



# Reflection on the Professional Development of Early Childhood Education and Care Teachers in Japan Based on Children's Voices

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## Abstract

Using action research, this study examined the professional development of teachers through the reflections that kindergarten teachers obtain from children's voices and the relevance between the working environment and teachers' reflection at teacher conferences in Japan. Four teachers participated in the study. Data sources included teachers' perspectives on imitation paper, teachers' thoughts and reflections at conferences and during interviews, visual material, and narrative observations of children's play. Children's voices stimulate teachers' reflection and provide deeper insights about diversity among children. The discussions at the conference about children's voices showed teachers' learning in four aspects: beliefs of play, environmental setting, understanding of children, and child–teacher relationships. In the act of listening to children's voices, each teacher was influenced by their job positions and by the relationship within teacher groups in reflection at teacher conferences. Teachers appeared to understand each other's beliefs by engaging in regular dialogue at conferences. This study contributed to the improvement of in-service training methods in early childhood education and care.

**Keywords** Children's voices · In-service training · Reflection · Teachers · Japan

## Résumé

S'appuyant sur une recherche active, cette étude analyse le développement professionnel d'enseignants par le biais de la réflexion apportée par des enseignants en maternelle à partir de la parole des enfants et l'adéquation entre l'environnement de travail et la réflexion des enseignants, lors de conférences regroupant des enseignants au Japon. Quatre enseignants ont participé à l'étude. Les sources de données comprenaient les points de vue des enseignants sur des documents factices, les idées et réflexions des enseignants lors de conférences et d'interviews, des documents visuels

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et des remarques descriptives sur les jeux d'enfants. La parole des enfants stimule la réflexion des enseignants et permet une compréhension plus approfondie de la diversité parmi les enfants. Les discussions lors de la conférence sur la parole des enfants ont mis en avant quatre aspects de l'instruction des enseignants : valeur du jeu, éléments environnementaux, compréhension des enfants et relations enseignant-enfant. Lors de l'écoute de la parole des enfants, chaque enseignant était influencé par sa propre position professionnelle et par les rapports à l'intérieur des groupes de réflexion d'enseignants lors des conférences d'enseignants. En engageant régulièrement le dialogue lors des conférences, les enseignants ont démontré une compréhension de leurs convictions mutuelles. Cette étude a contribué à améliorer les méthodes de formation interne dans le domaine de l'éducation et du soutien de la petite enfance.

## Resumen

Utilizando la investigación-acción, este estudio examinó el desarrollo profesional de los maestros a través de las reflexiones que los maestros de educación infantil obtienen de las voces de los niños y la relevancia entre el entorno laboral y la reflexión de los maestros en las conferencias de maestros en Japón. Participaron cuatro maestros en el estudio. Las fuentes de datos incluyeron las perspectivas de los maestros sobre el papel de imitación, pensamientos y reflexiones de los maestros en las conferencias y durante las entrevistas, material visual y las observaciones narrativas del juego de los niños. Las voces de los niños estimulan la reflexión de los maestros y proporcionan una visión más profunda sobre la diversidad entre los niños. Las discusiones en la conferencia sobre las voces de los niños mostraron el aprendizaje de los maestros en cuatro aspectos: creencias sobre el juego, entorno ambiental, comprensión de los niños y relaciones entre niños y maestros. En el acto de escuchar las voces de los niños, cada maestro estaba influenciado por su posición laboral y por la relación dentro de los grupos de maestros en la reflexión en las conferencias de maestros. Los maestros parecían comprender las creencias de los demás al participar en un diálogo regular en las conferencias. Este estudio contribuyó a la mejora de los métodos de formación continua en la educación y atención a la primera infancia.

## Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is built around the interactions between teachers and children. Teachers who listen to the voice of children enhance the quality of these interactions and contribute to the overall improvement of ECEC. In recent years, quality education has often been conceptualized as a product, in which higher returns depend on investment in perfecting the system (Moss, 2014). However, in reality, unlike products and their market value, quality education comprises dynamic and multidimensional processes that are influenced by multiple levels of involvement, contexts, and activities (Sinclair, 2004). Hence, listening to young children is not an act of receiving consumer evaluation, but a democratic act of “meaning-making” of their experiences (Dahlberg et al., 2007 p. 105–120).

Meaning-making is subject to reflection and discourse, and leads to value judgments about children's experiences (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

In Japan, quality ECEC is an important policy concern, and policymakers concur with Sylva et al. (2003) that "quality is not a universal concept, but depends on national curricula and cultural priorities" (p. 46). In 2018, committees were established by two ministries (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology; Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare) to investigate the role and influence of traditional Japanese values in providing high-quality ECEC. In 2020, the summary reports by each committee (MEXT, 2020; MHLW, 2020) supported the need to accommodate the diversity of children and provide opportunities to develop children's sense of agency (being able to independently make choices and decisions).

This leads to a more thorough examination of the current educational and training strategies aimed at facilitating the professional development of ECEC teachers in Japan. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018a), participation in in-service training is positively associated with quality in ECEC settings. In-service training is widely accepted as an effective method to create opportunities for significant reflection on the teachers' own practices (OECD, 2018a). Positive outcomes of in-service training have been found in many aspects, including changing teachers' beliefs and practices regarding children's play (Vu et al., 2015), improving child-teacher relationships (Rhodes & Hennessy, 2000), and intentional planning of activities and environmental settings (Dickinson & Caswell, 2007). As a result, various in-service training methods and content have been implemented, and meaningful strategies for the professional development of ECEC teachers have been examined in several countries (OECD, 2018a). Recent ECEC research is focused on practices that promote children's rights (Clark, 2006). For example, the revival of the Reggio Emilia approach (Isabela et al., 2021), Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach (Gal, 2017), and the development of the mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) all promote ECEC pedagogical practices that focus on listening to young children's voices. Many of these innovative approaches and strategies have been incorporated into Japan's ECEC development programs; however, research on them and their effectiveness is still limited. Therefore, this study would like to examine the current ECEC professional development practices in Japan, specifically in-service trainings that incorporate listening to children's voices.

## Teachers' Professional Development in Japan

In-service training has long played an essential role in teachers' professional development at various levels of school education (Collinson & Ono, 2001). The most basic in-service training is designed to help teachers understand students' favorite play, communication needs, and learning disposition. In recent years, it has been suggested that learning to develop and use flexible curricula and practices (such as emergent curriculum) depending on the interests of the children and the process of play activity will enhance teachers' professional development through the participation of children and in the ECEC settings, for example, in decision-making processes by children (Correia et al., 2019).

In Japan, professional development training is prescribed according to the years of teaching experience. For example, new 5<sup>th</sup> year, and 10<sup>th</sup> year teachers are required to complete specific pedagogical and skills-based training (MEXT, 1993). In addition, Japan is well known for its lesson study, a teaching strategy that emerged over 100 years ago as in-service training in Japanese schools and has spread worldwide (National Association for the Study of Educational Methods [NASEM], 2011). Lesson study helps in visualizing teachers' knowledge and skills, and may involve feedback and suggestions from colleagues through reflective and critical thinking among teachers (NASEM, 2011).

ECEC teachers in Japan also consider reflection essential because of their preference for the Mimamoru pedagogical strategy. Preschool teachers in Japan frequently use facial expressions and gestures without physical contact with children as a pedagogical tool (Hayashi & Tobin, 2015). The Mimamoru technique, which includes the use of body language, is often embedded in teachers' unconscious actions; therefore, it cannot be acquired by simply learning specific knowledge or skills, but instead, by accumulating experience in pedagogical practice over time—through repetitive actions and reflections with colleagues. ECEC guidelines also recommend reflection and dialogue for planning and assessment processes (MEXT, 2017).

Teacher conferences in the field of ECEC became popular in the 1990s, inspired by lesson study, which was discussed above (Moriue, 1996). Teacher conferences are a form of a case study conducted by ECEC teachers; discussions are held using various resource materials such as records, photographs, and videos. The dialogue themes vary and include development strategies for specific children, teaching practices, and strategies to build relationships with children. Teacher conferences offer ECEC teachers the opportunity to improve their practice from teacher-centered to child-centered, and thus reconstruct their perspectives and perceptions (Yodogawa et al., 2019).

However, problems have also been reported related to the structure of the discourse at teacher conferences. If superiors, such as principals and middle leaders or veteran teachers, facilitate the conference, many teachers, especially younger teachers, do not express their true feelings, thoughts, and opinions (Matsui, 2008). Consequently, conferences take on a top-down structure, thereby diminishing their positive effects. This problem may be deeply rooted in the patterns of communication in Japanese culture. Since their childhood, the Japanese are encouraged by adults (parents and teachers) to engage in *hansei* (introspection) more than self-reflection to discover their weaknesses (White & LeVine, 1986; Taylor et al., 2005). In addition, Doi (1973) argues that the characteristics of Japanese communication include a fondness for unanimous agreement, ambiguity, and hesitation of self-expression in a group. As it is difficult to talk freely about one's own perspective, the motivation to listen carefully to children's voices becomes limited as well.

In recent years, strategies that encourage self-expression at conferences have received increased attention (Otsuka et al., 2020). An example is Ashida et al.'s (2012) Japanese version of the self-evaluation instrument for care settings (SICS), which facilitates discussion about the idea of play environments using video clips of children's experiences (Laevers, 2007). In addition, children's stories with photos,

such as pedagogical documentation, have become widely accepted by teachers in Japan in conference discussions (Otsuka et al., 2020).

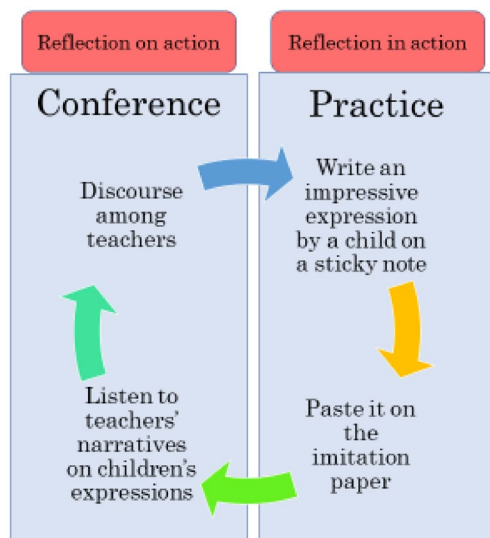
Furthermore, the focus of conference discourse has shifted from teachers' perspectives to children's perspectives. This is in line with the international practice of practitioner enquiry, a process to implement action research focused on listening to young children's voices. A reflective learning cycle conducted by teachers emphasizes the importance of meaning-making through dialogue (Wall & Hall, 2017). Matsui (2021) notes that discourse based on children's perspectives can contribute to effective reflection and improvement of Japanese ECEC practices, which were originally based on the pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2006).

## Research Questions

This study would like to investigate the characteristics of children's voices that facilitate teachers' reflection. It also would like to examine the influence of discourse on children's voices in teacher conferences on teachers' awareness on child participation.. An action research project was designed and implemented in a single kindergarten over a period of six months. The following research questions were posed:

1. What are the characteristics of children's voices that prompt teacher reflection?
2. How do the working environment and teacher groups influence reflections on listening to children's voices in teacher conferences?

Fig. 1 Study process



## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study drew upon two theoretical and conceptual constructs: reflection (Schön, 1983) and discourse on meaning-making (Dahlberg et al., 2007). The concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action proposed by Schön (1983) correspond to the process of teachers' practices in this study. Reflection-in-action occurs in daily practices when teachers might struggle to make decisions or encounter conflicts when listening to children's voices. By contrast, reflection-on-action occurs after the children return home and teachers recall their own practices. Teacher conferences that include discourse with colleagues is predominantly about reflection-on-action.

Most teachers' professional development focuses on verbal and written aspects of teaching techniques; however, in Japan, professional development of pedagogical techniques requires teachers to implement the reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action in their everyday practice (Schön, 1983). Reflective practitioners, have better disposition toward incorporating children's voices into their pedagogical practices.

Teachers' practices improve after teacher conferences through meaning-making of children's experiences from multiple perspectives. Dahlberg et al. (2007) note that the pedagogy of listening involves listening to children's ideas, questions, and answers; this implies that practitioners make meaning from what is said without preconceived ideas of what is correct or valid. Teacher conferences are significant because they provide ECEC teachers an opportunity to reconstruct their perspectives and perceptions. Specifically, teachers reassess their relationship with children, recognize children's learning, and form an inquiring disposition toward children's understanding, thus improving their communication and competence through dialogue based on empathy. In summary, teacher conferences create a learning community, in which information about a student's learning process is shared with colleagues, individual teacher's pedagogical style is explored, and teachers' motivation to reflect on their own actions is stimulated (Sato, 2008).

This study's research design was constructed based on these theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

**Table 1** Participants' information

Participants	Experience as a teacher
Teacher A	Teacher A was a teacher in primary school for ten years before working in this kindergarten for eight years. They were also a vice-principal since 2019
Teacher B	Teacher B was a teacher in primary school for three years before working in this kindergarten for one year
Teacher C	Teacher C was an assistant teacher in another kindergarten for 2 years before working in this kindergarten for four years
Teacher D	Teacher D was an assistant teacher. They were an assistant teacher for a total of 30 years, leaving and returning to this kindergarten

## Methodology

### Research Design

This was an action research study. According to Isaac (1990), action research helps in developing new approaches for practice that can be applied directly in a classroom setting, in this case, to reflect upon and improve kindergarten practices.

The action research cycle employed in this study comprised two fields and four phases. Based on Schön's (1983) theory of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, the two designated fields were practice and conference. The four phases reflect the four key teacher practices. The steps of the study are shown in Fig. 1. The first step involves teachers writing about an impressive expression made by a child that stimulated their reflection, on a sticky note. This note could record a phrase, comment, or an act done by the child during their daily classroom activity. Teachers collect these notes throughout the time spent interacting with children. The second step involves pasting the sticky note on an imitation paper in the staff room. The size of the imitation paper is 788×1091 mm and is put up on a wall in the staff room so that teachers can always see it. The third step involves each teacher sharing their experience and reflections in the teacher conferences. The fourth step involves dialogue with everyone about the words that influenced each teacher. The cycle models are effective in incorporating productive dialogue into practice (Evelein & Korthagen, 2014; Wall, 2018). This study also constructed a cycle model with reference to such previous studies.



Fig. 2 Usage of imitation paper

**Table 2** Number of records per teacher

Teacher's name	The number of teacher's records on imitation paper
Teacher A	28
Teacher B	14
Teacher C	10
Teacher D	17

**Table 3** Number of records per place

Place where children's voices were listened by teachers	Total
4-year-old class room	6
5-year-old class room	8
Playground	34
Play room	6
Staff room	0
Picture book room	0
Other places	15

## Participants

Four teachers working in public kindergartens in the western region of Japan participated in this study (Table 1). The kindergarten comprised two classes for children aged four and five years, with two teachers for each class. Each class had 30 children. This kindergarten was chosen because it adopts program practices based on free play, which is characteristic of Japanese ECEC settings.

## Data Collection and Analysis

From August 2019 to March 2020, the author collected mixed data, including records such as the teachers' perspectives on imitation paper; oral and written narratives such as the teachers' thoughts and reflections at conferences and during interviews; visual material; and narrative observations of children's play. The interviews and conferences with the teachers were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The interviews were conducted in an unstructured format. The interview questions were based on the teacher's perspective on the imitation paper and the observation record of the children's play. The interview responses were carefully read by two other researchers, and the author, and after coding, the contents were confirmed by the teacher. The teachers' narratives through this process were used as the base material for the analysis.

Naturalistic observations were video-recorded, and the interactions between children or children and teachers were used for content analysis. After the monthly conference, follow-up observations were made twice a month to confirm that the conference discussions were relevant to classroom practice. The



observed records were shared with the teacher each time to improve the practice and conference process. The kindergarten teachers reviewed all the data with the researcher. Qualitative data triangulation (Flick, 2014) was adopted to integrate data from various data sources.

## Results and Discussion

### Number of Children's Voices Pasted on Imitation Paper

Differently colored sticky notes were used by each teacher. The imitation paper was divided into seven areas for each place in the kindergarten: 4-year-old classroom, 5-year-old classroom, playground, playroom, staff room, picture book room, and other places (Fig. 2).

The number of children's voices pasted on imitation paper by teachers was 69. The monthly numbers are listed in Table 2. October had the highest numbers, while January had the lowest. Table 3 shows the number of children's voices by place. The playground had the largest number of children's voice notes.

### Distribution of the Number of Children's Voices by Month

The teachers mentioned that it was difficult to listen to children's voices during busy times. At the conference in January, Teachers A and D stated:

*Teacher A: During the year-end and New Year seasons, there are many annual events in the kindergarten, such as the Christmas party, assembly involving dance and song performance to parents, and so on. So, there was no time every day. Unfortunately, during such busy times, we cannot afford to listen to children's voices.*

*Teacher D: That's right. Additionally, in such a case, troubles like fights and quarrels tend to increase among the children in the class, so it is difficult to positively accept the voices of children.*

These responses indicate that teachers' attitude of listening to children's voices was related to the amount of work and their sense of self-composure. Teachers in Japan work longer hours than in other countries. Japanese ECEC staff work for about 50.4 h per week, which is the longest among Chile, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Korea Norway, and Turkey (OECD, 2020). Furthermore, the literature suggests that ECEC staff experience stress when they spend a lot of time on administrative work and planning or preparing activities for children (OECD, 2020).

The high expectations of parents for kindergarten events and their contents add to the stress. Consequently, listening to children's voices is dictated by time, and teachers tend to have children obey as planned, thereby becoming less conscious of children's

inner world. The increased workload also results in teachers having insufficient time for flexible or reflective thinking.

### **Distribution of the Number of Children's Voices by Place**

At the conference held in November, there was a discussion with teachers regarding children who were listened to more or less often:

Author: I noticed that a lot of Hanako's voices are pasted on imitation paper.

*Teacher A: Certainly, that's right. I guess her play is often interesting.*

*Teacher C: I feel that I often pay attention not only to Hanako, but also to children who have a lot of ideas for playing and are active.*

*Teacher B: I understand that too. They stand out. On the contrary, it may be difficult to pay attention to children who spend time playing with little change.*

*Teacher A: Yes. How about Mitsuko? I may not be able to listen to her voice because she often plays the same thing in the same place in the room all the time.*

*Teacher D: It's true. Mitsuko surely expressed her voice, but I didn't listen at all. I should reflect on myself.*

The teachers' reflection described above demonstrates that the act of listening to a child's voice by teachers is unconsciously biased. Flewitt and Cowan (2019) find that children with fewer observations by teachers tend to be quiet and shy, have limited English abilities, spend a lot of time outdoors, be highly physical and run a lot, shy away from group activities, do not produce work such as drawings, or be independent.

However, there were differences in the characteristics of the children in this study. As teacher C mentioned, they tended to focus on children who were playing outdoors and were highly active. According to Flewitt and Cowan (2019), high physical play and extensive play outdoors present practical issues for teachers, including difficulty in writing while following the movements of the children and supervising risky play. In this study, teachers tried to take shorter notes rather than writing records for children's voices. This allowed teachers to pay attention to children who played actively outdoors.

In addition, teachers' dispositions toward children's play may be related to differences in the results. ECEC teachers in Japan indicated significantly higher agreement for "enjoyment when joining the children's play" and "If invited, join in with the children's play" than in other countries (OECD, 2018b, p. 280). In this study, teachers were often invited by active children who preferred to play outdoors. One interpretation is that the ECEC culture in Japan values playing with children and this has influenced the bias in the high number of sticky notes collected in the playground.

### **Characteristics of Children's Voices to Which Teachers Listened**

To clarify the characteristics of children's voices, 69 children's voices recorded by teachers was categorized by type of content. The contents, classified by the author and two other researchers, were discussed with the teachers and revised to consider their feedback. Based on the results, children's voices were divided into four

categories: beliefs regarding play, environmental settings, understanding of children, and child–teacher relationships. The voices of some children corresponded to multiple categories.

### Beliefs Regarding Play

This category refers to children’s voices reflecting teachers’ beliefs regarding play. For instance, Ken’s voice of “It’s also one of [our] experiences” was listened to by Teacher A.

This was the voice of Ken in the sandbox. Several children were making a water slide for toys and leaves. It took about two hours to build, but one boy accidentally broke a part of it. The children reacted in various ways, such as being disappointed or angry at the child who broke it. Ken calmly made his statement and started rebuilding it again. Other children also became positive and began to be enthusiastic about building again.

At the conference in January, Teacher A explained why the word was so impressive:

*Teacher A: “I may never have valued something breaking during the play of producing something. I always had the consciousness that I had to let children make it properly. Ken’s attitude—of turning even something breaking into fun—made me reconsider my values.”*

There were 19 examples of children’s voices that changed teachers’ beliefs regarding play. Teachers reviewed their stereotypes of play through interactions, ideas, and processes among children. In other words, the children’s voices stimulated the teachers to change their perspective on children’s play.

### Environmental Settings

This category refers to children’s voices in reconsidering the environmental settings in the kindergarten. For instance, Teacher D noted Naomi’s voice in her facial expressions.

Several girls carried heavy books to the entrance of the kindergarten. The entrance was not a play space; therefore, Teacher D wanted to stop the children from carrying books. However, she was discouraged when she saw Naomi’s eyes. In the October conference, Teacher D explained her feelings at that time, and the following discussions regarding environmental settings were shared among teachers:

*Teacher D: “When I saw them at first, I wanted to say, ‘You shouldn’t play there.’ But Naomi’s eyes were so serious that I wanted to see it a little more. Until then, I didn’t have the impression that Naomi was so enthusiastic about playing. After watching for a while, the museum pretend-play started, and Naomi was playing very lively. I thought that there was play that occurred because of what happened at the entrance.”*

*Teacher A: “That’s a wonderful story. Certainly, the entrance is just an entrance for adults, but for children, the entrance is also a play space. I would like to think*

*about the attractiveness of the entrance for children, and there may be other similar places.”*

There were 15 examples of children’s voices regarding the kindergarten environment. As ECEC believes in the philosophy of learning through the environment, teachers prepare various educational environments for children’s learning. However, teachers are sometimes confused when children act differently from the teacher’s expectation in these environments. The discussions in this category helped turn the teacher’s confusion into reflections about their perceptions of the learning environment.

### Understanding Children

This category refers to children’s voices that involved understanding the child from the perspective of their personality and sense of wonder. For instance, Teacher B heard Meg’s voice that said, “This stone is glittering. It’s a jewel! I’ll wash it so it shines more.”

This was the voice the teacher heard when Meg found a stone on the playground. At the conference in March, Teacher B described her thoughts on Meg as follows:

*Teacher B: “I thought these words were so Meg. Meg has a wonderful sensibility because she uses unique colors when drawing and producing. It was so her to play with the color of the stone as a jewel.”*

*Teacher C: “Sure, Meg looks like an artist. She is interested in various things and lives with various emotions.”*

*Teacher B: “I think the sense of wonder among kindergarten children is really amazing. It’s really interesting for me how it’s expressed differently from primary school children.”*

There were 41 examples of children’s voices that deepened teachers’ understanding of children. Among these are examples that impressed teachers about the children’s sensibility with words, gestures, and facial expressions. The sense of wonder expressed by children changed the teachers’ perceptions of their students’ personalities.

**Table 4** Number of classification results per teacher

Teacher’s name	Beliefs to play	Environmental settings	Understanding of children	Child–teacher relationships
Teacher A	13	10	13	0
Teacher B	1	1	6	8
Teacher C	1	2	10	1
Teacher D	4	2	12	5

## Child–teacher Relationships

This category refers to children’s voices that caused teachers to worry about their relationship with the child. For instance, Teacher B heard Lisa’s voice that said, “The bed is here. You sleep like this.”

Several girls played house in the classroom corner. Teacher B was invited to join by Lisa. Lisa played the role of the mother. Teacher B was ordered by Lisa to play the role of a baby. Lisa started making a bed using large wooden building blocks for her baby (Teacher B) to sleep on. When she finished making the bed, she said the above-mentioned phrase to Teacher B.

In the November conference, Teacher B described her feelings at this time as follows:

*Teacher B: “When I was told this by Lisa, I was very confused about how to behave. I was reluctant to become a baby, and I didn’t understand what it meant. How do you behave in such cases?”*

*Teacher C: “I understand. I may not be very good at it.”*

*Teacher A: “Actually, I’ve been in kindergarten for a long time, but I’m not good at playing house. So, I understand your feelings. In my case, I have a conflict between the wish to play with them and the position of the teacher. Teacher D is good at it, right?”*

*Teacher D: “I’m not so good at it, but I don’t have to worry like everyone. I’ve never thought about it because I simply act to make children happy.”*

There were 14 examples of children’s voices regarding child–teacher relationships. When teachers were unable to immediately determine how to respond in their interaction with a child, it became a cause for concern. During discussion, teachers reflected on their lives and teaching experiences and talked about the process of forming their own beliefs and thoughts.

## Summary of Teachers’ Reflections Influenced by Position

Table 4 shows the classification of each teacher’s thoughts influenced by children’s voices. Teacher A reported many children’s voices; however, there were no records on child–teacher relationships. Teacher B had the most records on child–teacher relationships. Teacher C often listened to children’s voices and reflected on their understanding of children. Teacher D also reported about often listening to various kinds of children’s voices.

Individual interviews were conducted with each teacher after they were presented the results in Table 4. Teachers’ interpretations regarding the results are discussed below.

*Teacher A: “I became a vice-principal this year. So, I may have paid more attention to the kindergarten as a whole than to myself. I wanted everyone to practice the same philosophy, so I wanted to know how other teachers perceive children’s*

play. Therefore, I may have listened to children's voices related to the beliefs regarding play."

Teacher B: "I just moved from primary school, so I didn't know much about play and the environment in kindergarten. I could only talk about children; therefore, I thought about child-teacher relationships."

Teacher C: "I have always been conscious of understanding children. I thought every item (beliefs regarding play, environmental settings, child-teacher relationships) starts from the understanding of children. Honestly, there was no atmosphere of teachers talking about children last year. I was happy to talk about children. I'm glad I can talk a lot about children after Teacher A became the vice-principal."

Teacher D: "I don't know why it looks like it [does] (Table 4). However, as conferences continued, I became very motivated to tell various things to young teachers (Teachers B and C). I'm not sure, but maybe because I wanted to inherit the philosophy of thinking everything from the children's perspective]."

Teacher A mentioned their position, and Teacher B argued that their workplace had changed. Teacher C suggested that the atmosphere of the teacher group had changed. Teacher D stated that conferences changed her perceptions of other teachers.

Self-awareness is often built through an internal dialogue, in close connection with external dialogue (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). In kindergarten, there are different professional positions such as managerial positions (Teacher A), regular teachers (Teacher B), and part-time teachers (Teachers C and D), as well as positions that arise depending on the period of affiliation with the organization, such as newcomers (Teacher B) and veterans (Teacher D). In other words, the teachers in this study were influenced by their positions and their relationships with other teachers with respect to the act of listening to children's voices. Individual teachers' sense or individual skills, such as teaching methods, also influenced their selection. Therefore, in managing education and care grounded in children's rights, it is necessary to consider not only individual teacher capabilities, but also the influence of external factors such as position and groups.

## Conclusions

This study examined how kindergarten teachers listen to children's voices and reflect on their practices in a conference based on children's voices. The results reveal two key points.

First, children's voices stimulate teachers' reflection and provide deeper insights into the diversity among children. The discussions in the conference about children's voices illustrate teachers' learning in four aspects: beliefs regarding play, environmental setting, understanding of children, and child-teacher relationships. These discussions expanded teachers' self-understanding and led to learning beyond the stereotypes they had formed about their students. Such learning would not be possible merely through training that focuses on knowledge and skills especially in a

kindergarten community. Sheridan et al (2009) pointed that the communities of practice are effective in improving practical expertise because teachers are able to consider their practices in authentic situations. This study recommends that in-service training on learner participation should be followed by teacher conferences specifically focused on listening to children's voices.

However, the action research method used in the study was unable to support long term practices that would encourage children to actively and directly participate in their pedagogic plan. Similar to the Reggio Emilia approach, further consideration is necessary regarding how teachers should participate so that children practice agency in creating a process of life. To this end, it may be helpful to listen to children's voices in various ways, such as the mosaic approach. The mosaic approach is a multimethod, polyvocal approach that brings different perspectives together; it is used to work with children to create an image of their worlds (Clark, 2017).

Meanwhile, the interpretation of the concept of voice is also dependent on society and culture (Spyrou, 2011). Therefore, in the context of ECEC in Japan, it is necessary not only to carry out practical research, but also to consider the interpretation of the concept of voice.

Second, external factors influence the teacher's act of listening to the children's voices. This study shows that a lack of time, pressure caused by elaborate events, and the position of each teacher influence their interpretation of the children's voices. Therefore, the teacher's act of listening to children's voices must be discussed not only from the aspect of individual ability but also from a macro perspective, such as the working environment and characteristics of each teacher's position in the teacher group. Gal (2017) proposes an ecological model of children's participation. According to this model, teacher practice is positioned in the mesosystem, and the entire regime is positioned in the macrosystem. From this viewpoint, it is possible to examine not only the contents of pedagogical practices but also the working condition of teachers or the values of policies for ECEC in Japan.

In addition, irrespective of the teacher's position in a school's hierarchy, it is also necessary to consider if reflection is an effective pedagogical practice for all teachers. As pointed out by the OECD (2018b), there is a large gap in terms of the quality of involvement with children between full-time and part-time teachers in Japan. Wall (2018) notes that methodologies such as visual tools that facilitate teachers' enquiry, enrich dialogue, and improve the quality of the reflective cycle. This applies to the present study, where a kind of visual tool contributed to prompt reflection, and all teachers had the opportunity to learn from various perspectives in teacher conferences. However, the long-term effect of conference reflection in changing the practices of each teacher in this study is unclear. However, according to Isik-Ercan et al. (2017), the process of reflection is effective in various contexts of professional learning and personal experience for ECEC practitioners. It is a future task to consider how conference reflection will affect the practices of different positions teachers.

Children's voices are not heard naturally, but are listened to and selected by the teacher. Children's voices become meaningful in ECEC practice when dialogue about it is encouraged between teachers. Furthermore, regular dialogue can shape teachers' beliefs regarding the value of children's perspectives. The ECEC practice of listening to children's voices is spreading internationally and is increasing in

Japan. However, this study did not examine how teachers' reflections have actually influenced child–teacher relationships and pedagogical practices. Future research should examine methods of in-service training rooted in the cultural and historical background of Japan.

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**Data Availability** All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

## Declarations

**Conflicts of interest** The authors declare no conflicts of interest associated with this manuscript.

**Ethical Approval** This study was approved by the Education Research Ethics Committee of the author's organization. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants, including the parents of the children who were included in the study. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any phase of the study. The research materials collected will be used only for this study, and all records are stored securely. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms. This study was approved by the Education Research Ethics Committee of Kagawa University.

**Consent to Participate** Written informed consent was obtained from the participants, including the parents of the children who were included in the study.

**Consent for Publication** Written informed consent was obtained from the participants, including the parents of the children who were included in the study.

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