

Overview of Japan's policies on transition from ECEC to primary education: Focusing on the late 2010s to the present

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the need for the establishment of a system of cooperation between early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres and primary schools to achieve a smooth transition from ECEC to primary education has been a long-standing concern in Japan. This is due to two trends: the focus on ECEC as a national strategy for educational reform based on the continuity of development and learning; and the prevention of 'first-year student problem', a maladjustment problem among children entering school caused by the 'gap' between ECEC centre and primary school (Fukumoto, 2014).

While the above has been summarised by Fukumoto (2014) for the period up to the early 2010s, it has not been summarised for the period since the 2010s. Therefore, this paper aims to summarise the policies on transition from ECEC to primary education from the 2010s to the present.

2. Policies on transition from ECEC to primary education: from the late 2010s to the present

Two major developments to date can be pointed out: the first is 'the image by the end of childhood', which was specified in 2017 as common to the three national ECEC curricula; the second is the 'bridging programme for ECEC and primary education', which was launched in 2022.

'The image by the end of childhood' is positioned as a specific state that is developed in children at the end of their preschool years when the foundations of 'knowledge and skills', 'abilities of thinking, judgement, and expression', 'learning dispositions and humanity to advance towards learning', which are the qualities and abilities to be developed throughout school education, are nurtured in early childhood. 'The image by the end of childhood' are so called in other words as 'the ten attitudes': "sound mind and body", "independence", "cooperativity", "fostering of morality and normative consciousness", "social participation", "fostering of thinking abilities", "connection to nature and respect for life", "interests in and sensitivity to quantity, figures, signs and letters", "mutual verbal communication" and "rich sensitivity and expression". 'The ten attitudes' are presented as clues for improving the quality of education in the period of transition from ECEC to primary education. 'The image by the end of childhood' should be seen as clues for teachers to build up their practices, such as creating situations in which individual children can have the experiences necessary for their development during play and providing the necessary support. And the fact that young children are not to be taught or seen in the same way was to be borne in mind from the outset when they were described in the three national ECEC curricula modified in 2017. However, contrary to the original intention, in the field of practice, 'the image by the end of childhood' is often misunderstood and accepted as a goal to be achieved by the end of early childhood, and the intention has not always been fully disseminated (MEXT, 2023). In addition, 'the image by the end of childhood' itself has been considered as an

advance of early childhood education to primary school, and researchers have criticised the 'the image by the end of childhood' as being oriented towards ECEC as an advance on primary education.

Against this background, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) established the 'special committee on bridging for ECEC and primary education' in the Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittee of the Central Council for Education in 2021, which positioned the two years between five-year-olds and first grade as the 'bridging period' and held further discussions on improving the quality of education during the period between ECEC and primary education. From 2022, based on a correct understanding of 'the image by the end of childhood', and with respect for the diversity of each child, the 'bridging programme for ECEC and primary education' is being promoted mainly in model local governments, aiming to develop the foundations of learning and life for all children. Based on the discussions of the above-mentioned committee, the 'bridging programme for ECEC and primary education' aims to take a unified view of the curriculum for five-year-old children and first-year primary schools students and to ensure that those involved in ECEC and primary education in local governments work together to enhance and improve curricula and educational methods, so that every child in the transition period between ECEC and primary education will have the opportunity to unlock their potentiality and enjoy their wellbeing (MEXT, 2023). In 2023, as a summary of the discussions of the 'special committee on bridging for ECEC and primary education', it was proposed that education in the bridging period should be enhanced by preparing and evaluating the curriculum with a view to children's development, and that the education in the bridging period should be enhanced through the development and evaluation of the curriculum. The committee's aims include directions as follows: the enhancement of education during the bridging period, including the development of a curriculum and evaluation; sharing of awareness of the characteristics of early childhood education with society and primary schools; support for children and families with special needs; support for all children to develop a foundation for learning and life without disparities; the establishment of systems and human resource development necessary to guarantee the quality of education; and research and study necessary to ensure the quality of education (MEXT, 2023).

3. Conclusion

Fukumoto (2014) observed that the importance of cooperation between ECEC centres and primary schools has been emphasised from two perspectives: the development of educational reform; and the prevention of 'first-year student problem'. This paper has made it clear that in recent years, namely from the late 2010s to the present, the transition policies has been progressed in the context of the development of educational reform, with a more specific agenda of improving the quality of education during between ECEC and primary education.