

The Characteristics and Enlightenment of Mimamoru in Japanese Early Childhood Education Strategy

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Abstract: In the practice of early childhood education, Japan has formed an implicit education strategy "Mimamoru", which means "teaching through observation", which is a method of no intervention or less intervention, which is mainly characterized by the distance between teachers and children, teachers' body movements, language and intervention time, representing the general strategy of early childhood education and nursing in Japan. The "Mimamoru" method respects children's position in the implementation process, pays attention to children's emotional experience and the cultivation of problem-solving ability, can effectively promote children's social development, and is worth learning and learning. At the same time, in the process of use, it is necessary to pay attention to combining it with the actual situation of the country in order to maximize its effectiveness.

Keywords: Japanese preschool education; Educational strategies; The Mimamoru method

1. Introduction

One of the goals of early childhood education in Japan is the socialization of children based on cultural values. Teachers achieve this by providing integrated instruction and appropriate experiences for children in a group-oriented environment through play. ^[1] Japan's National Curriculum Standards for Kindergartens also articulates the importance of group-oriented environments, indicating that such interdependent environments can support children in developing love and trust for those around them. ^[2] Therefore, teachers must support children to develop warm interpersonal relationships, focusing on developing children's ability to connect with others in a group that values everyone. Teachers mainly use indirect instruction in learning appropriate behaviors for children, rather than direct guidance using a top-down approach. Teachers provide ample opportunities for children to promote their social and emotional development by creating a warm and safe environment for them to interact with each other, solve problems on their own, and develop positive emotions towards each other, such as autonomy, kindness, empathy, cooperation, compassion, responsibility, etc. In doing so, an implicit educational strategy "Mimamoru" aims to promote intrinsic motivation for learning through everyday social interactions, rather than using external reinforcement such as praise and punishment. ^[3]

2. The connotation of the Mimamoru method

In Japanese, mi means "watch" and mamoru means "guard". The idea that Japanese early childhood educators spend time waiting, observing, and then intervening in the early childhood education and care environment is known as the Mimamoru Method. Often understood as "watching teaching," Mimamoru is a hands-off or low-intervention approach that indirectly promotes children's cognitive and social development. ^[4] The Mimamoru method can also be seen as one of the strategies of Japanese preschool teachers to provide suitable places and spaces for children to solve problems on their own, and is a teaching method based on waiting, patience, long-term vision and observation. ^[5] Japanese early childhood educators understand that children's cognitive, social, and emotional skills can be better developed in everyday life through regular interaction with others, especially during play, rather than when adults use a top-down approach for direct instruction. Japanese early childhood educators promote children's social and emotional development by creating a social environment in which children play freely, solve problems with their peers, and learn social skills. Overall, the Mimamoru method refers to young children learning by exploring autonomy under the observation and protection of adults. For example, in the practice of socialization in Japanese homes and schools, adults often wait for children to

respond to problems and guide them to master their own learning. The Mimamoru approach requires not only avoiding intervention, but also an underlying belief that children are able to solve problems on their own. [6]

3. The characteristics of the Mimamoru method

Preschool in three cultures revisited: China, Japan, and the United States describes a scene in which children are free in class at the Komatsuya Daycare Center in Kyoto, Japan, and toddler A, the youngest in the class, runs to the toy box to grab her favorite teddy bear as soon as she enters the classroom. After a few minutes, she put down the teddy bear in her hand and went to play with the other girls. Toddlers B and Cs (B and C are twin sisters) go to get the teddy bear, and seeing this scene, toddler A begins to compete with toddler B and toddler C for the teddy bear. The twin sisters said that because toddler A put the teddy bear down by herself, the two of them could go get the teddy bear. At this time, toddler A did not listen to them, and the three girls had been fighting for the teddy bear. During this struggle, Morita-sensei kept walking back and forth around the girl, but she didn't get involved, and the only visible and audible reaction Morita-sensei could have was to shout hey from the other side of the room. After a period of argumentation, in the end, toddler B took the initiative to say to toddler A: "You put the teddy bear down, so your time is over" and took toddler A to the other side of the room and put his arm around toddler A's shoulder to comfort, and the teddy bear battle ended.

3.1. Emphasis on distance control

In situations where children participate in social activities or have conflicts with others, teachers will deliberately and strategically adjust their position in the field, controlling distance to prepare for arbitration if necessary. [7] This distancing behavior is a deliberate tactic by teachers to understand children's emotions and provide space for children to solve problems. Although the teacher did not speak directly to the children, the teacher kept an eye on the situation, thinking about how things would unfold and deliberately conveyed the implicit message of "solving the problem on their own now" by adjusting the distance between teacher and student. Teachers are positioned as close as possible and not far away, both to create a safe atmosphere and to convey to children that they are concerned, understood, trusted and supported by their teachers, thereby stimulating their intrinsic motivation to solve problems on their own. At the Komatsuya Daycare Center, Mr. Morita has been walking around the children to observe their situation, adjusting and controlling the distance between them and letting them know that they are being paid attention to by the teacher.

3.2. Focus on the use of body movements

Teachers can respond to children's behavior through non-verbal means such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and nods, suggesting to children, "I have been paying attention to you, but I will not help you now, please solve the problem yourself first." "To avoid direct intervention by teachers, let the children think for themselves about the situation they face and how to solve it." In fact, this indirect guidance contains a wealth of cognitive and emotional information. Cognitive messages include "I'm watching you" and "forbid or limit help." Emotional messages conveyed include "I believe in you" (trust), "I understand you" (sympathy), and "don't worry" (support). [8] As a result, children can feel noticed, understood, trusted, and supported, and can express themselves freely.

3.3. Care about the timing and extent of intervention

When dealing with children's conflicts, teachers will give children enough time and space to solve problems on their own, but when children are still unable to solve problems on their own and are frustrated and confused about what to do next, teachers will take minimal temporary intervention, such as having a simple conversation with children, and then the teacher will return the scene to the children, and the teachers themselves will continue to observe and wait for the next development of the conflict events from a short distance. [4] In general, Japanese preschool teachers intervene directly only when the child's activities become "frozen" and the situation becomes difficult for the child to solve on his own, and this direct intervention is also minimal and temporary. When teachers intervene too quickly or aggressively, they give young children the wrong message that they are not responsible for controlling their behavior and that without teacher intervention, the class as a group cannot handle disputes. At the Komatsuya daycare center, it was also mentioned that Morita-sensei gave the children plenty of time to

resolve the dispute, and when the situation stalled (when the three toddlers had been fighting over teddy bears), Mr. Morita called out from the other side of the room to remind the children to focus on solving the problem.

4. The main application scenarios of the Mimamoru method

4.1. Peer conflict in young children

The Mimamoru Method is often used by Japanese early childhood educators to encourage children involved in peer conflict to make their own decisions and resolve conflicts. ^[4] In Japan, peer conflict is seen as an opportunity to teach children appropriate emotional and social skills, an important opportunity to promote character development, and to help children become responsible adults. Japanese educators may even deliberately prepare less than needed materials and equipment in games in order to be able to make children experience conflict, so that children can learn how to share limited game materials. ^[1]

4.2. Risky behavior in young children

The Mimamori Method can determine whether intervention is needed by judging the possible risks faced by young children, and if intervention is required, the minimum amount of intervention is used as a precautionary measure of risk. ^[9] When children know that the teacher is watching them, they know they are in a safety net, which means that the teacher will intervene if the situation becomes dangerous or too risky. In this process, children maintain their subjective integrity, are not distracted by teachers, and explore their "limits" as much as possible. On the other hand, teachers can maintain their external supervision to protect children. Therefore, the Mimamoru Method also embodies the relationship of trust between teacher and child. Japanese preschool teachers are relatively calm when young children climb horizontal bars, jump from heights, throw objects, or engage in other high-risk activities.

4.3. Young children are developing positive behavior

In addition to focusing on young children's conflictual and risky behaviors, the Mimamoru Method can also be used to cultivate positive behaviors. Positive behaviors include the formation of daily habits and the learning of skills, such as the ability of young children to perform various household chores (such as simple cleaning, organizing and sorting toys, throwing garbage, etc.) and self-care (such as putting on and undressing, putting on shoes, wiping their buttocks, etc.) under the Mimamoru method of adults. ^[6] Take Komatsuya Kindergarten in Japan as an example, where older children will take turns helping in the infant classroom, institutionalizing the interaction between mixed-age children, that is, 4 children in the five-year-old class will help take care of children aged 0~2 in the afternoon snack time every day. One afternoon, during snack time, Kawai-sensei in the infant room watched five-year-old A feed one-year-old toddler B, but when using the spoon, he pushed the spoon too hard into toddler B's mouth, and toddler B looked to Kawai-sensei for help. At this time, Kawai-sensei's hand gently rests on the back of toddler B, using gestures to encourage toddler B, and also suggesting that toddler A should pay more careful attention to what he is doing. Through the Mimamoru method, Kawai-sensei successfully and skillfully discovered that children's interactions did not disrupt the fluidity of interactions, nor made them lose confidence in themselves or the other person, and better practiced their skills of getting along with others and caring for others.

4.4. Special education and child welfare

The Mimamoru Method can also be applied to special education and child welfare. When dealing with children with special needs, educators can utilize the Mimamoru Method, creating a safe environment where children can experience and recover from conflict with their peers, allowing children to learn and negotiate their differences with their typically developing peers. In addition, at child welfare institutions in Japan, staff use the Mimamoru Method to create a socially and emotionally supportive environment in which children with a history of abuse feel safe and build relationships with supportive adults to overcome challenges. ^[10]

5. The main way teachers learn the Mimamoru method

The Mimamoru method is mainly implemented by adjusting and controlling facial expressions, body

movements, and distance from each other, a skill that is difficult to teach academically and needs to be developed through receiving instruction and accumulating one's own experience. Therefore, there are two main ways to learn the Mimamoru method, the first is through the "mentor system" to learn, many kindergartens in Japan use the mentor system to train young teachers, so that young teachers learn from experienced tutors, such as experienced preschool teachers in Japan see young teachers struggling in the classroom and do not know what to do, the experienced teacher will tell the young teacher to "intervene as little as possible." "It also gives young teachers the time and space to develop in their own way, at their own pace, and to master them through years of experience." Studies have shown that novice teachers in Japan need to learn the Mimamoru method from experienced teachers, and it takes at least five years for novice teachers to effectively apply Mimamoru's strategies. ^[5] The second is learning through self-reflection and dialogue with colleagues. In practice, it is mainly manifested in self-criticism and mutual criticism. For example, many kindergartens hold learning communities, teacher meetings, internal learning groups, etc., where a group of teachers of similar ages gather to plan, criticize, and improve their curriculum and pedagogy. It should be noted here that the criticism in the internal learning group mainly comes from themselves and their peers, and leaders or experts rarely participate in it and do not criticize young teachers, leaders believe that this is the responsibility of young teachers themselves, that is, to correct their own shortcomings, which is also consistent with the implementation points of the Mimamoru strategy.^[11]

6. The meaning and implications of the Mimamoru method

6.1. The significance of the Mimamoru method

6.1.1. Promote emotional development in young children

Japanese preschool education places special emphasis on learning how to experience, express and respond to feelings, and teachers also emphasize that teachers can make children feel a sense of trust and recognition by adjusting facial expressions, distance, etc., and at the same time can express their feelings in the process of interacting with others, not only that, but also enable onlookers to promote their emotional development through alternative experiences. Taking the application of the Mimamoru method in children's conflict events as an example, by allowing children to experience and experience conflicts to promote children's emotional development, onlookers can better deal with similar conflict events by watching the development of the whole event.

6.1.2. Encourage the development of autonomy in young children

The Mimamoru Method is consistent with the Japanese preschool teacher's emphasis on the ability of young children to act on their own without explicit instructions from the teacher, which is one of the characteristics of Japanese early childhood care and education cultural practices. ^[12] Therefore, Japanese preschool teachers respect children's independence and initiative, believing that supporting children's autonomy can cultivate children's self-confidence and willingness to constantly try when things happen, so teachers will purposefully oppose direct teaching or intervention until children know what they are capable of and can solve problems on their own. Otherwise, children become people who cannot do things without permission. At the same time, Japanese preschool teachers try to keep a low profile in the class (compared to the teacher as an authority figure in the class), and by doing so, delegate power to children, and cultivate groups of children responsible for rule setting and enforcement, conflict resolution, and self-management in the class, so as to maximize children's autonomy.

6.1.3. Support children's social interaction

With a focus on environmental development and interpersonal relationships, Japanese early childhood educators promote the social development of young children and the establishment of friendly relationships by creating an environment for children to experience interactions between peer groups that are difficult to experience in the family.^[9] In addition to supporting the interaction between children of the same age, there is also a special emphasis on mixed-age education in Japanese kindergartens, often allowing children of different ages, different abilities, and different personality characteristics to learn and live together to increase the communication between children of different ages. When teachers use the Mimamoru method, they try to let the children discuss by themselves as much as possible, deepen the communication between each other in the process of discussion, and accelerate the solution of problems.

6.2. Revelations of the Mimamoru method

6.2.1. Create safe, belonging, and emotionally supportive environments for young children

The basic idea of the Japanese Mimamoru parenting strategy is that teachers should observe children with empathy, provide a safe, harmonious and belonging social and emotional environment as much as possible, ensure the safety of young children while avoiding direct and "excessive" intervention or correction. The Mimamoru Method emphasizes caring for the feelings and needs of others without verbal expression, as well as the indirect communication and subtle use of their authority by educators when instructing children.^[10] Instead of imposing their will on their children, adults develop close relationships with children and perceive their emotions, making an effort to listen to their feelings, offer hints, give advice. Under this strategy, children can feel reassured and accepted. They'll feel, "Everything I'm doing is fine."

6.2.2. Use a variety of body movements to stimulate children's intrinsic motivation to solve problems independently

The most common body movements and expressions that occur when using the Mimamoru method are gaze, tilting the head, touching, etc. Japanese preschool teachers generally believe that a person's posture can express their attention, concern, whether they are distracted, etc., so Japanese teachers tend to adjust their attention to children's performance by adjusting their position in class and body movements.^[13] A skilled teacher can strategically show varying degrees of attention, and if a child is too dependent on the teacher to solve problems on her own, the teacher can adjust her gaze and body position so that she seems too busy to pay careful attention to the children's situation, leaving the problems to the children to deal with on their own. When the teacher senses that the children are about to lose control, she adjusts her body movements and expressions to make them appear more focused. Let young children know that teachers are always paying attention to their actions and have the confidence to deal with problems.

7. Conclusion

This paper mainly summarizes the connotation, characteristics, and applicable conditions of Mimamoru in Japan through the literature method, as well as the methods of teachers to acquire the strategy, and analyzes the benefits of using Mimamoru strategy on children's cognitive, emotional and social communication. It should be noted that this strategy is mainly based on Japanese cultural practices, and it is necessary to make trade-offs in the process of borrowing from the actual situation of the country. In addition, the Mimamoru strategy pays special attention to the timing of intervention and advocates as little direct intervention as possible, which requires teachers to have a good understanding and certainty of the situation on the educational scene, if this level is not achieved, they need to intervene as quickly as possible to avoid school bullying.

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