

***A Study on the Vocational Awareness of Japanese Students
Attending Childcare Vocational School
-Analysing Panel Survey at Vocational School-***

Risa Tsushima

*Faculty of health and welfare
Okayama Prefectural University*

Koto Kamiji

*Center of Professional
Development of Teachers
Shizuoka University*

Abstract: *This paper clarifies the formation of vocational awareness as a nursery school teacher among students attending vocational schools. While the previous studies mentioned above focused on reality shock, this paper focuses on the vocational awareness of students attending vocational schools, using panel survey data. The paper also will examine the educational support they need. The findings of this paper are related to human resource development and support for continued employment among other issues.*

Our findings focus on three points. The first was an analysis of vocational awareness that would be applicable to general jobs. It can be said that students attained a higher level of these skills from the time of admission. The second was an analysis of the change in awareness after childcare training. As a result, the students lost confidence in their childcare practices. The third is an analysis of what the students felt through the training. The results showed that students experience difficulties in acquiring professional skills as a nursery school teacher, especially in relation to children, when they are in school.

Based on the findings of this paper, it is thought that clarifying how students form their professional awareness while they are enrolled in vocational schools and then providing them with the necessary childcare training guidance pre and after will lead to support for continued employment after graduation.

Keywords: *vocational awareness, nursery school teacher, vocational schools, panel survey data*

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of this paper

This paper clarifies the formation of vocational awareness as nursery school teachers among students attending vocational schools in Japan, using data from a panel survey conducted while the students were in school. In Japan, it has become a social issue to solve the problem of childcare. There is a shortage of places for preschool children. Since 2015, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) has released the "Plan for Securing Childcare Workers" and has been promoting increasing the amount of childcare available. It is based on training more nursery school teachers. Currently, the "New Childcare Security Plan" has been announced, setting a numerical target of expanding the number of places for 140,000 children by the end of 2024.

In order to eliminate the waiting list for children, the following issues have been identified: "human resource development", "support for continued employment", "support for re-employment", and "improvement of the working environment". In November 2020, the effective ratio of job openings for nursery school teachers was 2.68 in Japan; Ibaraki Prefecture had the largest ration (4.16) while the smallest (1.26) was that of Wakayama Prefecture. Ibaraki does not have enough nursery school teachers. There is expected to face even more serious challenges in terms of securing human resources for childcare. So, what kind of job awareness do the students who attend childcare training facilities have? How do they think about the job of childcare, and how do they form their professional attitudes ?

Previous survey research focused on young nursery school teachers and students at childcare training institutions. They have developed in the context of clarifying reality shocks. This is because, preventing workers from leaving the workforce at an early stage has been emphasized in the "Childcare Worker Security Plan". For example, Matsuura et al. (2019) targeted young workers and clarified the gap between expectations and reality. Tanigawa (2013) and Matsuda et al. (2016) conducted a survey of students and found that they experienced reality shock mainly through childcare training.

While the previous studies mentioned above focused on reality shock, this paper focuses on the vocational awareness of students attending vocational schools, using panel survey data. And we will examine the educational support they need. The findings of this paper are related to human resource development and support for continued employment among the issues.

1.2 Nursery school teacher training system and vocational schools in Japan

In order to work in the field of childcare, it is necessary to earn either a nursery school teacher certification or a kindergarten teaching license^{*1}. These qualifications can be obtained at four-year universities, junior colleges, and vocational schools. The MHLW had certified 683 nursery school teacher training facilities by 2020.

Of the designated nursery school teacher training facilities, 294 are universities, 217 are junior colleges, 170 are vocational schools and 2 are high schools. Of these, vocational schools allow students to obtain a nursery school teacher certificate. In addition, 51 vocational schools also offer kindergarten licenses. Most of the vocational schools have a two- to three-year training course. And they are different from universities. School Education Law defines a vocational school as a school whose purpose is "to develop abilities necessary for occupation or practical life, or to improve culture. Among them, schools with specialized courses and where secondary school graduates go on to higher education can be called vocational schools (Article 126 of the School Education Law)". A vocational school for childcare is a school that offers specialized courses in childcare.

According to Uegami(2011), vocational schools are places for "adolescent education"

(Uegami 2011, pp. 279-283). To put it more concretely, students acquire the manners and attitudes needed as members of society, such as greeting people, not being late, and not missing deadlines, as well as self-awareness. According to Uegami's research, vocational schools not only provide education on specific specialized knowledge and skills, but also teach the attitudes and manners of professionals with a view to "working". Therefore, this paper focuses on the training of nursery school teachers at vocational schools, which are relatively more closely linked to working in the nursery school soon than universities in terms of institutional design^{※2}. In other words, this paper will focus on the awareness of students who are considered to have a relatively high expectation of going to work as nursery school teachers while they are in school.

1.3 Practical training in the curriculum for a nursery school teacher license

At nursery school teacher training facilities, it is possible to obtain a kindergarten teacher license and a nursery school teacher license. The number of credits required for licenses differs depending on the type of license^{※3}. In this paper, in order to focus on vocational schools, we will give an overview of the subjects related to a nursery school teacher certification. The compulsory subjects for nursery teacher training include "subjects related to the nature and purpose of childcare," "subjects related to understanding the childcare," "subjects related to the contents and methods of childcare," "childcare training," and "general practice.

Childcare training is a requirement to obtain both a kindergarten teacher license and a nursery school teacher license. According to Murata et al. (2004), "a total of 30 days of on-the-job training at nursery schools, child welfare facilities other than nursery schools, and related facilities is required for the nursery school teacher certification" (Murata et al., 2004, p. 13). In addition to the textbook for training institutions shows, childcare training is an opportunity for students to learn about children and their work as caregivers by being in the childcare field. (Sunaga, 2011, p. 8).

On the other hand, as introduced at the beginning of this article, research has been conducted to clarify the unexpected reality of students' experiences during childcare training. Matsuda et al. found that as students undergo childcare training, they become more aware of the "negative aspects of childcare" and the "harshness of the job. Tanigawa, who discussed kindergarten training, clarified the nature of reality shock caused by the practice experience. Tanigawa argues that although there is reality shock experienced through practical training, it is transformed into self-learning through reflective practice.

In addition, Uegami (2011) also students gain "learning and growth" or "a sense of vocation and self-awareness" (Uegami, 2011, p. 219) by coming into contact with the "reality" of the professional world through the field training.

However, the above studies were investigations of changes before and after the training period, and career development during the period from after training to early career. They were not focused on the changes in vocational awareness of vocational school students during their studies. In this paper, we use data from a panel survey of vocational school students while they were still in school to clarify the transformation of their vocational awareness through their studies and training at the school.

2. Overview of the survey and data

A total of four questionnaire surveys were conducted over a two-year period for students enrolled in the 2017 academic year at two childcare professional schools, A and B. The first survey was conducted in April-May of the first year, and the second in October-December of the first year. The third was held between May and July of the second year, and the fourth was held in February of the second year. The first survey was conducted shortly after the students

entered the school, so it can be said that the situation at the time of entrance can be grasped. The third round was conducted between May and July of the second year, so we can grasp the situation before the full-scale childcare training begins. The fourth questionnaire was conducted near the time of their graduation, when they had already completed their school curriculum.

The last three digits of the student's student ID number are entered in the questionnaire, and the questionnaires for each session are linked, so that the data can be analyzed as panel data. The questionnaire items included student life, grades, friendships, attitudes toward work, and career paths. Since there are not many surveys of vocational schools in Japan, this study was designed with reference to surveys of high schools^{*4}.

In this paper, the results of the questionnaire survey are presented as the combined data of School A and School B. In addition, as the survey progressed from the first to the fourth round, some students dropped out due to retention, withdrawal, or leave of absence, so the data was analyzed for the 92 respondents of the fourth round.

3. Analysis

3.1 Characteristics of Professional Attitudes of Students in Childcare Vocational Schools

Table 1 How important do you think the following things are in working?

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Punctuality	100.0% N=89	100.0% N=88	98.9% N=87	100.0% N=92
Professional knowledge and skills	96.6% N=86	98.9% N=87	87.5% N=77	92.4% N=92
General common sense	98.9% N=88	97.7% N=86	96.6% N=86	96.7% N=88
Have qualifications	85.4% N=76	79.5% N=70	82.8% N=72	68.5% N=63
Follow what your superiors say	82.0% N=73	90.9% N=80	83.0% N=73	84.8% N=78
Teamwork	97.8% N=87	98.9% N=87	96.6% N=85	96.7% N=89
Expressing one's opinion well	98.9% N=88	96.6% N=84	93.2% N=82	91.3% N=84
Being able to distinguish between work and private life	96.6% N=86	92.0% N=81	97.7% N=85	95.7% N=88
Motivated	100.0% N=89	98.9% N=87	97.7% N=85	96.7% N=89
Being able to build relationships with people of different ages and positions	98.9% N=88	100.0% N=88	100.0% N=88	94.6% N=87

Number of respondents who are very important and somewhat important

Table 1 shows the number and percentage of "very important" and "somewhat important" responses to the question, "How important do you think the following things are in working?" Respondents had four possible responses: "very important," "somewhat important," "not very important," and "not important at all". The item that most students answered as important was "punctuality," and all the respondents answered that it was important for the first, second, and fourth sessions. In addition, "being able to build relationships with people of different ages and positions" accounted for 100% of the responses in the second and third sessions, and all of the respondents answered that it was important. "Motivated" accounted for 100% of the responses in the first round. In addition, "general common sense," "teamwork," "expressing one's opinion well," and "being able to distinguish between work and private life" consistently accounted for more than 90% of the responses.

On the other hand, the percentage for "have qualifications" has been in the 80% range since the first survey, and dropped to 68.5% in the fourth survey. However, it is possible that this is because the respondents thought that qualifications alone were insufficient to work as nursery school teachers. It is also possible that this item was lowered because the respondents

recognize the importance of more specific professional skills as a nursery school teacher rather than the abstract concept of qualifications. In other words, they recognize that no matter how many qualifications they have, in order to be a good nurse, it is important to have actual skills. In fact, the percentage of respondents who thought that "professional knowledge and skills" were important was consistently high, ranging from 87.5% to 98.9%.

But in any case, with the exception of the lowest value of 68.5%, most of the items accounted for 80% or 90% or more, and this has remained consistently high from the first to the fourth survey.

3.2. Changes in awareness after childcare practice

Table 2 How confident are you in your ability to do the following?

	3rd	4th
Work cooperatively with colleagues	81.1% N=99	69.3% N=79
Work with your role in mind	79.3% N=96	65.2% N=75
Improve the quality of your work by reflecting on it	71.3% N=87	72.2% N=83
Using a computer to create documents	44.3% N=54	43.5% N=50
Understanding children's feelings	82.0% N=100	75.7% N=87
Understanding the child's family situation	74.6% N=91	64.3% N=74
Playing the piano in a way that nurtures children's sensitivity and creativity	41.0% N=50	37.4% N=43
Provide support according to the child's disability	54.2% N=65	44.3% N=51
Recognize children's individuality and support them to work independently in a group	63.9% N=78	53.0% N=61
To create an environment that encourages children's growth and development	63.1% N=77	59.1% N=68

Number of respondents who are very confident and somewhat confident

Next, we will compare the items in the third and fourth surveys to see how professional awareness changed as a result of childcare training. This survey was conducted four times during the two years of enrollment, and all of the subjects had experienced childcare training at the time of the fourth survey^{**5}. Therefore, by comparing the figures of the 3rd and 4th surveys, we would like to see the change in occupational awareness through the experience of childcare training.

Table 2 asks, "How confident are you in your ability to do the following? ". The table asks "How confident are you in your ability to do the following? ". Respondents had four possible responses: "very confident," "somewhat confident," "not very confident," and "not confident at all." Table 2 shows the number of respondents who answered, "very confident" and "somewhat confident".

Comparing the values of the 3rd and 4th surveys, the values of almost all items decreased in the 4th survey. In other words, after the practical training experience, the respondents lost confidence in the performance of their respective duties. In particular, there was a decrease of about 10% in the following items: "work in cooperation with colleagues" (11.8% decrease), "consider my role in work" (14.1% decrease), "understand children's family situations" (10.2% decrease), "provide support according to children's disabilities" (9.8% decrease), and "recognize children's individuality and take initiative in a group. (9.8% decrease), and "Recognizing children's individuality and supporting them to work independently in a group" (10.9% decrease).

Breaking these five items down into smaller categories, we can see that they are losing

confidence in items related to collaboration in the organization, such as "working with colleagues" and "thinking about my role in the work". Next, they lost confidence in training that take into account the characteristics of the child and the family, rather than just interacting with the child, such as "understanding the child's family situation," "providing support according to the child's disability," and "recognizing the child's individuality and providing support so that the child can work independently in the group". On the other hand, the item "understanding children's feelings" decreased by 6.3%, but there was little change compared to the other items that asked about the relationship with children. This may mean that the respondents think that they can confidently deal with children after the child training if they have a one-on-one relationship with them. In addition, there were no significant changes in items such as "improving the quality of work while reflecting on it," "using a computer to create documents," and "creating an environment that promotes children's growth and development".

According to Tanigawa (2018), childcare training is seen as a place for introspection. It is thought of as a place where students can take the next step by identifying their issues through actual field experience. When the results of this survey are examined by considering practical training as a place for self-reflection, rather than simply saying that the students lost confidence due to their incompetence or lack of ability through practical training, it can be taken as a result of objectively assessing their abilities by self-reflecting on their actions through practical training. Therefore, in the item related to self-reflection, "improving the quality of work while reflecting on it," there was no significant change in the numerical value, and it has continued even after the practical training.

3.3 What the students realized through the childcare training

Here Table 3, I would like to quote the part about what students felt through their childcare training. Table 3 shows the responses to the question, "How much did you feel the following things through your practical training? The table shows the number and percentage of "very much so" and "somewhat so". The question was asked using a four-point scale: "very much," "somewhat much," "not very much," and "not at all so". This question was asked only in the fourth session, when the students were finishing their training.

Table 3 How much did you feel the following things through your practical training?

	4th	
It is difficult to respond to each child individually.	89.0%	N=81
Sometimes it is difficult to keep a smile on my face.	56.0%	N=51
It is difficult to organize children the way I want.	93.4%	N=85
You need to be physically strong to work with children.	94.4%	N=85
Childcare practices (storytelling, hand games, piano.etc.) is difficult.	74.7%	N=68
Loving children is not enough to keep work it.	86.8%	N=79
Departmental courses at school (childcare principles, developmental psychology, etc.) are important.	78.0%	N=71
Kindergarten teachers and nursery school teachers have to do a lot of paperwork and chores.	57.1%	N=52
Kindergarten teachers and nursery school teachers have to work long hours.	59.3%	N=54

Number of respondents who are very much so and somewhat so

The most common answer, "Yes," was "You need to be physically strong to work with children," which accounted for 94.4%. The next most common response was "It is difficult to

organize children the way I want", accounting for 93.4%. The next most common response was "It is difficult to respond to each child individually" at 89.0%. Since all of these items were related to care for children. The relatively low percentages were "Sometimes it is difficult to keep a smile on my face," "Kindergarten teachers and nursery school teachers have to do a lot of paperwork and chores," and "Kindergarten teachers and nursery school teachers have to work long hours to make ends meet," all of which were in the 50% range. These are items related to the work of childcare workers, and it can be said that their awareness of the many tasks and overtime work is lower than the other items.

In light of the above, it can be said that many students found it difficult to interact with children in the field. This point is in line with the results of Kataoka (2020), who investigated the difficulties students experience during childcare training. According to Kataoka, the difficulties experienced by students during training were "difficulties in providing educational guidance to children" and items such as "children did not follow my instructions" and "I could not interact well with children" were raised (Kataoka, 2020, p. 89). However, Tanigawa states that since the training involves working with children under the assistance and supervision of caregivers, the environment allows the students to concentrate on care for the children. In light of Tanigawa's point, it could be said that finding difficulties in interacting with children through training is a result of learning the "basic concept of childcare" (Tanigawa, 2018, p. 153), which states that "it is important to understand children and then guide them" (Tanigawa, 2018, p. 153).

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to clarify the formation of vocational awareness as a nurse among students attending vocational schools. In this paper, we summarized the results of a panel survey. We analyzed the vocational awareness of the students from three perspectives during their enrollment.

The first was an analysis of vocational awareness that would be applicable to general jobs and were recognized as necessary skills. It can be said that students have a high awareness of these skills. Therefore, when conducting educational activities targeting these students, it would be effective to provide guidance to them while they are in school, taking into consideration that they are learning on the premise of such awareness. In addition, since this survey reflects the view of vocational school students only, it remains to be seen whether the same trend will be seen in junior colleges and four-year universities.

The second is an analysis of the change in awareness after childcare training. As a result, all the items showed a decrease from the fourth survey. In other words, the students were losing confidence in their childcare practices. This result does not simply mean that the students lost confidence due to their own incompetence or lack of ability through the practical training, but can be taken as a result of their objective assessment of their own abilities through self-reflection on their own behavior through the training. By learning through the training, the students can realize the gap between their own abilities and the abilities required in the childcare field.

As of May 2021, infection prevention and various responses to covid19 are increasing in the childcare field, which may make field training more difficult and hectic. We would like to re-evaluate the effects of the training by conducting a survey after the students find employment.

The third is an analysis of what the students felt through the training. The results showed that many of the students found it difficult to interact with children. In addition, the number of students who felt that the workload of childcare providers was too much was lower than the other items. This suggests that students experience difficulties in acquiring professional skills as nurse, especially in relation to children, when they are in school.

The percentage of respondents who answered that "having qualifications" in the fourth session decreased by 16.9% compared to the first session. This could be due to the realization that simply having qualifications is not enough to gain important skills as a child care worker. In fact, the percentage of respondents who think that "professional knowledge and skills" are important is consistently high, ranging from 87.5% to 98.9%. Matsuda et al. reported that the percentage of students who answered "the severity of the work" increased as they went through more childcare training. Matsuda et al. speculate that this is because "the job of a childcare provider cannot be done only with the emotion of 'I love children,' but is now seen as a specialized job that requires interaction and environmental settings that take into account development and family background" (Matsuda et al., 2016, p. 6). It can be said that the findings of this paper are similar to the change in perception of professionalism as a childcare provider that Matsuda points out.

Based on the findings of this paper, it is thought that clarifying how students form their vocational awareness while they are enrolled in vocational schools and then providing them with the necessary childcare training guidance pre and after will lead to support for continued employment after graduation.

As for the post-graduation situation, it is necessary to continue to conduct follow-up surveys of the subjects of this study to understand the actual situation through careful research. In particular, the subjects of this study experienced the COVID-19 epidemic in their second year after graduation, and they continue to work in the childcare field while being forced to respond to the epidemic. It is necessary to continue to examine how the professional awareness of child care providers are formed, paying attention to the new difficulties they face.

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<Annotation>

※¹ Four-year universities offer a 1st type of license and junior colleges (as two-year universities) offer a 2nd type of license.

※² According to a survey conducted by the National Council for the Nursery School Teacher Training, 44.2% of students at universities "strongly apply" to become a nursery school teacher, while 87.0% of students at vocational schools "strongly apply" to become so.

※³ Of the kindergarten teaching licenses, 59 credits of specialized courses are required for the Type 1 license and 39 credits for the Type 2 license. 68 credits of specialized courses are required for a childcare license at child care provider training facilities.

※⁴ There are two reasons for this: high school surveys are very common in the sociology of education in Japan, and the transition of young people, which is the purpose of this study, is an important research topic. In addition, we consulted the opinions of teachers at vocational schools in preparing the survey.

※⁵ In this analysis, the results of the third survey are compared with the results of the fourth survey, so it should be noted that it is not possible to strictly capture the changes caused by childcare training. In this paper, since the major difference between the third and fourth surveys is the experience of training, the difference between the two surveys will be interpreted as the effect of training being taken into

account.

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