

The Trends and Points of Issue Concerning “The Unification of Kindergarten and Nursery School Systems” after the 1990s in the Context of “Familism”

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Abstract

The objectives of this study are to focus on childcare policies in Japan from the 1990s, sort out the trends concerning the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” and its social background, and discuss these trends from the perspective of “familism.” To this end, this paper explores the background of childcare policy from the 1990s through to the 2010s, providing an overview of the debates regarding the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” based on information materials and previous studies on these facilities, while also extracting points of issue regarding childcare policies since the 1990s from the perspective of “familism.” The results reveal two points. First, behind the debates over the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” since the 1990s, there have been various changes in education policies, such as (1) countermeasures designed to address the declining birthrate and deregulation measures designed to facilitate them, (2) changes in welfare policies, mainly the reform of basic social welfare structures, and (3) increased concern for early childhood education and the provision of free early childhood education. The second point is the possibility that realization of the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems,” which dissolves the dual structure, may transcend “familism.”

1. Current Problems and the Objectives, Agendas, and Methods of this Study

1.1 Current Problems and the Objectives of this Study

The objectives of this study¹ are to address childcare policies, which are considered to have reached a turning point in the 1990s, in order to clarify the trends and the social backgrounds concerning “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems,” and to discuss these trends from the perspective of “familism.” Childcare policies generally cover various forms of childcare, including childcare facilities and homelike childcare, but this paper provides a specific overview of the trends focusing on policies related to childcare facilities. This is because it is thought that policies directly related to childcare facilities which are used by over two thirds of the preschool children in Japan² reflect views on childrearing in Japan during infancy and early childhood.³

As mentioned earlier, Japan’s childcare policies have been in a transition stage since the 1990s. One of the big changes surrounding the system of childcare provided by daycare institutions is the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems,” which was realized out of concern regarding the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools that have been maintained since they were established during the Meiji period.

Here, I would like to review the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools, which forms the premise of the discussion in this paper. During the Meiji period, when modernization was proceeding, kindergartens were established as educational facilities mainly for families with housewives. By contrast, nursery schools were established as child welfare facilities for children “lacking childcare” due to work, family situation and health. Table 1 presents a comparison of the institutional differences between kindergartens, nursery schools, and accredited center for early childhood education and care called *nintei-kodomoen* (facilities unifying kindergartens and nursery schools), which were newly established in 2006. The differences in the natures of these two facilities can be clearly found in their purposes. Article 22 of the School Education Act in Japan stipulates that the purpose of kindergartens is to “provide an appropriate environment for bringing up preschoolers for healthy growth and promoting their physical and mental development for cultivating the foundation for compulsory education and the subsequent education,” whereas Article 39 of the original Child Welfare Act stipulates

that nursery schools are “facility intended for providing childcare services for infants and toddlers who are brought to the facility by their guardians. ” The natures of these facilities can be also found in the differences concerning the age of the children receiving daycare and the operating hours of the facilities. Kindergartens whose main purpose is the “education” of toddlers are for “children aged 3 or older until they start elementary school” (Article 26 of the School Education Act). The number of education hours per day is set at “4 hours as a standard” (Course of Study for Kindergartens), and long breaks are provided. On the other hand, nursery schools serving the role of “work support” for parents are for “children aged between 0 and 5” and the length of time for providing childcare is “basically 8 hours per day” (Article 34 of the Standards for Facilities or Operation of Child Welfare Institutions). No long breaks are provided; childcare is provided almost every day except for Sundays and holidays.

Table 1—Institutional differences between kindergartens, nursery schools, and accredited center for early childhood education and care (facilities unifying kindergartens and nursery schools).

Category	Nursery school	Kindergarten	Accredited center for early childhood education and care
Underlying law	Article 39 of the Child Welfare Act (enacted in December 1947)	Articles 22 to 28 of the School Education Act (enacted in March 1947)	Act on Advancement of Comprehensive Service Related to Education, Child Care, etc. of Preschool Children (enacted in June 2006)
Jurisdiction	Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, municipalities	Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology National school: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Public school: Board of education Private school: Prefectures	Cabinet Office, prefectures
Establisher	Local governments (mainly municipalities), social welfare corporations, other corporations, individuals	National and local governments (mainly municipalities), educational corporations, other corporations, individuals	National and local governments, social welfare corporations, educational corporations

Purpose	Facilities intended for providing childcare services for infants and toddlers who are brought to the facility by their guardians (limited to facilities where the capacity of users is 20 or more, excluding accredited center for early childhood education and care) (Child Welfare Act, Article 39)	Facilities intended for providing childcare to toddlers to cultivate the foundation for compulsory education and their subsequent education, offering an appropriate environment to promote their physical and mental development (School Education Act, Article 22)	Facilities intended for providing childcare to children aged 3 or older who need education and childcare in a unified manner to cultivate the foundation for compulsory education and the subsequent education, offering an appropriate environment to facilitate their healthy growth and promote their physical and mental development, and providing childrearing support for parents (Act on Advancement of Comprehensive Service Related to Education, Child Care, etc. of Preschool Children, Article 2 (7))
Conditions of enrollment	When municipalities acknowledge that a guardian's work commitments, illness, or any other reasons cause a lack of daycare regarding an infant or toddler (or other children where necessary) (Child Welfare Act, Article 39) (facilities "provide daycare to infants or toddlers (or other children where necessary) lacking daycare based on entrustment from their guardians on a daily basis" before the 2015 amendment to the Child Welfare Act) Private contract (within the capacity)	When guardians wish for their toddlers to receive childcare	For children aged 3 or older and children under 3 in need of childcare
Ages covered	Infants and toddlers (other children where necessary)	Toddlers aged 3 or older before they enter elementary school	Children before the start of elementary school
When to be enrolled	When a child is in need of childcare	Beginning of the school year (April)	
When to leave	When a child is no longer in need of childcare	End of the school year (March)	

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Hours providing childcare	Basically 8 hours per day Offer overtime childcare, nighttime childcare, and weekend childcare as well	4 hours per day as a standard The number of weeks providing education in each grade shall not be less than 39 weeks unless there are special circumstances (Ordinance for Enforcement of the School Education Act, Article 37)	Basically open for 11 hours per day and on Saturdays
Closed on and during	Sundays, national holidays, New Year holidays (From December 29 to January 3 of the next year)	Offer long breaks in spring, summer and winter in addition to the days mentioned in the column at left	
Standard of childcare to be provided	Characterized by the provision of nursing and education in a unified manner. The content is pursuant to the principles set forth by the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare (Standards for Facilities or Operation of Child Welfare Institutions, Article 35) Childcare Guidelines for Nursing Schools	5 domains (health, human relationship, environment, language, and expression) constituting the curriculum according to the Course of Study for Kindergartens as published by the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology as the standard of the curriculum Course of Study for Kindergartens	Course of Study and Childcare for accredited center for early childhood education and care
Meal service	Provide staple food and side dishes to children under 3 and provide side dishes to children aged 3 or older	Provided by each institution optionally	Obligated to provide meals to children with Type 2 and 3 Certification. Must effectively cook meals within the institution and have their own kitchen
Qualification of nursery teachers	Certificate of qualification as a nursery teacher according to the enforcement order of the Child Welfare Act	Those who have a kindergarten teacher’s license according to the Education Personnel Certification Act Specialist, Class 1, and Class 2	Childcare teacher (kindergarten teacher + nursery teacher) * A transitional measure is provided.
Staff (mandatory)	Nursery teacher, contract doctor, cooking staff	Principal, teacher, school doctor	Principal, childcare teacher, school doctor, school dentist, school pharmacist, cooking staff
Staff (others)	School chief, nutritionist, janitor	Nursing teacher, school clerk	Assistance principal, head teacher, senior childcare teacher, supervising childcare teacher, etc.

Number of children supervised by each nursery teacher	Children aged 0 – 3:1 Children aged 2 and 3 – 6:1 Children aged 3 – 20:1 Children aged 4 and 5 – 30:1	The number of toddlers in one class should be 35 or less	- Children aged 0 to 3 – Same as nursery school - Children aged 3 to 5 – Approximately 20 to 35 children per worker Basically 35 or less in one class
Required facilities and equipment	<p>Nursery schools accepting infants or children under 2: Infant room, crawling room, medical room, kitchen, toilet</p> <p>Nursery schools accepting children aged 2 or older: nursery room or playroom, outside playground (outside space near the nursery school equivalent to outside playground), kitchen, toilet</p> <p>Must have materials and tools necessary for childcare (Standards for Facilities or Operation of Child Welfare Institutions)</p>	<p>Faculty room, nursery room, playroom, nurse office, toilet, drinking water equipment, hand-washing facility, foot-washing facility</p> <p><Facilities and equipment the institutions must try to install> Broadcast listening equipment, projection equipment, play pool, toddler washing facility, meal service facility, library, conference room</p> <p>The building should be no taller than two stories Must have athletic ground and the number and the type of tools and teaching materials necessary (Standards for establishing kindergartens)</p>	According to the ordinance of each prefecture
Relationship with elementary schools	In regard to sharing information on children, documents for supporting children's growth must be sent from the nursery school to the elementary school when the children in the nursery school enter elementary school (Childcare guidelines for nursery schools, Chapter 2)	When a toddler enters elementary school, the principal of the kindergarten must send an abridged copy of the kindergarten toddler's guidance record to the principal of the elementary school (Ordinance for Enforcement of the School Education Act, Article 12 (3))	When a child of the center enters elementary school, the principal of the center must make an abridged copy of the guidance record of the child and sent it to the principal of the elementary school. (Ordinance for Enforcement of the act on Advancement of Comprehensive Service Related to Education, Child Care, etc. of Preschool Children, Article 30 (2))

(Texts added and modifications made to Ueno 2000)

The dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools has been repeatedly debated since the Meiji period, when this structure was established, from the perspective of children’s growth and their rights. However, the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” was never institutionalized for a long time. Entering the 2000s, “accredited center for early childhood education and care,” which have the functions of both a kindergarten and a nursery school, were institutionalized and positioned systematically as a third type of facility. This marked a major turning point in Japan’s childcare system.

As a premise to such a dual structure, there is a tendency to prioritize the work statuses of guardians and home circumstances when choosing the facility, as opposed to the mental and physical status of each child receiving childcare. Here, the idea of “familism” (Esping-Andersen 2009–2011) can be said to exist. Familism takes family members for granted as the bearers of care labor, such as childrearing and nursing care, and depends on the self-help of family members in order to provide care. In other words, the familist idea for prioritizing family over children has supported the dual structure. This raises questions regarding how this “familism” has been maintained and how it changed as a consequence of the institutional “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” in the 2000s. This paper also discusses the changes in the “familism” logic behind the policy trend.

In terms of the previous studies discussing both the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” and “familism,” a study by Murayama (2016) discusses the policy trend related to the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” from the 1990s, as well as its social background. As far as I know, however, there are no studies discussing policies related to the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” since the 1990s from the perspective of “familism.” In terms of “familism” in childcare policies, there are previous studies in relevant fields, such as family sociology and social welfare studies. Examples of research on childcare policies after the 1990s and their social background include a study by Nakamura (2009) discussing post-war childcare policies from the perspective of welfare regime and children’s rights and an article by Shimoebisu (2015) discussing the positioning of the family in childrearing/nursing care policies. However, no studies can be found discussing the trend toward the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems,” including early childhood education. Bearing these facts in mind, this study holds scholarly significance in its cross-sectorial

approach by discussing the three phases: “education,” “childcare (care),” and “family,” all of which are essential in the childcare of preschool children.

Therefore, this study focuses on childcare policies from the 1990s, when the roles of kindergartens and nursery schools were questioned, and clarifies social circumstances and debates surrounding kindergartens, nursery schools, and the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems.” It also examines the logic behind the trend of these childcare policies in terms of the prioritization of the family (familism), which serves as the foundation of the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools. Specifically, the first section reviews the social background surrounding kindergartens and nursery schools, the second section provides an overview of the debates surrounding the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” since the 1990s, as well as policy changes, and the last section discusses the trend of these childcare policies from the viewpoint of “familism.”

1.2 Methods

This study employs the methodology of a literature study using information materials and documents. Specifically, law-related documents obtained from the website of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, and Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, municipalities, brochures for the general public and practical guides of policies for childcare practitioners, are used to understand the shifts in childcare measures. In addition, the background behind the childcare policies of the 1990s and the 2010s is explored, while a comprehensive overview of the debates over the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” is provided based on studies regarding women-related policies, family policies, childcare policies, and childcare systems. Using these resources, points of issue regarding childcare policies since the 1990s will be extracted from the perspective of “familism.”

2. The Social and Policy Background Surrounding Kindergartens and Nursery Schools

Behind the debates over the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” since the 1990s are various policy trends, such as countermeasures

designed to address the declining birthrate, a relaxation of regulations aiming to facilitate this process, and the introduction of market principles, as well as shifts in welfare and education policies. Therefore, I would like to outline (1) countermeasures to the declining birthrate, (2) welfare policies, and (3) education policies in order to look into their connections with childcare policies. This will be done based on previous studies, including Yokoyama (2002), Nakamura (2009), Maeda (2014), Kondo (2016), Murayama (2016), and Morikawa (2017).

2.1 Countermeasures Designed to Address the Declining Birthrate and the Relaxation of Regulations⁴

2.1.1 Ever-declining birthrate and countermeasures designed to address this process

The “declining birthrate” became a social problem in Japan in the 1990s. The total fertility rate (the average number of children a woman gives birth to in her life) peaked in Japan during the second baby boom of the early 1970s and has been on a downward trend ever since. In 1975, it dropped below the 2.0 level to 1.91. In addition, the downward trend has become even more prominent since the late 1980s. In 1989, the fertility rate was lower than the 1966 fertility rate of 1.58, which was a Hinoeuma year known for having an extremely low fertility rate.⁵ The 1989 fertility rate was called “1.57 shock,” which drew attention to the “declining birthrate” as an important social issue.

The Japanese government felt a strong sense of crisis regarding this ever-declining birthrate and began to work on countermeasures designed to address the trend in cooperation with various ministries and agencies. In 1990, the government established a “liaison council concerning the establishment of an environment for giving birth to and rearing children in a healthy manner,” which consisted of members from 14 relevant ministries and agencies. The report submitted by this council the following year, titled “About the establishment of an environment for giving birth to and rearing children in a healthy manner,” attributed the decline in the fertility rate mainly to the rise in the percentage of unmarried women in their 20s and the lowering of the fertility capabilities of couples, pointing out that the increased burden toward marriage and childrearing constituted the “problem.” Based on these factors, the government announced the “basic policy for future childcare support measures” (commonly called Angel Plan) in 1994. This

was a comprehensive childrearing support plan developed based on an agreement between the ministers of Health and Welfare, Education, Labour, and Construction at the time. The focus of the plan was the enrichment of childcare services. The initiatives it introduced included “expanded acceptance of early-age children,” “spread of overtime childcare” at nursery schools, and “enhancement of the regional childrearing support centers,” all of which are stipulated in the “Five-year project for urgent childcare measures” for putting the Angel Plan into practice.

Since then, the government has set out both a policy direction and a concrete plan every five years designed to facilitate childrearing support measures in an effort to counteract the declining birthrate. In 1999, a “concrete plan to implement countermeasures to the declining birthrate that should be facilitated as priority” (commonly called New Angel Plan) was formulated based on the “Basic policy for facilitating countermeasures to the declining birthrate,” and then, in 2004, a “plan for supporting children and childrearing” was formulated under the “Outline of measures for a society with fewer children” and approved by the Cabinet. Furthermore, the Cabinet approved a “vision for children and childrearing” in 2010 and began to work on the concept of the new “Comprehensive Support System for Children and Childrearing,” which was later introduced as a new framework from the fiscal year 2015 onward. In conjunction with these efforts, the government also expanded childcare services for early-age children to include children under 3. Focusing especially on countermeasures to the problem of “waiting-list children” since the 2000s,⁶ the “zero-waiting list for nursery schools strategy” was initiated in 2001, the “new zero-waiting list for nursery schools strategy” in 2008, and the “pre-emptive plan to eliminate waiting-list children” in 2013.

However, even after the 1990s, when the countermeasures designed to address the declining birthrate were initiated, the total fertility rate continued to drop, reaching the record low of 1.26 in 2005. Since then, the number has risen slightly, but it is still at a low level compared to European countries and the United States. Since 2007, even though the total fertility rate has increased, the total number of women of childbearing age has decreased, resulting in a concurrent decline in the number of births. In 2016, the number of births dropped below 1 million, before falling to a record low of 940,000 in 2017 (National Association for Childcare Organizations, *Hoiku-kenkyujo* (ed.) 2018).

It is thus difficult to say that these policies have been successfully

implemented; however, the countermeasures introduced to tackle the declining birthrate that have been initiated for nearly 30 years since the 1990s have gradually changed the operations of kindergartens and nursery schools. For example, in terms of kindergartens, it used to be a general rule for children to wait until April after they turned 3 years old, but now “three-year enrollment” has been institutionalized, meaning children can be enrolled from their third birthday. In addition, in order to accommodate the increased childcare needs, the “project for promoting after-hour childcare” was initiated in the fiscal year 1997 to provide “after-hour childcare” outside the curriculum of the kindergartens. As part of the countermeasures designed to address the declining birthrate, kindergartens began to partially fulfill the functions of nursery schools, offering long-hour childcare services intended to support the childcare of early-age children and the work of their guardians. As both kindergartens and nursery schools began to work on activities designed to support childrearing families of the region in an effort to support childrearing, the functions of kindergartens and nursery schools became increasingly similar as a consequence of the countermeasures designed to address the declining birthrate, which facilitated institutional unification (Tanji 2006, 2009).

2.1.2 Deregulation and the introduction of market principles

Seeing the trend of reforms in Europe and the United States, the Japanese government underwent a neoliberal policy shift following the administrative reforms that took place under the second Ad Hoc Commission on Administrative Reform in the 1980s in an effort to promote “decentralization” and “deregulation” as basic objectives.⁷ This neoliberal reform, which was considered one of the methods used in implementing the countermeasures designed to address the declining birthrate, had a significant impact on childcare policies.

Since the 2000s especially, a series of deregulatory measures were initiated in relation to registered nursery schools as a way of lowering the growing number of waiting-list children. In 2000, the then Minister of Health and Welfare released a notice titled “About approval of the establishment of nursery schools,” which consisted of three pillars: (1) the removal of restrictions on ‘establishers’ (establishment by private-sector entities (NPOs, school corporations, other corporations, business corporations) other than social welfare corporations was approved if certain standards were met); (2) a reconsideration of the requirement to self-own the facilities (the land and

buildings of the nursery school must be basically self-owned but renting was now permitted); and (3) a relaxation of the capacity requirement (the minimum capacity requirement was lowered from 30 to 20).

While these deregulation measures were undertaken, the local governments of urban areas where there are many waiting-list children began to introduce their own systems. For example, Tokyo has set its own standards by relaxing the “Minimum Standards for Child Welfare Facilities” (renamed in 2011 as Standards for Facilities or Operation of Child Welfare Institutions), which stipulates national uniform standards for facilities regarding nursery room areas and staff allocation, and began the “certification system for nursery schools” in an effort to provide subsidies to nursery schools that met the standards. These frameworks, where the local governments independently provide subsidies designed to cover operational expenses, are intended for non-registered day-care facilities from a legal point of view, but they were also adopted by other local governments, mainly in the Tokyo metropolitan area including Sendai City and Yokohama City, in order to accommodate the waiting-list children (Yoshida 2002).

These efforts led school corporations to establish nursery schools by eliminating restrictions on the establishers of registered nursery schools and the certification systems of local governments. Thus, neoliberalism was one of the main factors that facilitated the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems.”

2.2 Changes in Welfare Policies – Reform of the Basic Social Welfare Structure⁸

From the 1990s onward, an effort to reform the basic social welfare structure was enacted. This process was undertaken not only in the field of child welfare, which includes nursery schools, but also through wider welfare reforms, including welfare for the elderly and the disabled. The reform of the basic social welfare structure represented an attempt to shift from a system of “measures,” administrative actions premised on actions designed to save the needy after World War II, to a system of “contract,” which aims to build equal relationships between users and welfare service providers. As the national government sets national uniform standards meaning facilities are run by public funds under the principle of non-discrimination and equality, government organizations have basically decided what services to provide and

which provider should provide them. However, with the new contract-based system, users can choose what facility or which provider they use based on their own needs.

For example, in the field of welfare for the elderly, nursing care insurance was introduced in 2000. This led to fundamental institutional reforms shifting from “measures” to “contracts.” Here, municipalities assume the task of certifying the need for nursing care, such as “certification of long-term care need,” while users sign contracts directly with service providers. In the field of welfare for the disabled, the Assistance Benefit Supply System was adopted. Following this, in 2006, the Services and Supports for Persons with Disabilities Act was also enacted.

During the course of these reforms, efforts were made to revise the Child Welfare Act, which is the law governing nursery schools. In March 1996, the Ministry of Health and Welfare launched a task force aiming to address the basic problems within the Central Child Welfare Council and compiled an interim report titled “About the childcare system appropriate for a society with fewer children.” This report pointed out that in the current system, municipalities decide whether children are lacking in childcare and place those deemed to be so in nursery schools. Thus, it is “not a framework where users could have a choice institutionally.” It also suggested that “it should be a structure where users can choose which nursery school to go to and what childcare services to receive” in the future.

In response to this interim report, the 1996 revised Child Welfare Act stipulated that “when there is a lack in daycare of an infant or a toddler and when the guardian applies, a municipal government shall provide daycare to those children in a nursery center” (Article 24 (1)), in regard to enrollment. This amendment legally turned nursery schools into facilities that guardians “can choose,” much like kindergartens. However, because municipal governments still assumed no responsibility for childcare and the issue of waiting-list children was becoming a problem in urban areas, users could apply for enrollment but had virtually no choice regarding which school to attend. It was after the deregulation policy was initiated in 2000 when various service providers appeared in the field of childcare. The direct contract method was adopted on a full scale after the new “Comprehensive Support System for Children and Childrearing” began in the fiscal year 2015. These results indicate that the reform of the basic social welfare structure has had a long-term impact on the system of childcare.

2.3 Changes in Education Policies – Free Early Childhood Education⁹

The debate over “free early childhood education” that arose in the 2000s influenced how kindergartens, as educational institutions, should provide services. Behind this debate was an increased global concern for preschool education in the latter half of the 20th century (OECD 2006–2011, Izumi, et al. (eds.) 2008). Preschool education also drew attention from the perspective of economy growth strategy, as children were considered subjects of social investment (Ikemoto 2011, Heckman 2013–2015). In response to such concern and hope for preschool education, in 2006 the Japanese government announced the “Basic Policies Regarding Economic and Fiscal Management and Structural Reform 2006,” stating that “it would work on strengthening the educational functions of kindergartens and nursery schools and promoting early childhood education by expanding measures to lessen the preschool education burden placed on guardians while comprehensively considering the funding and institutional issues in conjunction with the revenue reform, in order to make early childhood education free in the future.” In response to this, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology established the “Study group for methods to promote early childhood education in the future” in 2008 in an effort to comprehensively consider how to make early childhood education free. It also compiled a report titled “About free early childhood education (interim report)” in 2009. This report states that “substantially guaranteeing opportunities for all toddlers to receive education by having the society bear the cost for early childhood education and making early childhood education free is an urgent issue in Japan’s national strategies” (4). This is due to reasons such as that early childhood education’s “educational and socio-economic effects are becoming evident empirically,” the “lessening of financial burdens is necessary as a measure to be implemented against the declining birthrate,” and that “other countries that have recognized its importance are now working on making early childhood education free.” Such a policy for making early childhood education free was a suggestion that went beyond the traditional dual structure and led to the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” in that it suggested all toddlers should be covered by public funds regardless of the institutional differences between kindergartens and nursery schools.

Thus, behind the debates over the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” since the 1990s were wider changes in education policies,

such as: (1) countermeasures designed to address the declining birthrate and deregulation measures introduced to facilitate them; (2) changes in welfare policies, mainly the reform of basic social welfare structures; and (3) increased concern for early childhood education and the provision of free early childhood education. These social and policy changes encouraged people to question the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools, which had been maintained since they were institutionalized.

3. Debates Over the “Unification of Kindergarten and Nursery School Systems” since the 1990s

A range of debates were held over the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” since the 1990s, as well as over what kind of institutional changes were made. In this section, I will provide an overview of the kinds of debate that were held in each era, as well as how the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” was institutionalized, using Morita (2000), Yoshida (2002), Nakata (2015), and Murayama (2016) as references.

3.1 Debates Over the “Unification of Kindergarten and Nursery School Systems” in the 1990s – Exploring Linkage

The debates over the institutional “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” in the 1990s arose during the course of exploring decentralization in conjunction with the administrative reform movement. In 1995, the Law for the Promotion of Decentralization was enacted, which led to the establishment of the Committee for the Promotion of Decentralization. In 1996, the committee offered its first recommendation, that “flexible operation must be established through shared use of kindergarten and nursery school facilities, in order to strengthen linkage between kindergartens and nursery schools and unify the relevant facilities, according to the local circumstances, so that the diverse needs of children and families could be met in a time of low birthrates” (270). To meet the needs of families with children, it was suggested to effectively use facilities and equipment according to the local circumstances without being bound by the segmentation of kindergartens and nursery schools. In response to this recommendation, in 1997 the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health and Welfare began discussions on the

links between kindergartens and nursery schools. In March 1998, they jointly announced the “guidelines for the shared use of kindergartens and nursery school facilities.” The guidelines acknowledge shared use of the facilities of kindergartens and nursery schools, provided that both the Standards for establishing kindergartens and the Minimum Standards for Child Welfare Facilities are met in terms of the reference area of the facilities and the number of staff members.

Thus, the debates over the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” in the 1990s led to the “guidelines for the shared use,” which contributed to partially removing the institutional barriers between kindergartens and nursery schools against a backdrop of social changes and administrative reforms. Although no discussions or policies that question the dual structure itself were found, this was when the functions and the roles of kindergartens and nursery schools changed.

3.2 Debates Over the “Unification of Kindergarten and Nursery School Systems” in the 2000s – Deregulation and Institutionalization

The neoliberal reforms progressed in the 2000s. The “Basic Policies Regarding Economic and Fiscal Management and Structural Reform 2003,” approved by the Cabinet in 2003, stated that it would be possible to establish a unified comprehensive facility by regarding preschool education and childcare as one package according to the local needs (to be considered by the fiscal year 2006), and that it would be further encouraged to have both qualifications and share the use of facilities and equipment of kindergartens and nursery schools. The “comprehensive facility” presented here was institutionalized later as “accredited center for early childhood education and care” when the “Act on Advancement of Comprehensive Service Related to Education, Child Care, etc. of Preschool Children” was formulated in 2006.

The system of accredited center for early childhood education and care is a system that certifies a kindergarten or a nursery school as an “accredited center for early childhood education and care” when it has the “function of providing both childhood education and childcare to preschool children” (a function of providing education and childcare in a unified manner by accepting children regardless of the work status of the guardians), and the “function of providing childrearing support in the region.” There are four types of accredited center for early childhood education and care: the “kindergarten-nursery

school unified type,” which can accept children aged between 0 and 5 and have the functions of both kindergartens and nursery schools; the “kindergarten type,” which were transformed from kindergartens; the “nursery school type,” which were transformed from nursery schools; and the “local discretion type,” which includes anything other than the above. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology had jurisdiction over kindergartens, while the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare had jurisdiction over nursery schools. As the Cabinet Office had jurisdiction over accredited center for early childhood education and care, some raised criticisms that the dual structure became a “ternary structure” together with both kindergartens (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) and nursery schools (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare). Accredited center for early childhood education and care back then were positioned as the third type of facilities, next to kindergartens and nursery schools, and did not lead to a fundamental review of the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools themselves.

3.3 Debates Over the “Unification of Kindergarten and Nursery School Systems” in the 2010s – Reconsideration of the Entire Childcare System

The big topic in the 2010s has been the introduction of the new “Comprehensive Support System for Children and Childrearing” (hereinafter “New System”), which began in the fiscal year 2015 and was designed to reconsider the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools. This system is aimed at running accredited centers for early childhood education and care at full scale and enriching comprehensive childrearing support in order to both overcome the quantitative and qualitative shortages of childrearing support and dissolve the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools (vertically segmented administrative system) against the backdrop of the declining birthrate.

There are two major differences between the New System and the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools. One is the use of the expression “level of childcare needs” as a standard for the provision of childcare, while the other is the change in how guardians bear the expenses.

As shown in Table 1, in the previous system, one needed a certain reason causing a “lack in childcare” in order to have the children in question enrolled in a certified nursing school, and children were allowed to be enrolled only

when family members or relatives living together could not provide childcare. However, in the new “Comprehensive Support System for Children and Childrearing,” children receive one of the three certifications (Type 1 to Type 3) listed below, regardless of their guardians’ financial circumstances, according to their “level of childcare needs” when entering an accredited early childhood care center, a kindergarten (except for some private kindergartens), or a nursery school, and choose a facility to attend according to the result of the certification.

Type 1 Certification: Early child education provided to children aged 3 or older from households that are not in need of childcare, such as households with a full-time housewife

Type 2 Certification: Childcare provided to children aged 3 or older who are in need of childcare due to the work commitments or other factors of their guardians

Type 3 Certification: Childcare provided to children under 3 who are in need of childcare due to the work commitments or other factors of their guardians

The above structure covers all preschool children who wish to receive childcare at providers’ facilities, and uses the expression “level of childcare needs” relating to the children themselves as a standard for the provision of childcare. Of course, it is necessary to grasp the guardians’ statuses when determining the type of certification. However, compared with the previous dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools, where the guardians’ statuses were used as a standard, the New System has a very different approach toward childcare as it sees children themselves as the main entity of childcare.

In addition, the “principle of ability to pay” (determining the childcare fee according to income) was employed in nursery schools from the perspective of work support for guardians and child welfare. On the other hand, because kindergartens were positioned as educational institutions premised on the guardians’ wishes, the “benefit principle” (pay fees according to the services received regardless of income) was employed in order to collect uniform fees regardless of the circumstances of domestic finance. However, in this new “Comprehensive Support System for Children and Childrearing,” this was changed to the “principle of ability to pay,” where guardians’ fees change according to household income (except for some private kindergartens). This is a mindset that went beyond the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery

schools in that the burden placed on all preschool children receiving child-care was made equal (Tanji 2016a).

4. Discussion and Future Research

As mentioned at the beginning, in the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools that has been maintained since they were institutionalized, a priority was placed on family lifestyles, such as the work of guardians, rather than on mental and physical conditions of each child. Family members were taken for granted in rearing infants and toddlers, which was the premise of the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools. Japan’s welfare regime is described as “familism” (Shimoebisu 2015), but the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools in particular is probably the embodiment of this “familism.”

If so, the movement toward the institutional “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” introduced to dissolve the dual structure can be regarded as a trend that goes beyond “familism.” For example, in the countermeasures designed to address the declining birthrate, along with the increased number of users of nursery schools and the provision of long-hour childcare at kindergartens and nursery schools, the functions of kindergartens and nursery schools proportionally expanded while the roles of family members in childrearing shrank. In the reform of the basic social welfare structure, nursery schools were turned into facilities that guardians can choose, just like kindergartens, while the system of “measures,” where government organizations decide which service to provide and what provider to use, was turned into the system of “choice.” Nursery schools were facilities used “out of necessity” due to reasons such as work, which was also reflected in the system of social welfare. However, through the structural reform, they turned into facilities that can also be used by those who want to use them. Furthermore, in education policies, early childhood education will also be publicly guaranteed for all children, regardless of their household’s financial circumstances, such that if the “costs related to early childhood education are borne by society as a whole...the opportunity for all toddlers to receive early childhood education is substantially guaranteed.” Thus, because the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools is premised on “familism,” the trend concerning the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” leads to an escape

from “familism.” Furthermore, if we look beyond this “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems,” we can get a glimpse of the issues that lie beyond such “de-familiarization in childrearing (socialization).”

The certification structure of the “level of childcare needs” in the new “Comprehensive Support System for Children and Childrearing” is modeled after the “nursing-care insurance system” introduced in 2000. This is a structure that sees the elderly as “persons concerned,” determines the level of their nursing care needs based on their necessity, and provides care not premised on the presence of family members as the bearers of nursing care (Hoiku-kenkyujo 2014). In the certification standard of the “level of childcare needs” of “children” regarding the new “Comprehensive Support System for Children and Childrearing,” the concept of “persons concerned” in childrearing has shifted from the family to children in an attempt to see children individually, as is the case with the domain of nursing care. This indicates a possibility of “individualization” ahead of “de-familiarization (socialization) in childrearing” beyond “familism” (Beck 1986–1998).

This paper has shown that there was an early indication that went beyond “familism,” and was taken for granted in modern times during the course of the “unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems,” that transcends the dual structure of kindergartens and nursery schools.

Questions remain regarding the kind of childrearing that could be achieved beyond “de-familiarization in childrearing (socialization).” In the future, I would like to explore the possibility of reaching “individualization.”

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Notes

1. For this article, texts were added and modifications were partially made to Tanji, K., 2019, “The trend and point of issue concerning “The unification of kindergarten and nursery school systems” after the 1990s: on “Familism” *Journal of Educational Research for Human Coexistence* 6, pp.19-30.

2. As of FY2016, over 65% of preschool children in Japan (over 95% of children aged 4 or older) go to kindergartens, nursery schools or accredited center for early childhood education and care (institutionalized as facilities for integrating the functions of kindergartens and nursery schools in the 2000s) (ed. National Association for Childcare Organizations, Hoiku-kenkyujo 2018).
3. Considering this, the findings obtained through this study can contribute to helping understand the unique context of Japan in terms of its systems and policies in the area of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), which have drawn international attention.
4. I will discuss countermeasures to the falling birthrate by referring mainly to Yokohama (2002), Nakamura (2009), Maeda (2014), Kondo (2016), and Morikawa (2017).
5. Hinoeuma is one of the oriental zodiacs. Since the Edo period, there has been a superstition that those born in Hinoeuma year have fiery temperaments and that women born in this year will make their husbands die early. Because of this superstition, the fertility rate of 1966 was also low.
6. The concept of waiting-list children was introduced as “children whose application form for entering a nursery school is submitted to the municipality, who fulfill the enrollment requirements but are not enrolled currently in any nursery schools. ‘Waiting-list children’ also include those whose guardians are on leave and those who currently use independent projects undertaken by the local government (e.g. childcare moms) but wish to be enrolled in a nursery school,” (old definition) according to the 1999 notice written by the Chief of the Day Care Division of the Children and Families Bureau. The latter half of this definition (from “and those who currently use independent projects undertaken by the local government” section onward) was modified in 2001 to “but exclude children when independent projects are undertaken by the local governments (e.g. childcare moms) and those who wish to go to a certain nursery school and are on a waiting list due to personal reasons of the guardians (new definition)” (Kondo 2016). Some have pointed out that the new definition might increase the number of “hidden waiting-list children,” who are not included in the number of waiting-list children even though they couldn’t enter any registered nursery schools.
7. Neoliberalism refers to economic policy to relax or eliminate regulations and introduce market principles in order to facilitate growth using the free power of the private sector, under the idea of “small government,” which means shrinking the role of the government.
8. Welfare policies are discussed mainly by referring to Nakamura (2009), Maeda (2014), Kondo (2016), Morikawa (2017).
9. Education policies are discussed by mainly referring to Weikart (2000=2015), Murayama (2016).

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