

Findings from the survey results

Takashi Muto (Professor Emeritus, Shiraume Gakuen University)

The previous survey was conducted in 2018, before the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, this survey took place in autumn 2023, by which time the pandemic had nearly ended. Additionally, the awareness of the three “National Curriculum Standard/Guidelines,” which were revised in 2017, is expected to have increased among kindergartens, daycare centers, and certified ECEC centers by the time this survey was conducted.

During this period, the birth rate has declined, while the number of dual-income families has increased. In response, the capacity fill rate of childcare facilities has decreased, particularly for children under 3 years of age. Additionally, the number of kindergartens is declining, although their operating hours are expanding. The use of ICT by ECEC teachers is rising significantly.

Parents increasingly expect childcare facilities to offer experiences that their children cannot have at home. Hence, childcare facilities are placing greater emphasis on various aspects of play and interest as key educational and childcare goals (they were asked to choose up to three, indicating the importance they place on these aspects).

On the other hand, activities outside of regular childcare, such as gymnastics, English, music, and writing *hiragana*, are also increasing.

As more childcare facilities provide longer hours, there has been a notable shift toward activities that offer wider group experiences, foster children’s interests, and emphasize play. Simultaneously, there has been an increase in specialized lessons for intellectual and artistic activities at an early age. This reflects the efforts of childcare facilities to meet diverse parental needs.

Toshiyuki Shiomi (Professor Emeritus, The University of Tokyo)

It is often claimed that the problem of childcare waiting lists has been resolved. However, this survey revealed data showing a decline in the capacity fill rates at each childcare facility, an increase in the number of children with disabilities, and a greater use of tools for indirect communication with parents. These trends indicate that the landscape of early childhood education and care is entering a new phase, and this change is not solely due to the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each data from these results is quite interesting. Specifically, in the survey about improving the quality of ECEC teachers, the top-ranked factors included “Improvement in compensation for ECEC teachers,” “Improvement in staffing standards,” and “Promoting a culture within the facility where ECEC teachers mutually learn.” These factors reflect the current conditions faced by ECEC teachers. Additionally, several ECEC teachers emphasized the need for “Enriching on-site training content” and “Securing training participation opportunities,” highlighting another important aspect of their situation.

I often hear reports indicating that the number of children who seem to need special support and those who are difficult to manage is increasing. I also hear several voices claiming that parents’ expectations are becoming increasingly diverse and difficult to meet. Many childcare facilities are concerned about inappropriate childcare. These situations reflect the pressing need for individuals working in childcare facilities to gain new knowledge and skills. This indicates that the need to improve the status of ECEC teachers as childcare professionals and increase opportunities to acquire specialized knowledge and skills during teacher training and post-employment training has become an enduring issue. I think the key word is improving the expertise of ECEC teachers.

Misako Aramaki (Associate Professor, Mejiro University)

Among the newly added survey items for ECEC teachers, I will discuss the results focusing on “Opportunities for discussions at childcare facilities.”

About 60% of ECEC teachers answered, “Often do so” to the question “ECEC teachers keep a record of children’s activities,” while 40-50% chose this answer for “ECEC teachers reflect on and review their childcare practices with each other.” These results might be higher if the responses indicating “Sometimes do so” were included. By adopting a child-centered perspective while reflecting on and reviewing childcare practices, ECEC teachers will understand the current conditions and issues at their childcare facility. Ultimately, they can improve and enhance the entire childcare system. These efforts are crucial for ensuring and boosting childcare quality. In contrast, the percentage of ECEC teachers who responded “Often do so” to “Children reflect on their own activities” was relatively low. When planning and reflecting on activities at the childcare facility, it is crucial to understand “what this means for children.” “Children reflect on their own activities” means accepting the thoughts and desires of children as their autonomy, enabling them to participate in activities autonomously and enthusiastically. Additionally, “ECEC teachers and parents discuss their children’s behavior and progress” is important for ECEC teachers to enhance parents’ understanding of children and foster a collaborative relationship that supports children’s development. By creating opportunities for casual daily interactions with parents and building a foundation of trust, ECEC teachers can also avoid troubles with parents.

In the future, it will be important to clarify the characteristics of childcare facilities that efficiently implement initiatives through the use of ICT and collaborative structures, aiming to improve childcare quality as an organization.

Asako Koyama (Associate Professor, Woyo Women’s University)

This survey revealed that many ECEC teachers have a positive view of their childcare facility’s environment and recognize the importance of sharing information about children’s growth and daily activities. They adopt a child-centered perspective, discuss children’s conditions and childcare practices with colleagues, and consistently record children’s progress. Their responses indicated that they derived satisfaction and fulfillment from their work. Consequently, it seems ECEC teachers believe their occupation to be attractive and rewarding.

However, they felt burdened by paperwork and a mismatch in salaries and workload. Regarding the “Requirements to improve the qualities of ECEC teachers,” principals focus on the importance of long-term initiatives like training. In contrast, ECEC teachers seek direct and short-term outreach initiatives to alleviate their current burdens. Hence, there seems to be a gap between what principals and ECEC teachers believe as necessary for the improvement of qualities in ECEC teachers. This indicates that ECEC teachers are struggling with so much excessive workload.

The results indicate that many ECEC teachers find their work rewarding. Nonetheless, excessive workload burdens them so much just to perform their daily tasks, making it difficult to continue working as an ECEC teacher. Issues, such as improving the working conditions of ECEC teachers and labor shortages, have persisted for a long time. Simply raising salaries or increasing the staff members is not a sufficient solution to these problems.

Government-level actions are required to create an environment that encourages ECEC teachers, who find their work rewarding, to remain in the profession. I also expect ECEC teachers to continue their efforts to improve their quality as childcare professionals.