order to prepare her for school. The child hated the new preschool, crying every day until she graduated and complaining that the teacher never took the time to listen to her. An adult now, she still reminds her mother how traumatic the experience was, and how constant sublimation of her individuality throughout her education prompted her to move permanently to the United States. Her mother Manami, however, has a different explanation: her daughter attended *hoikuen* from six months old, and therefore neglected to receive maternal *amae* during the crucial early years. Manami smiles sadly as says “My daughter was always so independent, I didn’t think she needn’t as much *amae* as my son who I spoiled terribly. I see now that I failed her. She doesn’t know how to depend on anyone and we [the family] all think she is quite intimidating”. Manami’s story is significant for the way she pinpoints lack of *amae* as creating an overly individualistic child who struggled in the *shūdan seikatsu* environment and who ultimately rejected Japanese values.

Scholars point out that Western ideas of ‘individualism’ (*kojinshugi*) incorporate positive notions of independence and democracy, while the Japanese translation of this concept is viewed negatively through its meaning of ‘selfishness’ or ‘irresponsibility’ (Hendry 1987:53, Moeran 1986:75). In contrast, ‘individuality’ (*koseika*) is seen as

compatible with the group oriented aims of *shūdan seikatsu* through its notions of reciprocity. “Except for extraordinary cases ... individualism is not really an option. One can either be cooperative or be left out, either be happy or laughed at as ‘strange’ and ‘peculiar’. But this cooperative individual is not losing its *individuality* or individual identity by participating in group activities. It is merely demonstrating one of the ‘faces’ it learns to have for different situations” (Hendry 1987:54).

Preschool teachers seek to encourage each child’s individual character while simultaneously socialising children towards ‘life in the group’. These two concepts are not seen as opposing, but complementary as Sato (1996:121) explains: “Individual development is both bound and enhanced by membership in mutual learning communities, and those communities, in turn, are strengthened by increased individual capacities; they complement one another towards reciprocal growth”.

However, teachers note that when ‘individuality’ (*koseika*) is replaced by Western-style ‘individualism’ (*kojinshugi*) problems are bound to occur. Failure to recognise crucial differences between these two concepts is not limited to small children but is beginning to be seen in the wider preschool community. Despite educators’ belief in the relevance of *shūdan seikatsu* to modern Japanese society, they accuse parents of neglecting to show the very restraint they expect of their children. A Yuri teacher trainer wrote that, “Instead of concentrating on their children’s upbringing, more and more parents are self-centred, thinking only about enjoying themselves. Modern parents don’t know how to properly carry out their roles as mother and father”. *Hoikuen* teachers were dismissive of mothers who left their children in day-care right up until closing time, in order to go shopping or play pachinko.<sup>2</sup> *Yōchien* staff also expressed concerns that free after-school care might attract mothers who wished to spend leisure time in the malls instead of interacting with their child. Most of the mothers I knew were aware of these views, and although they sometimes manipulated the system to their advantage, they generally respected the rules of the preschool institution.

In the early 1990s, national guidelines regarding curriculum at *yōchien* and *hoikuen* were revised, which called for “respect for the independence and spontaneity of children and ... the promotion of free thought and expression of children [in order] to avoid the evil

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<sup>2</sup> *Pachinko* is the Japanese version of a slot machine. *Pachinko* parlours are ubiquitous throughout Japan.

of too much intellectual training from infancy, in a society which lays stress on school careers” (Ishigaki 1992:121). For those *yōchien* under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, such as Oka, it means that within the school day there must be no explicit instruction of academic skills such reading, writing and mathematics. Indeed, Oka’s curriculum reflects its emphasis on *shūdan seikatsu*, as opposed to promoting individual children’s abilities in school subjects. Over the past several years, Oka mothers have begun approaching the preschool administration for educationally-based classes which may help to give their children an edge in Japan’s academically-oriented society. As the birth rate has fallen, the lobbying power of parents has risen, and in 2006, the director of Oka reluctantly agreed to trial after-school English classes.<sup>3</sup> Much to the surprise of the administration, these classes have been a huge success, with demand far outweighing supply. While at this point in time the classes consist of small groups, parents have already approached the Canadian teacher about individual lessons for their children.

Over at Chibikko, private lessons are nothing new. Unconstrained by national directives, the directors have made available a wide range of extra-curricular classes to their students, although parents must pay extra tuition fees for these, above the monthly day-care charges. In the case of English lessons, parents can choose to put their child in a small group situation or the most expensive option, one-on-one tutoring with a native speaker. Representing the wealthier sectors of the community, these initiatives at Chibikko and Oka appear to support studies which indicate that affluence is linked to individualism (Triandis 1994).

Along with Tenshi, these two preschools have also enthusiastically embraced “internationalisation” (*kokusai kōryū*), a term which is often bandied about in the press, and which was the inspiration for the JET teacher exchange programme through which I first came to Japan.<sup>4</sup> At a recent Hokkaido preschool teachers’ conference, Oka was the subject of much discussion, as the only institution outside Sapporo to have a native English speaker permanently employed at the kindergarten. This fact is displayed prominently on Oka’s advertising materials and during open days. As per Ministry of Education guidelines, the

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<sup>3</sup> Oka is funded by a variety of sources: most of it comes of tuition fees, but it also receives assistance from local and regional authorities which means it must abide by Ministry of Education guidelines, but retains limited freedom to implement its own initiatives.

<sup>4</sup> The JET programme is a Government initiative which has seen thousands of assistant teachers from various English-speaking countries employed in Japanese public schools.

teacher is supposedly there just to 'play' with the children, but she does in fact conduct simple English lessons for both mothers and children throughout the grades. At Chibikko, as well as exposure to English in both group and private lessons, children are tested on their ability to recognize flags from around the world and are read stories from various countries. When my son attended Tenshi, "internationalisation" was the theme of the end-of-year concert to be performed in front of a large audience of family and friends. This required children aged three to six to memorize songs and phrases in English, Korean, Chinese, French and Spanish. Yet ironically, these same students have little or no knowledge of indigenous Hokkaido culture. For the children attending Mori and Hinode it is the same, despite the distinctive onomatopoeic Ainu names of their towns.

The Japanese government's efforts to "convince schools to individualize instruction, nurture creativity and personal expression, and promote an international perspective" has been criticised by educators as contributing to disregard for Japanese values in favour of Western ones (Holloway 2000:82). This criticism is not just limited to the classroom. Teachers talk of "a new generation of parents who are more vocal and child-focused but also more self-centred and uncooperative. These parents are described as more informed about child care, but as having little experience in the actual raising of a child. They have their own ideas, yet are somewhat like children themselves, emotionally immature" (Tsuneyoshi 2000:96).

Preschool directors have linked Western ideals of equality for women to increasingly individualistic and selfish mothers, which has led them to reject traditional values and childrearing methods (Holloway 2000:171). Research shows that more highly educated a Japanese mother is, the more likely it is that she will reject Japanese characteristics in favour of Western individualism (Kashiwagi 1998). In the case of the five Hokkaido preschools, it certainly seems to be mothers from upper and middle class Chibikko, Oka and Tenshi who are most enthusiastic about promoting individual opportunities for their children. Teachers at Hinode and Mori reported that they had received no inquiries from parents about extra lessons or more individual attention for their child, which may reflect both the economic realities of working-class parents, and their lower levels of education.

In Hokkaido, the impact of *koseika* seems less to do with producing well-rounded children, but more about increasing stratification of preschool education along socio-economic lines. While educated parents may perceive a higher status attached to individualistic, Western values, working class parents continue to support *shūdan seikatsu* teaching methods. This finding supports Smith's (1995) argument that educated regions of Japan are less likely to support large classes, as opposed to rural areas where lower-educated residents accept high student/teacher ratios as a 'natural' consequence of *shūdan* ideology.

It appears that notions of individualism, as evidenced by calls for more personalised and academic based instruction coupled with increasing themes of internationalisation, are creeping into existing preschool pedagogies and practice, and/or being added as extra-curricular activities. What this increased pressure for greater individualism means for the position and status of teachers remains to be seen. The consequences in terms of teachers' abilities to respond, cope and maintain existing structures in the face of such pressures may pose deep and enduring challenges to the ethic of *shūdan seikatsu*.

Teachers in the five Hokkaido preschools point out that the greatest threat to *shūdan seikatsu* is not necessarily represented by *koseika*, which is compatible with Japanese values (Moeran 1986:75), but by parents growing predilection for Western-style individualism (*kojinshugi*). The sweeping changes which have occurred in post-war Japanese society have been widely reported and will not be discussed again here. Instead, the following section focuses on how Japan's dropping birth rate has contributed towards parents gaining greater power to influence practice and ideology in the Hokkaido preschool classroom.

### ***The impact of the low birth rate on preschool classrooms***

*“Japanese parents need children, not alone for emotional satisfaction, but because they have failed in life if they have not carried on the family line. Every Japanese man must have a son ... to do daily homage to his memory after his death, ... to perpetuate the family line down the generations and to preserve the family honor and possessions. A woman too wants children ... because it is only as a mother that she gains status.”*

*(Benedict 1946:255).*

Facing classes with fewer and fewer children seems to be inevitable for the preschools in this study as the birth rate declines. With the exception of one optimistic teacher at Oka who predicted a rise of eighty children over the next few years, all the other teachers interviewed felt that student numbers would reduce by as much as half. At Hinode, several of the current students had already been transferred from other local public *hoikuen* which had closed due to low enrolments. With only two public *hoikuen* remaining open in the town, teachers were considering the possibility that these centres would have to be amalgamated in the near future. With just five students, Mori was in the most precarious position, yet the principal there remained pragmatic, commenting that “The number will probably decrease over the next few years, but to be honest, we haven’t really thought about it. Every year there are just enough kids – if there were only one or two, I don’t know whether we would keep the *hoikuen* going or not, but we will face that when we have to”.

Back in the early 1930s, Japanese women were prolific childbearers, with the birthrate much higher than the United States, and other European countries (Benedict 1945:256). In 1950, the fertility rate peaked at 4.32 births per woman, but by 1989 Japanese media had coined the term ‘1.57 shock’ to represent the radical drop in the birthrate. Today the figure is 1.38 births per woman, and Japan ranks among the world’s lowest for rates of fertility (Roberts 2002).

Studies undertaken by the Japanese government have attributed the low birthrate to new lifestyle opportunities, the strict division of labour by gender, reluctance to compromise higher standards of living and anxiety about the future of Japan (Roberts 2002). Despite state initiatives encouraging childbirth, Japanese women remain reluctant to



bear more children (Takahashi 2003, Peng 2002). Goodman (2002a:10) points out that the ambivalence to state intervention in promoting birth rates can be traced back to policies in the 1930s when more men were needed to staff the army.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, as far back as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japanese feminists such as Hiratsuka Raicho had used pro-natal government policies to argue that children did not belong to their mothers, but were the possessions of the state who had an interest in the number and quality of children produced, therefore the state had a responsibility to give mothers adequate funding for this purpose (Molony 1993:128).

In pre-war Japan, women were under pressure to embody *ryōsai kenbō* ideology constructed by the state. “*Ryōsai kenbō* defined women’s contribution to the good of the nation to be their labor as “good wives” and “wise mothers” in the private world of the home. Ideally the “good wife” carefully managed the affairs of the household and advanced the well-being of its adult members, while the “wise mother” devoted herself to rearing her children to become loyal and obedient imperial subjects” (Uno 1993a:297). In the context of rising militarism in the 1930s the emphasis changed from educating children and managing the household, to emphasising women as the bearers rather than the socialisers of children (Uno 1993a:299).

By World War II, reproduction was under state control, through the banning of birth control and government demands for women to produce numerous children for the benefit of Japan. This policy of ‘motherhood protection’ had both an economic basis, to safeguard the livelihoods of mothers so they could eventually return to work, and a body-centred one, whereby mothers’ access to work during pregnancy was limited in order to assure a good supply of healthy children for the state’s needs (Molony 1993:143).

After the war ended, Uno (1993a:304) attributes the ascendance of motherhood to three main reasons: wives’ work in serving their in-laws diminished following the introduction of postwar democratic ideologies, modern appliances permitted mothers to devote more time to childrearing, and the rise of employment for wages which decreased the numbers of housewives working in family enterprise. By the late 1940s women were encouraged to have children to meet rising labour needs in industry, in contrast to the

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<sup>1</sup> See also Tamanoi’s (1998:160-165) ethnography of rural women in Nagano which discusses state praise for prolific childbearers during the wartime period.

state's prewar demands for colonists and military conscripts (Uno 1993a:306). The concept of *ryōsai kenbō*, however, continued to influence Japanese educational policy and practice throughout the twentieth century. "Within this framework women were perceived as having not a right to equal education but an obligation to fulfill a dual role of wife and mother... The underlying assumption of the concept of women's education was that the natural, and preferably sole, function of women was that of reproduction and nurturing" (Buckley 1993:360).

In December 1994, the Japanese government released the Angel Plan (*Enzeru Puran*) which proposed helping working mothers by improving day-care, most significantly by increasing the flexibility of day-care arrangements (Roberts 2002). Unfortunately, this move does not appear to have changed the reality for working mothers. Takahashi (2003:83-84) attributes the failure of the Angel Plan to a changing labour market, where both men and women in paid work toil long hours, leaving little time for child-rearing. While post-war Japanese society has placed importance on economic 'production', 'reproduction' has been undermined. Fathers have not been considered in the policy, which has added to the discourse surrounding the "declining birth rate issue" being seen as a "women's problem" or as a "crisis of motherhood".

In 1999, conflicting messages by the Japanese government about pro-natal policies were typified during a Parliamentary meeting on ways to tackle the dropping birth rates, when Seiko Noda (the only woman Minister in the Cabinet) was asked by Hiromu Nonaka (Head of the Office of Gender Equality), "Why don't you set an example?" (Goodman 2002a:10). Early this year (2007), it was evident that little had changed when Health Minister Hakuo Yanagisawa publicly commented: "Because the number of birth-giving machines and devices is fixed, all we can ask is for them to do their best per head" (Dyer 2007:A17). While he soon regretted calling women "birth-giving machines", government sentiment on this topic remains obvious.

However, while the birthrate is dropping at an alarming rate, the number of abortions is rising, the majority of which (70%) are carried out on married women, with those aged between 35 and 39 who already have one or two children accounting for the highest number (Jolivet 1997:127). While this figure points to the relative ease with which

abortions can be obtained,<sup>2</sup> it also shows the reluctance of Japanese women to take on more childrearing responsibilities. Moreover, it may imply that modern women are rejecting government ideology of the professional housewife, which is implicit in public documents assuming that a mother (or another female relative) will be present at home to meet children's needs (Hendry 1993:232). With so many demands made on their time, Japanese mothers find it very difficult to work away from the home, and instead must devote themselves fully to caring for the children society expects them to produce (Lebra 1984:158).

A study of the value of children in six countries found that Japanese parents expressed a desire for larger families, but appeared constrained by socio-economic factors such as financial costs and housing problems. The emotional costs<sup>3</sup> of having of a child were also revealed as having an impact on the number of children, with Japanese couples feeling more strongly than other nationalities that their lives would change immeasurably (Arnold, Bulatao & Buripakdi 1975). These findings contrasted with public opinion surveys conducted by the Mainichi newspaper every two years, which found that while three children was considered ideal between 1945 and 1971, from 1973 onwards two children were preferred along with the reason that it was important to ensure a good education for children, over the previously cited economic grounds (Hara & Minagawa 1996:18).<sup>4</sup>

Whether the dropping birth rate is a product of the emancipation of women, resistance to state interference, rigid division of labour by gender or socio-economic and

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<sup>2</sup> An abortion can be carried out up until week twenty-two of pregnancy, without any real need of explanation by the pregnant woman, and costs between 70,000 and 100,000 yen. This is relatively affordable, especially when you consider the delivery of a baby, and the subsequent hospital stay can cost anything from 400,000 yen to over 1 million yen. In fact, abortion is commonly seen as a form of contraception in Japan. (Jolivet 1997:217).

<sup>3</sup> The study described emotional costs as including the responsibility of parenthood, discipline and moral behaviour, concern over children's future success, concern about satisfying children's present wants, health problems of children, noise, disorder, general rearing problems and emotional strain (Arnold, Bulatao & Buripakdi 1975:47).

<sup>4</sup> Most Hokkaido families I spoke to expressed the belief that three children was 'the ideal', although it is hard to say if this translates as purely personal desire, or is influenced by notions of creating the perfect family unit as recommended by childrearing texts. Tsutsuji and Yuri are predominantly timber and farming towns, where a supply of a labour for physical work could also be a factor in having larger families. However, many parents commented that financially it was very difficult to support three offspring, especially if there were hopes for the children to attend university in the future.

lifestyle changes, the reality is fewer children in the preschool classroom. Towns like Tsutsuji have been particularly affected, and while state initiatives like the Angel Plan have been in effect for over a decade now, local authorities have also come up with ideas such as financial incentives for would-be mothers. When my youngest son was born, I received a phone call from the Mayor's secretary who informed me that the Mayor would soon be visiting me with a special gift for the new baby. I thought I must have misunderstood, but sure enough, a few days later the Mayor and two officials arrived at my house to present me with an envelope containing ¥ 100,000 cash (NZ\$1,400 at the time). This money was to thank me for contributing to the dismal local birth rate, and had been taken from the town tax fund. Ironically, the cost of giving birth in Japan remains relatively high, as it is not covered under the compulsory national health insurance system, and while the state refunds a certain proportion to women who bear healthy babies, this is not adequate to cover the costs associated with pre-natal examinations, delivery and ante-natal care.

With fewer children around, preschools are also being forced to come up with innovative solutions to halt plunging enrolment numbers. As described earlier, the establishment of the *yōchien* and *hoikuen* were historically responses to distinctly different social and economic forces, leading to definitions such as this by Smith (1995:69): "The *hoikuen* are primarily rural-based and serve working mothers who work out of need. *Yōchien* cater to urban families and professional and technical workers in prefectures with elite high schools noted for their ability to graduate large percentages of top-university-bound students...[demonstrating] the role of *yōchien* as bastions of privilege and status in Japan".

While there may be academics who still agree with Smith's analogy, there are reasons to believe the differences between the groups have shrunk considerably, as the driving forces behind the Japanese preschool have become more complex and diverse. In order to meet the needs of their contrasting clientele, the preschool is evolving at a rapid pace in order to keep up with societal changes and parent's demands.

In Tsutsuji and Yuri, the most obvious effect of the dropping birth rate is the fact that supply now exceeds demands. In contrast, on a national level, in 1982 Buckley found that only 4,739 day-care centres were available to mothers, falling far short of the 24,000 centres deemed necessary to meet demand. In addition, a mere 41% of kindergartens in

operation were public, forcing mothers to consider expensive private kindergartens with lengthy waiting lists. Most institutions would not accept children under twelve months old, reinforcing social expectations that mothers would stay at home with her child for the first year (Buckley 1993:356). While I was unable to obtain historical statistics specific to Tsutsuji and Yuri, veteran teachers often talked of 'the good old days' when parents would rush to pick up enrolment forms as soon as they were printed, lining up for hours outside the kindergarten in the hope their child would be accepted and the subsequently bustling classrooms full of youngsters. More recent figures from the Tsutsuji and Yuri town halls show that while Hinode is permitted to take 80 children, in the last five years the number of children enrolled has fluctuated between eighteen and thirty-eight. Mori once accommodated over fifty children, a huge change from the five children currently enrolled. At Tenshi the maximum number allowed is 100, but there is less than half that number of students today, while popular Oka falls short of the 180 maximum level by thirty children.

In order to lure students to their institution, the preschools have been forced to introduce measures that were once non-negotiable. Despite society's continuing implicit disapproval of childcare for under-threes, public day-cares like Hinode are now accepting younger babies. While once children were not permitted to enter until the start of the school year (1 April) following their first birthday, mothers can begin sending their babies as soon as they turn one. Several teachers also mentioned that informal arrangements for younger babies had been made in order to keep the infants' class, and therefore the day-care, operating. This class represents the only upward surge in numbers, up from one child in previous years to six children in 2006. Mori has also adopted a pragmatic approach towards accepting younger children. The entry policies at Tenshi and Oka have also recently been relaxed to allow children to enter as soon as they turn three, although they are marked out as different with a special badge labelled *man san sai* (exactly three years old).

In addition, the owner of Oka was the first in Yuri to employ a radical tactic to attract potential students. In 2004, he pioneered the creation of a mother-child classroom for under threes. In a society where there are few support systems or opportunities for mothers of toddlers to socialise, this class has been a resounding success. Aged up to three years old, the children who attend these weekly classes are too young to enter 'real' kindergarten, but alongside their mothers they are introduced to the *shūdan seikatsu*

environment, begin to master kindergarten routines and make friends and, above all, they are shown what great fun it is to be a member of the Oka family. Almost all the children who attended these “pre-kindergarten” classes went on to enrol full-time when they became eligible. While some part of the motivation behind the owner’s scheme is no doubt financial, the classes have been carefully marketed to upwardly mobile parents as a way to give children a “headstart” in life. They include English lessons plus basic numeracy and literacy instruction even though the youngest children are only one year old. The classes also work to create a bond between mothers, another way of ensuring that children will be enrolled in Oka together with their “friends”.

While the operating hours of kindergartens like Oka were traditionally only four hours a day, this is changing as the proportion of working mothers increase. To meet the demands of working parents, and to make their institutions more appealing as the numbers of children decline, kindergartens have been forced to consider child-care after the main educational session has ended. The Ministry of Education has begun providing funding for this extra service (called *azukari hoiku* in Japanese) but users are generally required to pay an additional daily fee for this (Takahashi 2003:87-88).

Teachers at both Oka and Tenshi directly linked the dropping birth rate and higher numbers of working mothers to the rise in users of *azukari hoiku*. The two preschools introduced the service eight years ago, and while Oka previously charged by the hour for after-school care, from 2006 this was reduced to a nominal fee. Tenshi has abolished the fee altogether, in the hope that more working parents will consider sending their children to kindergarten instead of day-care. When my children attended Tenshi, several of my local friends were surprised to hear that *azukari hoiku* was available there, still believing that the kindergarten closed at 2pm, and thus had dismissed it as unsuitable for working parents like themselves. Both Oka and Tenshi have introduced a kindergarten bus service, which collects children from their homes and returns them again after school. In the snowy winter months, and for parents of more than one child, this is especially useful. Correct conduct is expected of students who ride the bus, and the trip itself is also seen by teachers as a chance for children to bond with their peers. Through such measures, the kindergarten (*yōchien*) is now competing head-to-head with the day-care (*hoikuen*) for the patronage of busy, modern parents and their children.

In order to disseminate correct information, and to entice prospective students, Oka and Tenshi publish slick, glossy brochures several months before the new school year and, on top of mailing campaigns, parents are encouraged to pass on pamphlets and positive reports to friends and relatives. After expressing an interest in kindergarten to a mother of a Tenshi student, the next evening I opened my door to find the head teacher who had cycled around after school to personally deliver me a pamphlet and to answer any questions I might have. Although I did eventually enrol my two older sons there, at first, this direct approach somewhat put me off!

For Hinode and Mori, there are none of these kinds of active recruitment methods at work. The brochure for each day-care is a simple folded photocopy which outlines the opening hours, events, basic aims, items the children must bring along and policies on issues like illness. There are no swimming or piano lessons offered here, nor are children expected to have special uniforms, smocks or equipment like at the kindergartens. However, fewer numbers of children have resulted in a change in classroom structure. Classes that were once strictly segregated by age have been amalgamated, much to the regret of teaching staff who observe that games and activities for the whole group are now limited by the children's varied abilities. Unlike the standardised monthly tuition fees parents must pay at the kindergarten,<sup>5</sup> public day-cares like Hinode adjust their charges according to parents income levels which, in 2006, ranged from zero to ¥ 34,000. There are no extra administration fees to pay, and although mothers are expected to sew bags, sheets and duvet covers for their children, there are no uniforms, instruments or stationery sets that need to be purchased. Considering that the day-care is open from 8 am to 5.30 pm Monday to Friday, plus Saturday morning, and includes meals, this system represents good value and will continue to be an attractive option for working class parents who have jobs.

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<sup>5</sup> Both Tenshi and Oka charge ¥ 16,000 per month for tuition fees, which must be paid even when the kindergarten is closed over the holidays. At the time of enrolment additional one-off charges for administration (¥ 40,000) and equipment (¥ 6,000) must also be paid. At Oka, parents must also purchase items such as winter and summer uniforms (¥ 10,600), a school-approved backpack (¥ 4,000), musical instruments (¥ 5,000) plus suitable indoor shoes. There is a ¥ 2,000 monthly charge to use the kindergarten bus at both preschools.

However, at the other end of the spectrum is the private day-care, like Chibikko, which represents the changing face of the Japanese preschool. Although technically still a day-care centre (*hoikuen*), Chibikko's structured, academic curriculum reveals it to be more comparable with Smith's (1995:69) "bastions of privilege and status", the *yōchien*. Fees at Chibikko are not based on parent's salaries, but range from ¥ 30,000 for six year olds to ¥ 60,000 for newborns reflecting the more demanding job of caring for babies as opposed to older children. Unlike the other preschools in this study, Chibikko is willing to care for even very young babies, in fact, this was one of the reasons I enrolled my middle son here when he was three months old. They are also flexible on the hours children attend, and may negotiate discounted rates to reflect this, another important issue for part-time workers like myself. While more expensive than other institutions, Chibikko has positioned itself squarely to meet the market demand and although their computer-generated brochure is available for perusal, they attribute their success to word of mouth in the workplaces of their student's parents. Teachers take pains to ensure the children are well-behaved, recognizing how vital it is that their good reputation is maintained, because as Holloway (2000:26) points out, "Private preschool directors ... are free to develop an educational philosophy that is entirely unique and unfettered by accountability to any central government agency, but they must maintain a higher enrollment to remain viable economically" (Holloway 2000:26).

While Mori is more like Hinode in terms of resources and educational philosophy, in the manner of the Oka and Chibikko principals, village officials have been trying to meet the market with innovative ideas. In Mori, it is not just the preschool at risk due to depopulation but the whole community. Several years ago the village began a national internet advertising campaign encouraging disabled, bullied and academically struggling students to relocate to Mori along with their families. Appealing to the sentiment of a better life in "full of nature, slow pace" rural Hokkaido, the village promised help with housing, finding employment and emotional support. Due to this campaign, the small public school has managed to remain open as each year one or two students transfer from other parts of Japan to Mori. The number of newcomers combined with local children still means that the teachers far outnumber their pupils, but it is a harmonious and productive environment.



Unlike the school, the preschool at Mori does not receive any funding from local or national sources, but as long as the community exists it seems likely there will be parents requiring childcare.

While the birth rate has impacted on the number of students present in preschool classrooms, it has not significantly affected *shūdan seikatsu* as a method of socialisation. However, as described above, the reality of fewer students has affected classroom practice and structure. Hokkaido preschools have been forced into competing with each other either to remain open (public institutions) or economically viable (private institutions). Furthermore, modern Japanese parents have higher expectations, and more power to influence preschool policy. *Yōchien* like Oka and Tenshi no longer close at 2pm, but offer childcare services. Private *hoikuen* like Chibikko do not limit themselves to teaching hygiene and table manners, but offer specialist academic instruction. Hinode and Mori, the two public *hoikuen*, remain true to their working class roots but are forced to amalgamate institutions and classes, while watching their numbers decline. It is a far cry from the clearly defined roles of *yōchien* and *hoikuen* when they were first established during the Meiji regime.

## Chapter 7 Conclusion

Since the establishment of preschools in the Meiji period, Japanese *yōchien* and *hoikuen* have undergone tremendous change, particularly in the post-war years. Over the same period, the birth rate has gone from being one of the world's highest to a subject of widespread concern in recent times over its crippling decline. Whereas classes of forty children were once commonplace in Hokkaido preschools, some institutions are now facing as few as four or five students per grade. This change is most evident in rural areas, such as Tsutsuji, which is clearly reeling from the effects of economic downturn and depopulation.

Although seen by some as traditionally Japanese, the large class is in fact a product of Western influence but came to be adopted as an effective way of introducing children to *shūdan seikatsu*, or 'life in the group'. Unlike the indulged attention (*amae*) given to children in the family home, behaviour within the *shūdan* environment requires self-discipline and cooperation with one's peers.

This study focused on the ways in which *shūdan seikatsu* ideology had been accepted or rejected by five diverse Hokkaido preschools, and how this may have been affected by lower student numbers as a result of the dropping birth rate. Despite their diversity, teachers at all the preschools could see benefits in the *shūdan seikatsu* paradigm, although the extent to which this was implemented in practice varied across the institutions. It became clear almost immediately that the modern preschool faces challenges which have resulted in increasing levels of complexity far beyond the stereotypes of 'group-oriented' Japan.

Contrary to my hypothesis prior to fieldwork, smaller classes have not affected the practice of those preschools which continue to see *shūdan seikatsu* as their main aim. Although some activities are restricted with fewer children present, the main strength in *shūdan seikatsu* is the very fact that children are no longer interacting in the familiar, relaxed *uchi* environment of the home, but must adjust their behaviour according to expectations in the *soto* world of the preschool. According to the teachers interviewed, and my observations of classrooms, such conventions and codes of conduct are relatively impervious to changes in student numbers.

However, with less competition for preschool places, Japanese parents have begun to assert themselves in the educational sphere. Mothers, in particular, are beginning to resist attempts to socialise them, much in the same way Japanese women have begun to reject the role of childbearer for state purposes. For those women who do choose motherhood, the educational mobilisation of Japan has resulted in some becoming increasingly concerned with their child's success (*kyōiku mama*), while others are taking advantage of longer preschool hours to attend to their own needs.

Although there are fewer children being born in Hokkaido, the numbers attending preschool are rising, and the age at which children enter is becoming lower. This reflects both the growing numbers of working women, and a gradual grudging acceptance by society that children under three years old can be adequately cared for by someone other than their mother. This also may explain why *hoikuen*, which traditionally functioned to provide day-care for working parents, are growing much faster than supposedly academically-oriented *yōchien* with its limited hours.

In order to meet new demands by parents, and to stay economically viable, preschools have undergone something of a metamorphosis in the past two decades. Now offering after-school care, bus services and extra academic lessons, *yōchien* like Oka and Tenshi may still extol the virtues of *shūdan seikatsu* but are also flirting with the notion of individualised programmes for those parents willing to pay for it. At Chibikko the moral lessons of *shūdan seikatsu* remain as pertinent as ever, and despite traditional ideas of *hoikuen* as less prestigious, the emphasis here is clearly on assisting each child realise his/her own individual potential, a realistic goal for the children of the wealthy who can fund this dream. For the students of Hinode there is little opportunity for one-on-one exchanges with their overworked teachers. Their days are long and relatively unstructured, and while the children are still learning valuable lessons in social interaction through *shūdan seikatsu*, Hinode remains a rather static example of the social welfare roots of the *hoikuen*. Mori is somewhat of an anomaly. While teaching staff remain true to *shūdan seikatsu* principles of teaching, it is easy to imagine that inside the classroom the two worlds of *uchi* and *soto* will soon collide if the numbers drop any further. Like Hinode, Mori represents a basic need for childcare by working class parents, and as long as the

communities of Tsutsuji and Mori exist, this need will continue to be met, albeit in its most elementary form.

My initial research question considered the possibility that the relative isolation of Hokkaido, combined with its history of colonisation of the indigenous Ainu people, may have impacted on the pedagogy and ideology of its preschools. However, my fieldwork revealed that while Hokkaido society is far from homogeneous, minority groups including the Ainu have been completely eliminated from the preschool curriculum, resulting in subject matter that has been standardised across the country by state authorities even if it bears little relevance to Hokkaido children. Conversely, in line with Ministry of Education initiatives, *yōchien* and upwardly mobile private *hoikuen* have embraced the ideals of internationalisation which sees them looking to overseas countries for inspiration while simultaneously neglecting to examine their own history.

Upper and middle class parents are also driving the push towards a more outward-facing Hokkaido. After school English lessons are extremely popular, yet most children in this region have little chance of conversing with a native speaker beyond their teacher. Those who can afford it pay for their children to take extra classes, which will give them a competitive edge in Japan's increasingly academically stratified society, yet those same parents still appreciate the traditional moral lessons of the *shūdan seikatsu* teaching environment. If the birth rate continues to fall, it is clear that parents will continue to wield their new found consumer power in the educational sphere.

For less-educated, working class parents the reality is less clear-cut. They are more likely to accept large classes as a function of *shūdan seikatsu*, and may even actively seek out institutions which feature these to ensure their children have a wide group of friends. In the era of the low birth rate, crowded classrooms have come to replace the neighbourhood as an arena of socialisation for children with few or no siblings. On a practical level, these parents must utilize *hoikuen* for their long opening hours, although this may start to change as *yōchien* extend after school care services. The most affordable *hoikuen* are also those run by local authorities, which are protected from market forces by national subsidies and therefore the most resistant to pressure by parents for change. At the same time, large classes with few teachers are economically efficient and local authorities have little incentive to reduce student/teacher ratios. It appears likely that the public *hoikuen* will

continue on much in the way it always has, regardless of dropping numbers or attempts by parents to subvert the dominant paradigm.

The reality of the Hokkaido preschool is complex and diverse, yet still evolving to meet changes in society, the family, gender relations and the educational domain. While learning to act appropriately within the group is still valued, and even desired for preschool children, there is a growing awareness of the need to move beyond the stereotypes of *shūdan seikatsu*. Children in modern Hokkaido are increasingly being viewed as individuals whose strengths and weaknesses are enhanced by subverting their own desires for the group when appropriate, but who are finding their own voice above the crowd.

On my last evening in Hokkaido, my son and I were invited to a friend's place for a farewell party. The house was already full of mothers and children, but we were waiting on the fathers to arrive back from work. As we women worked together preparing the food, the group of children initially rushed about but soon began pulling out their Gameboys from cupboards and bags. Six year old Yayoi began to cry that she had forgotten hers, so a quick call was made via her cellphone instructing her father to drop by the house and pick it up on his way over. The children went back to playing at sumo wrestlers until Yayoi's father arrived. "I think she's happier to see the Gameboy than her Dad", remarked Yayoi's mother, laughing, "after all, she sees more of it than him!" The other mothers all smiled knowingly as Yayoi's father tossed the Gameboy over. Visualising his playmates disappearing, my son looked over forlornly, whereupon Yayoi's father quickly produced another Gameboy from his bag. "This is Yayoi's old one", he told him, "so you don't feel left out". Each child's Gameboy had been personalised by them, covered in *purikura* photo stickers or festooned with tiny beaded chains and baubles. The children moved en masse to the living area where they formed a circle, sat down and began playing their individual Gameboys. Periodically, they would swap the toys, but for the next hour the children remained simultaneously entranced in their own game yet continued to carry on animated conversations with the other members of the group. The sight of those tiny bowed heads, each focused on their own individual journey, yet securely surrounded by the comforting presence of their peers, seems to be a perfect metaphor for the children of Hokkaido today.

## Appendix: Questions for Participants

1. What do you see as the main aim of preschool?  
一般的に幼稚園か保育園の主な目的はなんと思いますか
2. How many children attend this preschool? What numbers do you predict over the next few years?  
この幼稚園か保育園の人数はいくつですか。将来の数年の人数はいくつぐらいと思いますか。
3. What kinds of families use this preschool? Eg, Farmers, working class, professionals?  
どんな家族たちがこの幼稚園か保育園を使いますか。たとえば農家、工員、店屋さん、先生。。
4. What kind of fees do you charge?  
保育料はいくらですか。
5. What are the ages of children here? Are classes divided by age, or are different ages mixed together?  
こちらは子供たちは何歳から何歳までですか。クラスは年齢で分かれていますか。又は子供たち何歳でも一緒にいますか。
6. Describe a typical day at your preschool  
この幼稚園か保育園で普通の一日を説明してください。
7. How many staff work here? How many of these are female/male teachers?  
こちらは先生たちは何人いますか。女か男は何人ですか。
8. What is the student to teacher ratio in your classes?  
クラスで先生一人と子供たち何人ぐらいいますか。
9. Which do you prefer, large or small classes? Why?  
クラスの人数が多いか少ないどちらがいいと思いますか。どうしてそうと思いますか。
10. Do you think *shūdan seikatsu* is important?  
クラスで集団生活が大事だと思いますか。

11. Do you think it is possible for children to experience *shūdan seikatsu* in a small group?  
小さいなグループで子供たちは集団生活を経験できると思いますか。
12. What are your expectations of mothers in the preschool sphere?  
幼稚園か保育園についてお母さんたちはどんのことをやったほうがいいと思いますか。
13. Do you think the role or participation of parents has changed over the past decade or two?  
社会について前の10, 20年間に母親や父親の仕事や参加することが変わってきたと思いますか。
14. Do you think the behaviour of children has changed?  
昔の子供たちと比べて、今の子供たちの行儀が変わってきたと思いますか。
15. What kind of children's behaviour do you deem unacceptable?  
子供たちの行儀について、何がだめですか。
16. How do you discipline children?  
どやって子供たちにしつけを教えていますか。
17. Do you think the drop in population has influenced preschool life? If yes, in what way?  
しょうしかのせいで幼稚園や保育園の生活が変わったと思いますか。はいだったら、どやって?
18. Are there any Ainu at this preschool? Does the preschool see introducing Ainu culture and/or Hokkaido history to children as important, or not? How about other cultures (internationalization)?  
この幼稚園か保育園にアイヌ人がいますか。子供たちにアイヌや北海道の歴史のことをおしえていますか。それは大事なことだと思いますか。国際きよりゆについてどう思いますか。
19. What issues or aims are important when planning your curriculum?  
幼稚園か保育園の一年間予定を作るとき何のことが大切だと思いますか。
20. Does your preschool teach reading, writing or other academic subjects, or offer extra lessons?

こちらは子供たちに読み方、書き方、ほかな科目を教えていますか。別の授業もしますか。

21. In the case of *yōchien*, do you offer after school care? When did this service begin, and why? Do you charge for this, and if so, how much? What percentage of children use this service?

幼稚園の場合はお預かりをしますか。いつからお預かりが始まりました。どうして？お預かりはお金がかかりますか。いくらですか。幼稚園のお預かり子供たちは何パーセントぐらいですか。

22. In the case of *hoikuen*, what do you see as the main purpose of group naptime? Do all kids take a nap? How do you get kids to sleep?

保育園の場合はグループのお昼寝の目的は何ですか。子供たちの全人はお昼寝をしますか。どやって子供たちを寝させますか。

23. What is the procedure around meals at preschool?

幼稚園や保育園のお弁当時間が級食についてどんなことをしますか。

24. What kinds of special events (sports days, festivals, concerts) do you have? Are these unique to Japan? Why do you feel these are important?

どんな特別な行事（運動会、お祭り、発表会）をもようしますか。この行事は日本のユニークのことですか。どうしてそれは大事なことだと思いますか。

25. What are your future goals for this preschool?

今後この幼稚園か保育園の目的は何ですか。



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## Glossary of key terms used in the text

While there are several ways of writing Japanese in its Romanized form, this glossary employs the Hepburn method. The often used double vowels **oo** and **uu** are written with a macron, and become **ō** and **ū** respectively. The same rule applies to the double vowel **aa** which becomes **ā**, whereas as the long **ee** vowel is written as **ei**.

Reference: Martin, S. (1997). *Martin's Concise Japanese dictionary: English-Japanese, Japanese-English, fully Romanized with complete kanji & kana*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle.

<i>Ainu</i>	The indigenous people of Hokkaido
<i>aisatsu</i>	daily greetings
<i>amae</i>	dependency
<i>amaeru</i>	to depend on someone (v.)
<i>bentō</i>	packed (box) lunch
<i>enchō (sensei)</i>	preschool principal or director
<i>enryo</i>	reserve, restraint
<i>ganbaru</i>	to do one's best, to persevere
<i>genkan</i>	entrance foyer where one takes off ones shoes
<i>hiragana</i>	Japanese syllabary
<i>hoikuen</i>	day care centre
<i>Hokkaidō</i>	Japan's northernmost major island
<i>Honshu</i>	Japan's main island where the capital, Tokyo, is situated
<i>kanji</i>	Chinese characters adapted into Japanese language
<i>katakana</i>	phonetic alphabet used for foreign loan words
<i>kojinshugi</i>	Western-style individualism
<i>koseika</i>	individuality
<i>kyōiku</i>	education
<i>kyōiku mama</i>	education mother
<i>nakami ni irete</i>	literally "can I join your group?"
<i>obāsan</i>	grandmother
<i>okāsan</i>	mother
<i>renraku cho</i>	parent/teacher contact notebook
<i>ryōsai kenbo</i>	good wife/wise mother construct
<i>sensei</i>	teacher
<i>shitsuke</i>	training, discipline
<i>shūdan seikatsu</i>	literally "life in the group", a socialisation technique
<i>soto</i>	outside group or world
<i>sunao</i>	cooperative, compliant
<i>taisō</i>	physical exercises, calisthenics
<i>tōban</i>	duty monitor
<i>uchi</i>	inside group or world
<i>undōkai</i>	sports day, athletics meeting
<i>wakaraseru</i>	getting a child to understand
<i>yōchien</i>	kindergarten