

# The Froebelian approach and the philosophy of Sozo Kurahashi: The Japanese ECEC Pioneer

Final Report for the Froebel Trust Open Call Research Grant

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## Overview of the project

Sozo Kurahashi (倉橋惣三, 1882–1955) is one of the pioneers of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Japan and is often referred to as the 'Japanese Froebel'. His educational philosophy of appreciating children and fostering their spontaneity continues to have a profound influence to date. While the impact of his theory can be observed in the national ECEC guidelines, his poetic narratives about children have been read by practitioners in the field and have supported their practice. His ideas are little known outside Japan; however, in this research project, we hope to demonstrate their uniqueness and clarify their connection to ECEC practices.

This research project aimed to address the following two points in relation to Kurahashi's theories.

(1) The contemporary significance of Kurahashi's ideas.

(2) The effect of perceiving ECEC based on Kurahashi's beliefs on contemporary practice through relevant case studies.

## Chapter 1: Kurahashi's ideas and their contemporary significance

### Methodology

We examined Kurahashi's ECEC philosophy and curriculum theory and presented a new understanding from the perspective of the mutuality of relatedness. Based on this novel insight, we also analysed contemporary cases of ECEC practice, published four articles, and prepared three manuscripts.

Nishi led the entire research part of this project, which consisted of a study of Kurahashi's philosophy and observational studies of ECEC practice. Matsushita, a researcher of clinical psychology with Jungian orientation, collaborated in this project with a psychotherapeutic interpretation of Kurahashi's theory and practice.

Data were collected between 2021 and 2022 through observations and video recordings with the help of Mihoko Ito, an ECEC researcher who had extensive experience in ECEC practice. With the cooperation of the nursery school where Nishi and Ito have been continually observing ECEC practices, we observed play in a class of more than 20 children aged between 3 and 5 years, and demonstrated how Kurahashi's ideas continued to be useful in understanding contemporary practice. Parents' consent to use the data and videos/photographs in the research presentation were obtained. The findings of the present research coincided with those of Chapter 2 and will be reported in detail in this presentation.

### Outcomes of the project

- (1) We examined the uniqueness of Kurahashi's philosophy from the perspective of the pedagogy of mutuality and clarified its contemporary significance;
- (2) The psychotherapeutic significance of play was investigated through a reinterpretation of the case Kurahashi cited in his curriculum theory of 'inductive curriculum (誘導保育, *yudo hoiku*; all Kurahashi's technical terms were translated by Nishi, the author of the present study)'; and
- (3) Based on this new understanding of the inductive curriculum, a contemporary example of children's play using video clips was discussed with the aim of offering a deeper insight into the ECEC process.

### Enquiry using the Froebelian approach

(1) Kurahashi's philosophy was influenced by Froebel and the New Education movement of the 20th century. He was one of the leading scholars of Froebelian studies and published '*Froebel*' (フレーベル; Kurahashi, 1939/1965). In this book, he outlined the life and work of Froebel and wrote about Froebel's influence on him, especially Froebel's profound respect for children. Kurahashi highly valued the fact that this respect was based on not only Froebel's theoretical assumption but also his experience of relating to and playing with children.

However, those who have read Kurahashi's writings, especially '*The Nurturing Mind*' (育ての心, *Sodate no Kokoro*; Kurahashi, 1936/1965) in which he employed a poetic narrative, believe that Kurahashi was different from other scholars. To determine his uniqueness, this study examined aspects related to 'mutual relationships' in

his writings. He emphasised that practitioners do not unilaterally lead children but rather 'learn from children'. Many authors have promoted the idea of respect for and learning from children; however, in his case, this attitude involves a certain meticulousness. This can be attributed to the fact that as the head of a kindergarten in Japan, he devoted his entire life to children. We explored his perspective on the relationships between practitioners and children with reference to what he termed as the 'nurturing mind'. These included the framework of mutual relationships, profound respect for children, empathy, experience of encountering children, and personal reflections of practitioners (Nishi, unpublished a, unpublished b). This article presents some excerpts of his works to offer valuable insight into his perspective.

The following section presents an example of Kurahashi's poetic narrative, which is titled 'At the corridor (廊下で)'. Although it is difficult to replicate the poetic tone of the original language, we hope that his profound concern for children is effectively conveyed in the translation.

#### At the corridor

A child is crying. The adults wipe away his tears. They say, 'Don't cry'. They ask him why he is crying. They tell him, 'You're a wimp'. Although they say and do many things to help him, there is only one thing that they do not do. It is showing empathy for the fact that he cannot help but cry.

Children appreciate teachers who take care of and treat them well. However, what children need the most is a teacher who allows them to feel joy. That teacher is the one who considers and empathises with the children's feelings in the present moment.

Some children are standing around the crying child. They do nothing. They do not say anything. They simply look at their friend's crying face with their own sad faces. Some children begin to cry without realising what is happening (Kurahashi, 1936/1965, p. 37).

Here, Kurahashi contrasts the adults' attitudes with the genuine empathy of the children. He emphasised the importance of caring for children with genuine empathy that comes naturally, similar to the way it does to children. Although the adult has the responsibility of caring for the child, in learning from the child, the adult fundamentally reconsiders their way of being an adult. This type of relationship, which includes a fundamental reflection and even a reversal of the relationship, is characteristic of Kurahashi's idea of mutuality.

Another excerpt shows how Kurahashi conceived the relationship between the practitioner and children in practice. In '飛びついて来た子ども' [*Tobitsuite Kita Kodomo*; The Child Who Ran Up to Me], he depicts the practical side of education.

### The Child Who Ran Up to Me

A child ran up to me. Before I noticed it, she had run off somewhere. By the time I noticed her closeness to me, she was already running away in another direction. Did I aptly receive what she felt in the moment when she came to me? Did I respond with equal affection to her?

I may realise it afterwards and brazenly follow her to respond, but the animated moment has already passed me by. If I push my affections on her now with the intent to make up for the missed opportunity, she may make a 'stop pestering me!' face and run away. If I don't act at the right moment, I would undoubtedly be useless to the child. That earlier moment was the ideal moment to act upon.

We never know when children will come running up to us (ibid., p. 40).

Children may not come to practitioners when we expect them to. We cannot build trusting relationships with children unless we notice the subtle changes in their emotions and respond at precisely the right moment. Unexpected things are always occurring in educational encounters. Practice is akin to a living being that is beyond our conscious control. Kurahashi often emphasised the significance of practice, but research on the actual practice through Kurahashi's viewpoint is limited. This indicates the need for case studies in ECEC, and Chapter 2 in this report highlights how such studies can be actualised.

(2) Kurahashi respected children and their lives as they were, based his educational approach on free play, and prioritised their experience of 'self-fulfilment (自己充実, *jiko-jujitsu*)'. He referred to the curriculum theory based on this approach as the 'inductive curriculum'. The practitioner suggests a theme within free play to add a slight systematic character to children's self-fulfilling play. This has often been perceived as an extended pretend play. However, investigating the specific examples of cases in which Kurahashi and the practitioners worked together, the findings of the present study revealed that his inductive curriculum surpassed the idea of pretend play. Each child's self-fulfilment was a prerequisite; the themes of play were not pre-decided but emerged from the common interests of the children and practitioners; and the children had an extremely high degree of freedom, including play that deviated from the theme. These factors suggest that Kurahashi's aim was to ensure that the children and practitioners were being guided together towards a 'unity' of the individual and the group in a Froebelian sense rather than being guided in a systematic way by the practitioners.

From a psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic perspective, it was also considered that the themes of play were not imposed by 'educational intent' on the part of the practitioners but that the themes necessary for the group to thrive in their life situations were unconsciously chosen. In the case study cited by Kurahashi (Kurahashi, 1936/1965), kindergarten children built a replica of the Tokyo station in the nursery through ingenuity, from which they experienced various imaginary journeys. This series of play began in September 1932 and lasted more than a year. Referring to the context of the case study, it appears to be unconsciously related to the fact that this kindergarten was burned down by the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, although the children may not have consciously realised it. The play was developed when the reconstruction work around Tokyo

Station was progressing in Tokyo and when the kindergarten was on the verge of relocating to a new building at the end of 1932. The play may have symbolised the journey of relocation to the new kindergarten, and the reason the children and practitioners were highly enthusiastic about the play can be attributed to the fact that they were experiencing various transitions together at that time. By putting the theme of play in its conscious dimension and unconscious background into perspective, we can better understand the process of ECEC and the children's experiences and appreciate them in the spirit of Kurahashi (Nishi, 2022, 2024a, 2024b).

(3) The observation of an ECEC case study in a nursery school suggested that the dynamic development corresponding to the inductive curriculum described above can be seen at present. In the case study, the children were enthusiastic about playing with disaster relief and medical emergency materials using their rich imagination. In this case, as well as the one above, it was inferred that the themes of play were improvised but not arbitrary and that they reflected their common interest. This case occurred in April 2022, several weeks after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when the children may have been concerned about the events related to the war as they unfolded. In addition, the practitioner provided an environment that made play possible and interactively engaged with the children in their shared fantasies by entering the play, which provided a further impetus to the children's fantasies. Here, we can see the unity of the individual and the group and learn about the way in which the practitioner's involvement facilitates this in a manner similar to Kurahashi's case examined above. The use of videos allowed the details of the case study to be analysed in a concrete and vivid manner (Nishi, 2023, unpublished b).

### Future research direction

This study demonstrates the significance of a new understanding of an ECEC pioneer's belief and highlights that case studies provide important clues in integrating theory and practice. In Kurahashi's ECEC philosophy, the practitioner is the most important factor. Even if identical techniques are used in ECEC practice, the children's experiences will be completely different depending on the practitioner. Moreover, even if the same principles, such as 'respect for children', are upheld as an espoused theory (Schön, 1983), whether and how children are actually respected depend on the practitioner's philosophy and personality. It is important for all ECEC practitioners and researchers to understand the ECEC philosophy more deeply rather than regarding it as a pre-existing concept to ensure ongoing research in this area.

The gap between theory and practice is often a challenge in ECEC. It is necessary to enquire about the meaning and relevance of a theory in actual practice. Case studies are an important means of integrating theory and practice. Kurahashi's ideas, the methodology of his successor Makoto Tsumori, and psychoanalytic and Jungian perspectives were useful in the interpretation of the case studies in the present project. Further research on the methodology of case interpretation is required.

## Chapter 2: Observational case studies

### Methodology

The authors continually conducted observational studies in a nursery school. In this project, the observations conducted between 2021 and 2022 were combined with the video recordings obtained previously, and we published the results as a book titled '動画で学ぶ乳児保育—0・1・2歳児の遊びと援助 [*Learn early years education and care through videos: Play and support for children aged 0, 1 and 2 years*]' (Nishi & Ito, 2023). The case studies were compiled into 18 short videos of 1–3 minutes, with a DVD as an appendix to the book; more than half of the video clips can also be viewed on smartphones and tablets using a two-dimensional code.

### Ethical considerations

Written consent for the publication of cases and photographs/videos was obtained from the children's parents with the cooperation of the nursery school. All the children's names are pseudonyms, and any portion of the video or audio that could identify them by name has been edited and blurred.

### The observational situation

The nursery school in which the observational study was conducted is located in Kurashiki City (Okayama, Japan), a regional city with a rich historical and cultural heritage. It is in a relatively urban area of the city, close to the railway station, and is attended by approximately 130 children aged 0–6 years. The nursery school has its own ECEC policy and does not promote the theories of Froebel or Kurahashi. However, since it respects the spontaneous development of children's free play, the observations revealed several interesting points, as the practical aspects were similar to these theories. In addition, the development of children's free play was supported by the caring relationship between the practitioners and the children, which was similar to the approach advocated by Froebel and Kurahashi. In terms of the specific form of ECEC, the nursery school adopted the 担当制 [*tantousei*] approach for children under the age of three years, which is the Japanese version of the 'key person approach' with special care for life routine. For children aged three years and above, classes in this nursery school are organised such that children of different ages can receive due care from practitioners, aiming to deepen the relationship between practitioners and children and between the children of different ages. With Ito's help, Nishi conducted the observations of all the classes in this project. We published a book, which contains the case studies of children under the age of three as the findings of this project (Nishi and Ito, 2023).

We applied a version of the participant observation approach in which we developed a friendly relationship with the children and observed them. Children often invited us to play with them, and we responded according to their needs while observing the situation. Although this is not an objective research design, it is a natural form of entry into an ECEC setting where children play freely. This participant observation approach allowed for more natural and ethical engagement with the children and facilitated an intimate mutual understanding than observing from a distance. Occasionally, the relationship with the observer becomes the focus of a case study (Tsumori, 1974; Nishi, 2018). However, in this project, the focus of the observations was on the

relationship between the practitioner and the children.

### Outcomes of the project

- (1) A practical understanding of the practitioner–child relationship in ECEC was developed using video clips; in ECEC, the gap between theory and practice is a challenge, which this video-based observational study helps to bridge;
- (2) The book demonstrates how to visually observe children and their play; and
- (3) It seeks to exemplify the nature of reflection through a dialogue between the co-authors, who have experienced both research and practice of ECEC.

### Enquiry using the Froebelian approach

The book was published in Japanese. In this report, we present the outlines of two case studies from the book (Nishi and Ito, 2023). They aim to provide a practical view of children's free play and its rich development. A video clip introducing the book can be viewed on this link (the captions in the video are in Japanese).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIHdvE4-C4M>.

### Case study 1: 'A great idea!'

On a summer day, we observed the various play scenes of the children in the two-year-old class and noticed that Ryuta (a boy) and Ryuko (a girl) had been playing together for more than half an hour (Figure 1; all children's names are pseudonyms). They shared an imaginary world in which they were caring for their baby. Their play appeared to continue with the same theme but frequently changed locations. They discussed their imaginary life experiences while rearing their baby.



Figure 1: Ryuta and Ryuko playing together

Ryuko feeds milk to her baby doll in the room of a house-like wooden structure, which is used for

various play. Ryuko says to Ryuta, 'I'm going to the toilet' and stands up, while another boy says to her, 'The baby is crying!' He gives his doll to Ryuko. She smiles and begins looking after the baby.

Ryuta is now moving the soft play blocks shown in Figure 1 as if he is redecorating the room. Seeing his efforts, Ryuko approaches him and says, 'Ryuta, that's a great idea!'

In this case, it is striking that the two toddlers shared an imaginary world that continued to develop over a considerable period, fuelled by their communication, engagement, and imagination. The way in which they both actively shared their ideas and were receptive to each other's thoughts while also genuinely appreciating the other's ideas suggests that the play was a self-fulfilling experience for both children.

The imaginary world of these two children was not closed to those outside this world. When the other boy handed the baby doll to Ryuko, he must have sensed how she had been taking good care of her doll, even if he had not directly joined in the play with her. Ryuko willingly accepted the doll with a smile and carefully incorporated it into her play at once. Rather than shutting themselves off from the outside world, the children were attentive to other people and situations. They smoothly took on external influences in creative and improvisational ways and incorporated unexpected events to enrich their imaginary world.

The children interacted with each other with and without verbal communication through play. From the way they talked, it appeared that the word *kagi* (鍵, key) was not clear to Ryuko; therefore, she repeatedly kept asking Ryuta about it and insisted that it was *kaki* (かき, may refer to 柿 persimmon or 牡蠣 oyster). They enjoyed this type of trial-and-error learning. Children acquire language through their interactions with adults; however, the experience of freely enjoying trial-and-error in the circle of children is also meaningful as part of the process of adapting language.

Three practitioners were present in the room during this interaction. Although they were aware that Ryuta and Ryuko were playing in this manner, they did not intervene in a way that would have interrupted the children's play process. If they had intervened in an 'educational' way with the intention of 'developing the play', the children may not have been able to develop the play to the extent that they actually did in the vignette above. Such continued and intensive play may not have been possible in the presence of a practitioner who constantly intervened.

This does not imply that practitioners should withdraw from the play and observe the children from a distance. Although the practitioners withheld frequent intervention, they were intimately involved with the children in charge through *tantousei*. As these close relationships were established, the children could play freely with a calm state of mind, which worked akin to a 'holding environment' (Winnicott, 1960; Langs, 1978) in a psychoanalytic relationship. Fusae Tsumori, who conducted case studies on ECEC with Makoto Tsumori, a prominent advocate of Kurahashi's philosophy, described the relationship with children as follows. 'It is necessary for adults to have the imagination and the emotional capacity to sense what the central image is that the child is seeking' (Tsumori, 1984, p. 132). While empathising with the children's inner world, the practitioners need to maintain not only direct but also indirect involvement such that the children can play safely and freely.



## Case 2: For each and everyone

Six infants and toddlers (0–1 year old) were playing around the practitioner (Figure 2). Some played with toys whereas others walked along the bookshelf. Three children seated in front of the practitioner played with wooden blocks. The practitioner was receptive to the children's thoughts and actions, responded carefully to all children from moment-to-moment, and ensured a safe play environment, both physically and psychologically.

One girl gave a wooden block to the practitioner. The practitioner smiled, bowed her head, and carefully received it with both hands, saying *Arigato* (thank you). Then a boy near them threw some blocks on the floor. The practitioner told him, 'Please don't throw them, it's dangerous'. The boy seemed slightly frustrated and leaned on the practitioner's lap. The practitioner was also supporting two children on her back while they were holding on to a bookshelf for support. After a short period, the boy regained his composure thanks to the practitioner's support, stood up, and joined the other children's plays. The practitioners carefully observed each child and the group as a whole.



Figure 2: Infants and toddlers playing around the practitioner

This case illustrates how the practitioner simultaneously interacted with several children. Her involvement and abilities enabled these six children to freely play with each other in a calm and enjoyable atmosphere. This is not an easy task for an average adult.

The practitioner sensed as well as empathised and engaged with the children by touching them, handing them play equipment, maintaining eye contact, and even supporting them on her back. The practitioner's posture in the video reveals that she was trying to support the children through careful involvement while empathising with them. While practitioners have the requisite knowledge and technique needed as a professional, direct interaction with the children was not only derived from a conscious plan and knowledge but rather emerged through her heartfelt reaction in every moment. Here, we can see how practical knowledge and 'reflection in action' (Schön, 1983) function in ECEC practice.

Based on the sense of security provided by the practitioner, the children expanded their own interests and inspired each other. This short two-minute video includes many such moments, and the children were often

inspired by their friends' play and attempted similar actions. They shared their joy with the practitioner when they had independently achieved something, although there were differences in their development, and the sense of achievement varied for each child.

These scenes demonstrate that individuals and groups do not contradict each other. ECEC practitioners can and should aim to create Froebelian 'unity' among the children and within the group. This task can be challenging, but highly specialised practitioners perform it every day. We do not wish to suggest that practitioners should simultaneously take care of many children. By contrast, we hope to clarify the type of challenges that skilled practitioners face every day, hoping to improve the work environment and child–practitioner ratio needed to perform such tasks in ECEC with expertise.

## Future research direction

Regarding the ECEC case studies using videos, we would like to present our findings from the experience of this project and ideas that can serve as a foundation for future research.

### (1) Beginning from an inspiring scene

Seeing children in a fulfilling play evokes various emotions in the observer. Guided by this experience, we conducted a case study and selected the relevant scenes. Evidently, there is a risk of the arbitrary selection of material for this type of participant observation. However, in Makoto Tsumori's observational methodology, this type of emotional involvement can be useful, as the mind of the observer can be a sensor of what is occurring in the present moment in the situation. Since the concept of 'objective empathy', or being devoid of one's own feelings, does not exist, emotion can be the key to observe children beyond surface action and communication. Psychoanalysis utilises these emotional responses to understand the client and analytic situation, as exemplified by the concepts of transference and counter-transference (Langs, 1978). It is essential to not suppress our emotional experiences but rather refine the sensitivity of one's subjective reactions to overcome unnecessary biases. Thus, we captured scenes that appealed to us, and the children welcomed us observing them this way, interested in their play and achievements.

### (2) Interactivity in the video clips

The method of compiling the ECEC case studies as videos was gradually established over the course of the project. Since it can be difficult for viewers to concentrate on videos for an extended duration, they were made concise and focused to the extent possible. The process of editing these videos helped clarify the authors' objectives and their findings. Captions were added wherever possible, as it can be challenging to understand the events without the on-site experience. These captions described what the authors had experienced and what they wanted to convey to the viewers. The families enjoyed watching the videos and provided consent to publish the data. Some parents expressed that they understood the nursery school's high level of expertise. We were informed that the children also enjoyed watching the videos repeatedly. We believe that the creation of the video helped foster a variety of dialogue among the nursery school, families, and children.

### (3) Dialogues on ECEC

The understanding and interpretation of the ECEC cases in this book are presented in the form of a dialogue between the co-authors Nishi and Ito. Nishi specialises in ECEC philosophy and psychotherapy while Ito is a researcher in ECEC with extensive experience in practice. Ito's practical knowledge provided immense learning during the course of the project. The ECEC practice is akin to a dialogue. Practitioners articulate their own thoughts and views of the world to children through their interactions, conversations, and actions, which, in turn, inspire related responses on the children's part. As ECEC is a dialogical practice, case interpretation is deepened through a reflective dialogue between researchers from different backgrounds. We hope that the dialogical style of the book will offer valuable insight into the ECEC practice.

### Application of the grant

This work was supported by the Froebel Trust under Grant number RCH-AP-00271-2021-G. The grant was used as follows. Direct project costs were used to purchase the books needed for the study of the philosophies of Froebel and Kurahashi Sozo. Travel expenses were used for travel related to the observations of ECEC practice; IT costs were used to purchase the storage media required for the video-based observational study. Miscellaneous expenses were used to cover the cost of commissioning English language editing to prepare the submitted article, manuscripts, and this final report. This grant made possible the authorised purpose of this study, namely, research on Sozo Kurahashi's ideas on ECEC studies and case studies to observe and understand ECEC practices based on these ideas. The results are presented in a book written in Japanese (Nishi and Ito, 2023), an English article (Nishi, 2024a), three Japanese articles (Nishi, 2022, 2023, 2024b), two English manuscripts (Nishi, unpublished a, unpublished b), and this report.

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