

Institutional Challenges Faced by Japan When Supporting Preschools in the Early Stage of the COVID-19 Pandemic

— Analyzing Its Approaches Before and After an Emergency Declaration —

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Abstract

This paper examines the institutional challenges faced by Japan when supporting preschools before and after an emergency declaration in the early stage of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The government and municipalities established institutions to support preschools mainly by providing information on infection prevention. Specifically, each municipality provided preschool support by offering more practical information regarding infection, with regional characteristics and actual situations influencing childcare and education taken into account, while making notifications and asking the parents of children to cooperate on infection control.

Such support enabled the study preschool to actively improve its environment and contents for childcare and education. In order to provide better support for preschools, it may be necessary to further develop support systems based on the experience of addressing shortages of masks and alcohol antiseptic solutions. Further institutional development to provide clearer and more useful information on infection prevention measures for preschools may also be required.

Keywords: Preschools in the Early Stage, Institutional Challenges, COVID-19, Pandemic, Japan

I. Introduction

New coronavirus (COVID-19) infection is spreading around the world. In Japan, where COVID-19 cases have been reported in all prefectures, the total daily number of new cases exceeded 1,000 for the first time on July 30, 2020.

Daycare facilities and preschools for children aged 0 to 5 years (preschools) are also adopting preventive measures against COVID-19 infection based on the government's and municipalities' institutional policies.

A previous study reported the current status and challenges of school approaches to this issue, represented by health management and mental care¹.

This paper examines the institutional challenges faced by Japan when supporting preschools

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before and after an emergency declaration in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

II. Objective and Method

This paper aims to provide a basis for the development of safety and security measures in childcare and education for young children by identifying institutional challenges for Japan to support preschools in emergencies caused by pandemic and other infectious diseases.

In the following sections, the institutional approaches provided to support preschools and responses of a preschool in a municipality from February to June 2020 are shown in chronological order. Subsequently, the institutional challenges faced by Japan when providing such support in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic are clarified.

III. Results

1. Before an emergency declaration issued by the government

(1) February 20, 2020

On February 20, 2020, the municipality notified the preschool and other facilities of the first COVID-19 case identified in a local healthcare institution.

This information put the preschool to formally adopt preventive measures against COVID-19 infection. Specifically, it began to ask parents to wash their hands and wear a mask when dropping off/picking up their children, sufficiently rest at home, and stay at home as much as possible.

(2) February 26, 2020

Based on a notification issued by the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, entitled: [Precautions to Prevent the Spread of Infection in Preschools (Second Report)]² on the previous day, the municipality gave the following instructions to the preschool:

- Preschool staff: Those with a body temperature of 37.5°C or higher and/or respiratory symptoms should not go to work at school.
- Children: Those with a body temperature of 37.5°C or higher cannot receive childcare/education. Body temperature measurement should be performed at home before coming to school.
- Children and their families: Those who have become infected should immediately report to the preschool.

The preschool began to encourage sufficient hand-washing, gargling, and hydration, in addition to keeping the facility appropriately ventilated. Running short of masks, it limited the use of masks to children with coughing and/or sneezing. It also reduced the durations of interschool activities, while increasing opportunities for outdoor play.

The preschool asked parents to sufficiently wash their hands when dropping off/picking up their children and entering the facility.

On the same day, it also distributed a communication document to share the following measures:

- The preschool will basically continue childcare and education even in a state of emergency. However, when any child/staff member becomes infected, the preschool will be closed. When a family member becomes infected, the situation will be managed upon deliberations.
- When any child/staff member/family member becomes infected, the principal will report this to the municipality. When necessary, the principal will also share this information with staff, so that the childcare professional in charge will notify the parents of classmates of the situation. Such communication should take place using written documents (directly distributed/mailed), posters, web pages, or by telephone.
- End-of-year field trips, end-of-year parties, and graduation ceremonies will be held, as scheduled.

(3) February 27, 2020

The government instructed all elementary, junior, and senior high schools and schools for children requiring special support throughout Japan to temporarily close from March 2, 2020, to the end of the spring vacation.

There was no such instruction to preschools.

(4) February 28, 2020

All schools in the municipality were temporarily closed.

The preschool notified parents of the following measures/requests:

- To prevent infection, please refrain from taking your child to school, if you can take parental leave or take care of the child at home.
- When any child/parent/staff member becomes infected, neighboring schools may also be temporarily closed.
- Please perform temperature measurement and health checks for your child and other family members in the morning and evening at home. If you have a poor physical condition, please refrain from coming to school, and ask someone to drop off/pick up your child.
- When dropping off/picking up your child, please wash your hands, and wear a mask before entering the facility. You are also asked to leave the facility as soon as possible to minimize the duration of your stay at school.
- We will measure your child's body temperature, whenever there is something unusual about his/her condition, in addition to performing regular measurement after a nap. If your child has a body temperature of 37.5°C or higher, we will promptly contact you, so please come and pick your child up as soon as possible.
- Temporary elementary school closures may make it difficult for some of our staff members to

work regularly. If the number of our childcare professionals temporarily falls below the national standard, we will notify parents of the situation using posters, and report it to the municipality.

(5) March 5, 2020

The municipality and the principals of private preschools within it made notifications on their emergency measures.

Those with fever and/or coughing were asked to wear masks, and receive medical consultation.

The preschool asked parents of all toddlers and older children to make sure that their children wear masks. Considering the current social environment with mask shortages, the preschool taught parents a method to make simple masks by themselves. It also reported that masks were allocated to staff members in the lunch service room with priority, and those in charge of childcare and education were wearing their own masks.

On the same day, the preschool gave the following instructions to staff members:

- Measure your body temperature, and confirm your physical condition before going to work.
- Wash your hands, ventilate rooms, and clean floors more frequently.
- Keep a safe distance, and avoid games involving hand-to-hand contact indoors. Maximize opportunities for going out.

The preschool changed the end-of-year field trip and party to a shopping experience not requiring transport by train and a treasure hunt game in the school garden.

During the shopping experience, children walked to a nearby vegetable market, and each of them paid money from a wallet hung on his/her neck to buy vegetables. The money was allocated by the preschool as part of childcare and education costs.

After coming back to school, children ate lunch and snacks they brought from home, and enjoyed a treasure hunting game in the school garden, where they sought treasures made by staff members. They took the treasures they found in the garden home.

(6) March 12, 2020

The preschool held a graduation ceremony, shortening its duration to 40 minutes and reducing its scale.

Only people dropping off/picking up children to/from school were allowed to attend the ceremony. Among siblings, only graduates attended it. Body temperature measurement was previously performed, and those with a temperature of 37.5°C or higher, coughing, and/or a poor physical condition were not allowed to attend the ceremony. Children belonging to the preschool washed their hands, wore a mask, and were dropped off/picked up at the entrance.

(7) March 21, 2020

The preschool mailed a notification on the entrance ceremony to parents.

Up to 2 adults were allowed to attend the ceremony after washing their hands and wearing a mask. Morning body temperature measurement was required, and those with a temperature of 37.5°C or higher, coughing, and/or a poor physical condition were not allowed to attend the ceremony.

(8) March 26, 2020

The government organized a department exclusively for COVID-19 infection control, based on Article 15-1 of the [Revised Act on Special Countermeasures against Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases] (enacted in 2020, act number: 4).

(9) April 2, 2020

The preschool notified parents of a class meeting cancellation.

2. Under the emergency declaration

(1) April 7, 2020

To prevent the spread of COVID-19 infection, the government declared a state of emergency for 7 prefectures, including Tokyo, based on the [Act on Special Countermeasures against Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases] (revised on March 13, 2020, act number: 4).

After the emergency declaration, the preschool continued its services, while limiting its activities, and asking parents, who were at home or concerned about possible infection in their children, to refrain from taking their children to school.

The preschool also decided to receive/see off children belonging to the toddler class at the terrace from April 8 to May 6, 2020, when the emergency declaration was scheduled to end. Being under an emergency declaration for the first time, it asked for parents' understanding and cooperation.

(2) April 9, 2020

The preschool distributed a notification from the municipality to parents. The notification contained the following requests:

- Please refrain from going out from April 8, 2020, to May 6, 2020.
- The preschool basically continues its services, but it may be temporarily closed.
Your cooperation would be appreciated, as childcare professionals are bearing an increased burden.
- If you can take care of your child at home, please refrain from taking him/her to school.
- If you plan to take your child to school, please submit a document to confirm your intention about childcare and education to the preschool.

Please fill out this document by describing: the work status of parents (necessary to work in the workplace/possible to work at home, caring/nursing, and others); work days (working on weekdays only, also working on Saturdays, working shifts (days of the week)); durations of childcare and education needed on weekdays and other days; and telephone number for

emergency contact.

- With regard to childcare and education fees under the emergency declaration, the fees will be reduced according to the number of days without school attendance, and the difference will be paid back later.

If lunch provision becomes difficult, parents may be asked to prepare lunch for their children to bring to school. The preschool will notify about school lunch fees in such cases later.

(3) April 10, 2020

The preschool notified staff members of the following measures:

- The preschool will distribute a municipal notification on preschool services under the emergency declaration to parents.
- Children belonging to the toddler class should be sent off/received at the terrace.
- Tooth-brushing assistance should be discontinued.
- The preschool continues to issue preschool newsletters, lunch information letters, and lunch menus.
- Individual interviews, health examinations, and interschool activities will be postponed.
- Parents' days and traffic safety classes will be cancelled
- The number of staff members working at school will be reduced to 1/3, according to the number of children attending.

Full-time staff members: working (such as preparing documents and reviewing the literature) at home twice a week.

Part-time staff members: working at school once a week.

- Any staff member, who has become infected or had close contact, should report to the principal.

(4) April 13, 2020

The municipality notified the preschool of the following measures based on [Measures to Be Adopted Under the Emergency Declaration to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 infection (Second Report)]:

- A letter of request for cooperation should be prepared and distributed to parents, based on [Measures to Be Adopted to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 infection].
- Class rounds made by the person in charge of cooking to confirm children's status of lunch consumption should be discontinued.
- Masks will be delivered to facilities in order from April 27, 2020, onward.
Alcohol antiseptic solutions will also be delivered to facilities in order, according to their size.

(5) April 20, 2020

The preschools distributed a letter to parents, explaining the circumstances that had made school lunch provision difficult, and asking them to prepare lunch for their children to bring to

school.

As the circumstances that had made school lunch provision difficult, the preschool explained that a case of infection was identified in a nearby facility used by a child of a staff member, and, consequently, some staff members, including those in the lunch service room, were instructed to stay and wait at home. Accordingly, parents were asked to prepare lunch for their children from April 27 to May 1, 2020.

(6) April 22, 2020

The municipality issued a notification, entitled: [Request for Continuation of Self-restraint in Preschool Service Use to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 Infection], considering the difficulty of completely avoiding crowded and confined spaces with poor ventilation (so-called “the 3 C’s”) at preschools, as the infection was spreading.

When both parents belonged to any of the following occupational categories, and they had difficulty taking care of their children at home, they were asked to use preschool services to the minimum necessary.

- Healthcare providers (such as medical doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and public health nurses)
- Engaged in lifeline services (such as public transportation, water, gas, and electricity services)
- Working in welfare facilities (such as nursing homes for the elderly, facilities for people with disabilities, and preschools)
- Working in facilities supplying daily necessities (such as wholesale markets, grocery stores, and convenience stores)
- Working in other facilities needed to maintain social life (such as police, fire-fighting, and other administrative offices, financial institutions, and transportation companies)

(7) April 24, 2020

The preschool issued a newsletter to notify parents of the following issues:

- The school attendance rate has been lower than 10% since the emergency declaration was issued.
- Preschool staff will continue to receive/see off children belonging to the toddler class at the terrace.
- Toddlers should continue to wear masks.
- Preschool staff try to keep a distance of 2 m between children during interschool activities, but some actual settings do not allow this measure.
- To prevent children from suddenly rushing out in front of cars, childcare professionals take their hands outside school. After coming back, all of them wash their hands.
- Tooth-brushing assistance has been discontinued. Therefore, after each meal, infants drink warm water or wheat tea, and toddlers swish around in the mouth.
- The lunch duty has been cancelled in the toddler class.
- Parents’ days, lunch tastings, and evening parties will also be cancelled.

3. From the extension/end of the emergency declaration by the government to the call off of the request for self-restraint in preschool service use by the municipality

The emergency declaration issued by the government was originally scheduled to end on May 6, 2020, but it was actually lifted on May 25, 2020, as COVID-19 infection continued to spread nationwide.

(1) May 8, 2020

The preschool decided to cancel a field trip, and postpone internal medicine examinations.

Parents submitted a document to confirm their intentions regarding childcare and education to the preschool.

(2) May 14, 2020

Based on [Precautions to Prevent the Spread of Infection in Preschools] published by the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, the municipality made a notification on preschool service fees under the emergency declaration. According to this, they continued to pay back for days without school attendance.

(3) May 22, 2020

The preschool issued a newsletter.

In this newsletter, it asked parents with a poor physical condition to drop off/pick up their children outside the entrance.

The preschool was going to make a decision regarding pool play, following the city's instructions.

(4) May 25, 2020

The government lifted the emergency declaration nationwide.

The municipality issued a notification, entitled: [Request for Continuation of Self-restraint in Preschool Service Use to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 Infection].

The notification asked parents to continue to use preschool services to the minimum necessary until June 30, 2020. Concerning preschool service fees under the emergency declaration, the municipality continued to pay back for days without school attendance. Although lunch service fees vary among schools, those for children aged 2 years or younger were included in preschool service fees. It also asked parents to continue to submit a card to confirm their intentions regarding childcare and education as part of their cooperation.

In addition, the notification specified the following special exceptions regarding returning to work and preschool service use:

Those taking parental leave: If parental leave ends by August 31 (the parent returns to work by September 1), there is no need to change the details of the certification (such as the reason and period) or discontinue preschool service use.

Prospective employees: If the parent starts to work by August 31, there is no need to change

the details of the certification (such as the reason and period) or discontinue preschool service use.

Job seekers: If the validity period ends by the end of July, the certification period is extended until August 31.

On the other hand, the preschool notified parents of the following measures:

If any sibling of a toddler belongs to the infant class, the preschool staff will receive/see off the infant and toddler at the entrance and terrace, respectively.

Preschool staff will measure each child's body temperature using a forehead thermometer upon arrival.

Paper towels should be used after hand washing in the toilet in all cases.

Tooth brushing after each meal will resume depending on the situation.

All children should wear a hat when coming to/leaving school. Please disinfect and clean the hat whenever your child comes back home.

(5) June 4, 2020

The preschool made the following requests using a written document:

• **When receiving/seeing off children in the morning/evening**

The preschool allocates a sufficient number of staff members to each childcare and education room.

Preschool staff disinfect infants' hands and fingers, and receives/sees them off at the terrace.

They continue to receive/see toddlers off at the terrace, but they do so at the entrance when it rains.

They measure each child's body temperature using a forehead thermometer upon arrival at the gate.

All children put on the shoes they wear when they come to school.

• **Mask use**

All children aged 2 years or older wear a mask, but they may not use masks when going out or to prevent heat stroke.

When going out, preschool staff continue to hold children's hands.

Preschool staff are doing their best, but if you are concerned about possible infection, please refrain from taking your child to school.

• **School lunch**

Two children sit side by side on a desk, and swish around in the mouth after a meal.

Please be in charge of tooth brushing for your child at home.

• **Pool play**

The preschool has decided to discontinue pool play, and let children play with water in the garden instead.

Please keep your child's hair short/tied.

Children should bring a change of clothes, a bag to bring wet clothes back, a face towel to take a

shower, and shoes to play in water, such as sandals.

- **Home life**

Children without fever, but with coughing and/or nasal discharge should also stay at home.

Children's immunity should be enhanced by making sure of sufficient hand washing, gargling, healthy diets (breakfast should be taken every day), fluid intake, and regular routines at home.

Please avoid crowded spaces when taking your child on holiday, and adopt preventive measures when going to work not to contaminate the preschool with the virus.

(6) June 25, 2020

The municipality issued a notification on preschool service from July 1 onward.

While approaches to revitalize the economy were being implemented, the number of children attending preschools tended to increase. Therefore, the municipality was going to call off the request for self-restraint in preschool service use on June 30, 2020, as scheduled, and stop paying service fees back for days without school attendance. However, it also mentioned that a similar request may be made in the future. As it is difficult to completely avoid crowded and confined spaces with poor ventilation (so-called "the 3 C's") at preschools, parents were asked to continue to use preschool services to the minimum necessary, and consider the following new norms:

- **Recommended basic norms:**

Perform body temperature measurement and health checks every morning, and stay at home if you have fever/cold symptoms.

Wash and disinfect your hands and fingers sufficiently.

Practice the "cough etiquette".

Make sure of frequent ventilation.

- **Basics of infection prevention**

Social distancing, mask use, and hand washing.

Keep a distance of 2 m, at least 1 m, from others.

Encourage outdoor play.

Avoid conversing with others while facing each other.

Wear a mask when going out, staying indoors, and talking.

Wash your hands and face, change clothes, and take a shower when coming home.

Wash your hands with water and soap for about 30 seconds. Hand sanitizers may also be used.

- **Health management**

Children/parents with fever and/or respiratory symptoms should not come to school.

- **Hygiene management**

Based on [Situation Analysis of COVID-19 Infection Control and Recommendations] and [New Norms] established upon deliberations at an expert meeting on May 4, 2020.

IV. Discussion

In the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government and municipalities established

institutions to support preschools mainly by providing information on infection prevention. Specifically, each municipality provided preschool support by offering more practical information regarding infection, with regional characteristics and actual situations influencing childcare and education taken into account, while making notifications and asking the parents of children to cooperate on infection control. For example, as shown in the notification issued by the municipality under the emergency declaration on April 9, 2020, parents' cooperation was asked for, as childcare professionals were bearing an increased burden.

Such support enabled the study preschool to actively improve its environment and contents for childcare and education even in a state of emergency, requiring a request for self-restraint in preschool service use. The preschool implemented different infection prevention measures to appropriately receive/see infants and toddlers off, considering their developmental characteristics. Furthermore, in daily childcare and education, it encouraged outdoor play while limiting indoor activities, with a view to maintaining their service quality. As for school events, it continued holding end-of-year field trips/parties and graduation/entrance ceremonies with limited content within reduced timeframes. At the same time, it provided information for parents using various methods, including newsletters, which were directly distributed or mailed, posters inside the school, web pages, and individual contact by telephone. It also supported staff members, adopting various measures, such as limiting the number of members simultaneously working at the school and making considerations for those with elementary school children.

On the other hand, mask shortages forced even staff members in charge of childcare and education to prepare masks to use at school by themselves. They also had difficulty obtaining a sufficient quantity of alcohol antiseptic solutions, indicating the necessity of further developing experience-based support systems to help preschools with a marked impact on the safety and security of young children.

Another point is that institutional development to support preschools more effectively may become feasible, when the amount and quality of information provided are sufficient. For example, "keeping the hands and fingers clean", "frequent ventilation", and "sufficient disinfection" are recommended infection prevention measures for preschools, where it is difficult to completely avoid crowded and confined spaces with poor ventilation (so-called "the 3 C's")³, but it may be desirable to provide such information more clearly, so as to become more practical for preschools.

V. Conclusion

This paper examines the institutional challenges faced by Japan to support preschools in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic before and after the emergency declaration.

The government and municipalities established institutions to support preschools mainly by providing information on infection prevention. Specifically, each municipality provided preschool support by offering more practical information regarding infection, with regional characteristics and actual situations influencing childcare and education taken into account, while making notifications and asking the parents of children to cooperate on infection control.

Such support enabled the study preschool to actively improve its environment and contents for

childcare and education even in a state of emergency, requiring a request for self-restraint in preschool service use. In order to provide better support for preschools with a marked impact on the safety and security of young children, it may be necessary to further develop support systems based on the experience of addressing shortages of masks and alcohol antiseptic solutions, as well as institutions to provide clear and useful information regarding infection prevention measures for these facilities.

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