

## **9 Methods for improving education: teacher's self-reflection and development**

A teacher is responsible for initiating and improving daily childcare. There are many approaches to early childhood education, and there is no fixed formula. The reason is because every child is unique - every one of us is a unique person on earth. Teachers will meet children from different backgrounds at different times in their lives. In such circumstances, there is no single absolute method for early childhood education. An act by a child that looks the same as something s/he did before may convey many different messages in each time. Therefore, early childhood education requires a flexible relationship with children, but within a recognized framework of development principles. For effective teaching, teachers need to make constant efforts to improve education and build up his/her capacity. So, how can teachers improve their own education methods?

### **1 The essence of improvement**

In essence, the improvement of education requires self-reflection and self-development by teachers. This process requires trial and error, continual engagement, accumulation of knowledge, and flexible thought. Following the charts - “understanding of children”, “review of teaching plan” and “interaction with children” - can support improvement.

### **2 Understanding the children**

The improvement of education depends on a teacher's efforts of self-reflection. Children's activities often give you clues about improvement. Not only the observation of “what the child did”, but also an analysis of “how child did it”, “with whom he/she did it” and “what were his/her feelings about it” helps a teacher to reflect on the education process. To organize their thoughts, teachers can keep records of observations.

#### **Observation report**

After the children leave in the afternoon, a teacher updates the records of activities. This record can be made into the class record or in an individual child's record. There is no standard format, so each teacher can compile these data for their own use.

## Tips for improvement

	Self-improvement	Group-improvement
<b>Understanding of children</b>	<p>Record keeping</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where and how children were playing each other?</li> <li>• Were there any challenges or problems for children?</li> <li>• What were the feelings behind the particular behavior of children?</li> <li>• How did they interact with other children?</li> <li>• What was the environment of the activities?</li> <li>• What was the activity/thing that the children were interested in?</li> </ul> <p>Keep and organize records.</p>	<p>Share the records and exchange ideas.</p> <p>Ask about each child's behavior and development from colleagues' points of view.</p> <p>Exchange opinions about children's feelings behind the children's particular behavior.</p> <p>Share the impressions of children with other non-homeroom teachers.</p>
<b>Review of teaching plan</b>	<p>Review each teaching plan considering the progress of children (daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annual planning)</p> <p>Review the details of planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the aim feasible?</li> <li>• Did the activities suit the children?</li> <li>• Was the method suitable for the children?</li> <li>• Was a suitable environment provided?</li> <li>• Were the materials and instructions matched with the aim of the activities?</li> <li>• Was time management appropriate?</li> </ul>	<p>Discuss the areas of improvement in common activities with other teachers.</p> <p>Share the teaching plan review (daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annual planning).</p> <p>Discuss the issues about the teaching plan, its feasibility, content and method of teaching activities, and learning environment.</p>
<b>Interaction with children</b>	<p>Review the interaction with each child.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the talking with the children appropriate?</li> <li>• Were timely supports provided?</li> </ul> <p>Were activities and interventions made with respect for the independence of the children?</p> <p>Review your own perception of the children, development, early childhood education.</p>	<p>Observe and discuss each other's teaching and interaction with children.</p> <p>Decide the specific theme and research on that topic with all teachers.</p> <p>Discuss each teacher's perception of the children, development, early childhood education.</p> <p>Organize a conference of teachers on early childhood education.</p> <p>Invite a resource person and organize a conference.</p>

The daily records about the children help teachers to review the overall activities of the children; what was the activity/thing the children were interested in, how children interacted with each other, what was the learning environment etc? The teacher recalls each child's way of playing and activities, while keeping the daily records. Any specific situation that drew the teacher's attention

can also be included in this daily record. Sometimes, the teacher refers to the attendance register and other reports to keep this record. This record keeping activity facilitates teachers to understand the feeling behind the certain behaviors of children and their problems.

### **Organizing records**

Based on daily records and personal journals, the teacher reviews the children's records every term or every few months. Daily planning helps teachers to improve the methods of education, and reviewing these records gives them insights into the long-term development of the children. The teachers keep in mind the significant observation points and can review their records accordingly. Some of these points are: children's interests, play, behaviors, interest towards natural surroundings, interaction with other children, and health issues.



### **Information sharing**

In some kindergartens, submissions of these records are compulsory. By combining all records, the whole picture of child care activities become clear. On some occasions, other teachers bring out unrecorded stories, or recorded issues are brought out in casual discussion. Information sharing exposes teachers to other perceptions of children. Through this, teachers build up their capacity to understand multiple aspects of children's development.

## **3 Review of teaching plans (Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Annual Planning)**

Each teacher reflects on daily, weekly, monthly activities based on the teaching plan. At the end of the day, the teacher reviews the daily plan reflecting each child's level of participation, and prepares the next day's teaching plan. The review will be made according to the specific standards, and will be reflected into the next planning.

- Did the daily plan, content of activities and methods suit children?
- Did I push the children to do activities, and neglect their pace of learning?
- Was the time allocation appropriate for the activities?
- Was the arrangement of facilities and learning materials appropriate for the children?

Weekly and monthly records will also be reviewed using the same standards. If there were any common activities taking place across classes, all related teachers should review these activities together.

A teachers' general meeting can be called to review daily, weekly, monthly, and annual planning.

The outcome of this meeting helps to improve the education process in the kindergarten. These holistic reviews of education are essential, since our surrounding environment and demands constantly change.

## **4 Interaction with children: review of the approach to and support for children**

It is sometimes difficult for teachers to reflect on each child's activity as they may supervise many children. In such circumstances, teachers need to interact with those children during the next day and carefully observe their progresses. Reflection should especially be made about unprepared activities and quick judgments made during the day. Some review points are as follows:

- Was there timely support and appropriate talking to the children?
- Were the explanations sufficient or not?
- Was the timing and support appropriate or not? (Did I disturb the children's own efforts to learn.)
- Was the way of instruction appropriate or not? (Might I have scolded a child too loudly?)

Principles and knowledge are just a part of childcare. A teacher's humanity and personality affect the way education happens and consequently, create the uniqueness of a particular teachers approach to education. Therefore, the improvement of education requires self-reflection on one's "perception of the child", "perception of development" and "value judgment." This self-reflection can be made through informal conversations with other teachers or at formal conferences. These occasions help teachers to revise their perceptions and values, and as a result, increase their abilities.

As was discussed, the understanding of each child, good teaching plans, and the way of interaction make early childhood education more effective. Conferences, research and workshops will also develop the teacher's abilities.

## **5 Further efforts for improvement: conferences, research and workshops**

Activities such as a conference on early childhood education with all teaching staff, research activities on specific topics of education, and teaching and learning workshops can support the development of teachers.

In a teachers' conference, it is important to create an equal and open platform for discussion. The purpose of this is not to summarize the teaching activities nor to draw one simple conclusion, but to share diverse opinions and experiences. Each teacher can identify areas of improvement, appreciate the diverse perceptions, and restructure their own methods of teaching.

In Japan, kindergarten teachers conduct research on practical issues of childcare. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), as well as municipalities, designate

some kindergartens as research centers and subsidize research activities at these for a number of years. As government offices designate these research centers, teachers are required to present their research findings and the research outcomes will be public. Each kindergarten also conducts independent in-house research from time to time. Through “Research Centers” and “In-House Research”, teachers find areas of improvement for daily childcare. It is important to recognize this process of findings and progress of teachers through research. During this process, university professors are sometimes invited and asked for their guidance and academic suggestions. As these research outcomes become public, the kindergarten receives further advice from outside and can improve its education.

In early childhood education in Japan, it is compulsory for all kindergarten teachers to attend training workshops in relation to their career. Some of them include “Freshman Training” for newly recruited teachers, a “10<sup>th</sup> year Sharing Workshop” for experienced teachers and “Principle's Training” for kindergarten principles. Besides these government workshops, education-related publishing companies or other relevant private institutes also organize private workshops about the principles and skills of early childhood education. These workshops provide opportunities for teachers to go out and learn new methods of education that can be reflected within their future practice.

There is no blueprint for early childhood education, as each child requires unique forms of attention from a teacher. This is a challenge for teachers, but is a reward for them as well. The improvement of education depends on the will of teacher. Conferences, research, and workshop opportunities will assist teachers to develop their own methods of education.