

How do Nursery Teachers in the US View a Japanese Nursery Teacher Who uses Her Back to Interact with Infants and Toddlers?

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1. Introduction

With the global rise in the discussion about the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC), there has been a growing interest in the quality of ECEC for children under the age three. Mizuno and Nakatsubo (2021) introduced the practice of how Japanese nursery teachers approach infants and toddlers by using *senaka no hoiku*, a technique characterized by teachers' positioning themselves with their back facing the child. In Japanese, *senaka* means back, and *hoiku* refers to ECEC. This is an approach in which the nursery teacher uses her back to interact with infants and toddlers to ensure spontaneous play, provide space for play, and give them time to move on their own. Previous studies have pointed out that one characteristic of Japanese ECEC is that it encourages children's autonomy by believing in their abilities and daring not to intervene (e.g., Hayashi et al., 2015; Nakatsubo et al., 2021). *Senaka no hoiku* can also be seen as a characteristic of Japanese ECEC because it encourages autonomy by believing in infants' and toddlers' abilities by not facing them.

In the US, the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) (Harms 2018) indicates that interactions between nursery teachers and infants and toddlers should be warm and responsive, including skin-to-skin contact and other teachers' actions that are visible and tend to emphasize direct interaction. By contrast, *senaka no hoiku* is an approach that is not described in ITERS. Further, it is an invisible teacher action that cannot necessarily be observed by a third party. In fact, Nakatsubo et al. (2023) found that while US nursery teachers hesitate to turn their backs on infants and toddlers and emphasize verbal interaction and observation, Japanese teachers use the technique to ensure infants' and toddlers' involvement in the classroom.

When considering the above, how do nursery teachers in the US view *senaka no hoiku*? The purpose of this study is to clarify this question and to examine the uniqueness of Japanese ECEC by exploring the narratives of US nursery teachers about this practice.

2. Methodology

2-1. Participants and procedures

In this study, we used multi-vocal ethnography (Tobin, 1989) with some modifications. In June 2022, an online focus group interview was conducted with the cooperation of nursery teachers from two facilities in the US (two at M Daycare and three at W Daycare, a total of five). Specifically, we illustrated and introduced in English seven episodes related to *senaka no hoiku*, as shown in Mizuno and Nakatsubo (2021), and asked the teachers at each facility to talk freely with each other about what they saw.

2-2. Data analysis

All recorded data were transcribed in the original language (English) and then translated into Japanese. The data were analyzed in Japanese by the research team. To understand the meanings behind participants' narratives, we analyzed the data following the procedure developed by Otani (2019). Specifically, after repeated readings of the transcript, we identified words and phrases that came up often, or had cultural nuances. Using these words and

phrases as codes, we coded each segment, carefully considering the meaning of the participants' statements. A total of 120 codes were found. Using all the codes, we reconstructed a story that shows how US nursery teachers view *senaka no hoiku*.

2-3. Episodes of *senaka no hoiku* presented to some teachers in the US

Playing house back to back (April 2022): Tomoko/Girl/2 years, 4 months old

Tomoko recently came to our center. She took a toy I handed to her, but did not know what to do with it. When I moved closer to her, she stepped backward. I took more time in approaching her. Tomoko noticed a child next to her putting toy vegetables into a pot, moving the pot over to the stove and pretending to cook them. Tomoko stared at the child, chose a pot nearby, then started to put toy vegetables into her pot. I kept my back turned to her, but still sensing each child behind me. Tomoko also had her back turned while "cooking." Occasionally, she turned her head and looked at me. I knew she was looking, so I muttered, "Something smells really good." By saying this, I tried to send her the message, "Your teacher is right here."

Calm down and recharge energy (April 2022): Yuya/Boy/1 year, 6 months old

Two children were on my lap, and four others were sitting in front of me. They started to read picture books. At that moment, Yuya was irritated and jumped onto my lap. This broke the sense of calm and led everyone to cling to me. Seven children were now jumbled together. I removed everyone from my lap, hugged Yuya tightly, and then moved him behind me. I started reading the previous book for other children, who were now sitting in front of me. Yuya screamed and cried loudly because he had been placed behind me so suddenly. I squeezed him just a little toward the corner, to make a wall with my back to create space only for him. The other six children were calm and looking at the book I held. Yuya gradually calm down. Eventually, he was so quiet that I needed to glance at him over my shoulder to check how he was doing. Yuya was sucking his finger and holding the end of my apron. As I was sensing Yuya with my back, I felt a stamp on my back. It was Yuya who stood up and leaned on me. After a while, he sneaked over my shoulder, showed himself, and sat on my lap. I let him do so. After he finished so-called recharging his energy, he slowly stood up and went away to play.

3. Results

While the US teachers expressed interest in "*senaka no hoiku*", there were some differences compared to the practice in the US. First, while the Japanese nursery teacher does not face the infants and toddlers in *senaka no hoiku*, the US nursery teachers emphasize being face-to-face with each other. The purpose of looking at the children is to assure their safety, to understand them, and to communicate compassion to them. Second, in *senaka no hoiku* the Japanese nursery teacher does not talk with the infants and toddlers, whereas US nursery teachers prefer speaking with them. The purpose of speaking with them is to be a model of conversation to them. Consequently, infants and toddlers can acquire the basic patterns of appropriate cognition, thinking, and behavior. Third, while the Japanese nursery teacher in *senaka no hoiku* use her back to gently divide spaces, the US teachers emphasize that the purpose of their explicit division of space is to give infants and toddlers individual space when needed and to prevent them from interacting with others.

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Editor's Notes

Thank you for letting me assist you.

This looks great! You have explained things very well throughout.

All the best,

Nancy