



~International Comparative Study on Free Preschool Education and Childcare~

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1. Purpose of this study

Using a newly developed spreadsheet to compare the detailed features of the activities and policies of ECEC in representative European and Asian countries, we have studied the free (charge) system of ECEC.

After reviewing the differences of the free ECEC system in these countries, we analyzed the outstanding issues of free ECEC systems.

One of the challenges in Early Childhood Education and Care (hereinafter, "ECEC") that draws public attention is to ensure the "quality of childcare services. Parental affordability is the critical factor in such a challenge. On October 1, 2019, the Japanese government introduced the "Free ECEC" system for all preschool children aged 3 to 5. However, this move has revealed several issues.

Free ECEC has already been offered or is currently underway in many countries. Therefore, we conducted an international comparative study examining issues arising from free ECEC in each country.

These materials were prepared by expert groups from each country/region and summarized and finalized by CRN. In this presentation, we used these materials to compare and analyze international issues focusing on the theme of "Free ECEC around the World."

In the next section, we will explain the current situation of free ECEC in each country/region with the matrix table.



2. Current situation of free ECEC



Country	Current situation of free ECEC
Japan	Children aged 3 to 5: free ECEC since 2019 (and partly free childcare services outside school hours at kindergartens/childcare facilities) Children aged 0 to 2: sliding-scale fees based on household income.
Korea	Children aged 3 to 5: free ECEC with "Nuri" curriculum (other education fees and expenses are borne by families).
New Zealand	Children aged 3 or above: free ECEC up to 20 hours/week since 2007.
Italy	Children aged 3 to 5: free ECEC at public schools (excluding school lunch fees and other expenses). Children aged 0 to 2: different childcare fees based on household income and childcare service hours.
UK	Different childcare fees based on the place of residence, parents' employment status, and children's age Children aged 3 to 4: free ECEC for 15-30 hours/week Children aged 0 to 2: childcare fees borne by families (except for two-year-olds from low-income families).
Netherlands	Children aged 4 to 5: free ECEC at basic schools Children aged 2.5 to 5: childcare-fee subsidies Children aged 0 to 4: free normal childcare services up to 230 hours/month.
Sweden	Children aged 3 to 5: free ECEC up to 15 hours/week (not 100% free, but the financial burden for parents is minimal).
France	Children aged 3 to 5: free ECEC at infant schools (the country has a history of free education that ensures children's right to receive education).

References

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3. Issues of free ECEC

[Characteristics of free ECEC in Japan]

- Scope:
- All children from their 3rd birthday until school enrollment
 - All kindergarten class hours (4 hours/day, 5 days/week, 38 weeks/year in principle)
 - Children aged 3 or above attending nursery schools (which are public/private facilities for children 0 to 6)
 - Partially free for after-school childcare services at kindergartens and childcare support facilities (mostly without time restriction) to support parents' work
 - Not only public preschools but also applicable to private preschools (81% of kindergartens, 65% of nursery schools)

[Issues of Free ECEC in Japan]

■ Japan introduced the "Free ECEC" system quite recently and several issues have been pointed out:

- ①Because there is no time restriction for free ECEC, many parents wanted to use childcare services for long hours, which caused greater burdens for childcare workers and lower service quality.
- ②Unauthorized preschools with unique educational policies are out of scope and now face difficulties continuing their services.
- ③More private kindergartens and unauthorized childcare facilities raised their service fees through price-grouping, making an excuse that they are outside the scope of free ECEC.
- ④The government is facing revenue shortfalls because a more-than-expected number of parents are using this system.

■ Feedback on the implementation of free ECEC(Data: Cabinet Office Survey in March 2022)

- Parents: Positive feedback = 80% (the system makes more affordable in using childcare services, helps household budgets, etc.)
Preschools: Positive feedback = 40% (More opportunities for children receiving ECEC as a result of lower financial burdens for parents)
Negative feedback and issues (greater administrative workload)

[Some insights from the initiatives of other countries]

- A limited number of hours to receive free ECEC.(e.g. Korea, NZ, UK, etc.)
- Childcare services beyond the limited hours are not free.(Same as above)
- Limited facilities in scope: some countries limit to public schools(e.g. Italy, etc.), while other countries permit both public and private schools.(Netherlands, France, etc.)
- Efforts to maintain a balance between parents' financial burdens and the quality of childcare services.
- Effectively secured financial resources needed to provide free ECEC for all children aged 3 to 5.

4. Discussion (summary)

We believe this international comparative study will help us have deeper discussions and insights into our respective educational policies.

As shown in the left section, Japan has several issues providing free ECEC. We can learn from the initiatives of other countries.

①What should we do to secure financial resources and improve the quality of childcare services?

Japan's educational policy to provide free ECEC has caused greater burdens for childcare facilities. Therefore, to promote free ECEC further, securing financial and human resources (i.e., childcare workers with appropriate working conditions) is essential.

After observing the initiatives of other countries, we recognize the necessity to refine the free ECEC system. For example, we can specify conditions for eligible service hours, parental employment status, and facility types. In addition, limiting the number of hours to receive free ECEC based on kindergartens' operating hours (i.e., 4 hours/day, 5 days/week, 38 weeks/year) may avoid confusion.

②Who are the recipients of free ECEC?

Many countries started their initiatives for women's empowerment, equal educational opportunities for children, and so on. For example, Japan's free ECEC originally intended to provide "all children with opportunities to receive a quality education." However, this policy gradually shifted to "reduce financial burdens of families with small children" (Ikemoto).

We should bear in mind that children are the recipients of free ECEC. So, we always need to ask ourselves whether these initiatives really benefit children's happiness and well-being while improving their parents' and childcare workers' quality of life.

In this comparative study, we used the matrix to compare the initiatives of free ECEC in each country and obtained valuable insights. We believe that this approach is also useful in analyzing other research topics.



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Child Research Net (CRN) is an Internet-based child research institute established under the concept of interdisciplinary "Child Science". It was founded in Japan in 1996 to solve issues involving children.