



Early Childhood Education Curriculum in Japan: A Systematic Literature Review and Insights for Indonesia

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Manuscript received: May 14 2024, Revised: June 30 2024, Published: September 25 2024

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji sistem kurikulum di Jepang dengan fokus pada lima aspek utama, yaitu: (1) sejarah kurikulum; (2) kebijakan kurikulum; (3) prinsip dasar kurikulum; (4) kurikulum pendidikan anak usia dini (PAUD); (5) jenis-jenis lembaga PAUD di Jepang; dan (6) wawasan untuk Pendidikan anak usia dini di Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi literatur. Subjek penelitian berupa dokumen-dokumen relevan, baik berupa buku, artikel ilmiah, maupun kebijakan pendidikan Jepang. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui telaah pustaka, sedangkan teknik analisis data menggunakan analisis isi (content analysis) dengan membaca secara berulang dan melakukan triangulasi antar sumber untuk memperoleh kesimpulan yang valid. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Jepang secara konsisten memperbarui kurikulum setiap sepuluh tahun untuk menyesuaikan dengan perkembangan zaman. Kurikulum bersifat dinamis, fleksibel, dan modern. Sejarah perkembangan kurikulum Jepang terbagi dalam dua era utama, yakni Tokugawa dan Meiji. Prinsip Chi-Toku-Tai yang diterapkan dalam kurikulum Jepang sejalan dengan ranah kognitif, afektif, dan psikomotorik dalam taksonomi Bloom. Pada jenjang PAUD, pembelajaran anak usia 0–3 tahun berfokus pada perkembangan intelektual, sosial-emosional, dan fisik, sedangkan usia 4–6 tahun difokuskan pada aktivitas bermain yang terstruktur, bahasa, seni, dan hubungannya sosial. Dengan demikian, sistem kurikulum PAUD di Jepang menunjukkan karakteristik yang komprehensif dan berkelanjutan, ditandai oleh pembaruan kurikulum secara periodik, penerapan prinsip Chi-Toku-Tai, serta integrasi antara kebijakan.

Kata kunci: Kurikulum, Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Jepang.

Abstract

This study aims to examine the curriculum system in Japan by focusing on five main aspects: (1) the history of the curriculum; (2) curriculum policy; (3) curriculum

principles; (4) early childhood education (ECE) curriculum; (5) types of early childhood education institutions in Japan; and (6) insights for Indonesian Early Childhood Education. This research employs a qualitative approach using a literature review method. The subjects of the study include relevant documents such as books, academic articles, and Japanese educational policy documents. Data were collected through literature analysis and analyzed using content analysis techniques, involving repeated reading and cross-referencing of sources to ensure data validity. The results indicate that Japan consistently updates its curriculum every ten years to align with changing times. The curriculum is dynamic, flexible, and modern. The historical development of Japan's curriculum is divided into two major eras: Tokugawa and Meiji. The principle of *Chi-Toku-Tai*, emphasized in the Japanese curriculum, aligns with Bloom's taxonomy domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. At the early childhood level, the curriculum for children aged 0–3 focuses on intellectual, social-emotional, and physical development, while for those aged 4–6, it emphasizes structured play, language, arts, and social interaction. Thus, Japan's early childhood education curriculum reflects a comprehensive and sustainable system, characterized by periodic curriculum revisions, the implementation of the *Chi-Toku-Tai* principle, and the integration of national policy with a holistic, child-centered educational approach.

Keywords: Curriculum, Early Childhood Education, Japan.

Introduction

Japan has been recognized as one of the most economically advanced and technologically sophisticated countries for the past six decades. Following the devastation of World War II, Japan experienced rapid economic growth, with education regarded as the primary factor in producing high-quality human resources essential for national development. Education is often considered a fundamental strategy for breaking the cycle of poverty, as it equips individuals with knowledge, skills, and confidence to build a better future (Sugiartha & Farid, 2023).

Early childhood is a critical and foundational period in human development, during which an individual's potential begins to form and grow. At this stage, the child's brain exhibits high plasticity, enabling rapid and effortless absorption of information. As such, the concept of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has become a key policy issue in both developed and developing countries. ECCE refers to educational and care services

provided to children from birth to age eight to support their holistic development—cognitive, emotional, social, and physical (Sultan & Syafiuddin, 2025).

Japan's strong performance in international assessments demonstrates the effectiveness of its education system. The country consistently ranks highly in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), published by the OECD, particularly in literacy, science, and mathematics (PISA, 2012). Japan also has one of the lowest under-five mortality rates globally, reflecting a robust ECCE system (The World Bank, 2018). Its early childhood education emphasizes character development, good manners, and the inculcation of moral values (Ningsih et al., 2025).

In contrast, Indonesia continues to face challenges in education quality. In the 2022 PISA results, Indonesia ranked 67th out of 81 countries, highlighting the urgent need for educational reform (PISA, 2022). Curriculum development is one critical avenue through which Indonesia could improve its education system. A curriculum is not only a guide for instructional content but also a reflection of the educational vision, mission, and goals. It must remain dynamic, adaptable to societal change, and aligned with contemporary needs (Hasibuan et al., 2022; Malaikosa et al., 2022).

Several prior studies have explored various aspects of Japan's education system. For instance, Ningsih et al., (2025) compared the curriculum structure in Japan and Korea. Japan's success and progress are closely linked to its strong character-based values. The nation's culture of character is cultivated through moral education, which is integrated from elementary school through to higher education. Pasaribu, et al., (2023) found that children in Japan are highly respected for their morality, self-control, and discipline from birth to the age of three. However, few studies have offered a comprehensive analysis of Japan's early childhood education curriculum by integrating historical, philosophical, policy, and institutional perspectives. Moreover, comparative insights to inform curriculum development in countries like Indonesia are still limited.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing Japan's early childhood education curriculum from multiple dimensions, including its historical evolution, foundational principles, policy framework, and institutional structures. This comprehensive analysis is expected to serve as a reference for improving the quality of early childhood education, especially in developing countries such as Indonesia.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using the literature study method. A literature study is a type of research that involves reviewing scientific articles, books, or other relevant sources that discuss problems, theories, and published documents. The primary sources in this study include official documents and policies related to the Japanese education system, such as the *Fundamental Law of Education (2006)*, the *National Curriculum Standards for Kindergarten*, and publications by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). These are complemented by academic journal articles, books, and previous research relevant to early childhood education in Japan. All data were analyzed using content analysis by reading, comparing, and interpreting the materials systematically to ensure credibility and relevance.

The data analysis technique used in this study is content analysis, which involves a systematic reading and interpretation of the literature, as well as cross-referencing multiple sources to reduce bias and ensure the reliability of the research findings. According to (Krippendorff, 2014), content analysis enables researchers to select, compare, categorize, and synthesize data from textual sources in a structured and replicable way. In the context of a literature study, the process typically includes three main stages: (1) introduction, where the topic and objectives are identified; (2) discussion, involving analysis and synthesis of findings; and (3) conclusion, which summarizes the insights obtained. These steps help ensure that the literature review is comprehensive, systematic, and academically rigorous.

This research is presented by compiling findings based on the principles of clarity and accessibility, with the aim of making the Japanese Early Childhood Education Curriculum easier to understand for readers. However, this study has certain limitations. First, the analysis is constrained by the availability of literature in English and Indonesian, as many official Japanese education documents are available only in Japanese. Second, due to time and resource constraints, the study does not include empirical validation or field observations in Japanese early childhood institutions. Therefore, the interpretations provided rely solely on secondary data and may not fully capture contextual or recent policy changes. Despite these limitations, this study aims to provide a comprehensive overview based on the most relevant and accessible sources.

Result and Discussion

1. History of the Education Curriculum in Japan

The history of the educational curriculum in Japan can be divided into two eras, *Tokugawa* and Meiji. *The Tokugawa* Era took place from 1603 to 1867. The Meiji Era lasted from 1867 to 1900 (Crouch & Spindelman, 2023); Lilienfeld, 2022; John & Phillips, 2011).

a. *Tokugawa*

Tokugawa established a highly bureaucratic government and exerted great control over the education system in Japan. *Daimyo*, samurai, farmers, craftsmen, traders, and others are some of the socioeconomic groups that make up modern-day Japan. In this era, there are five types of schools, namely: 1) *shogun*; 2) *daimyo*; 3) *shijuku*; 4) *terakoya*; and 5) *gogaku*.

1) *Shogun*

Children from the samurai or warrior class, aged 8 to 15, are the target audience for Shogun school. Confucianism, weapons, technology, and cartography are all taught at Shogun school. Confucian classics are read and committed to memory as a study technique. There were 27 shogun schools at the conclusion of the Tokugawa period.

2) *Daimyo*

Throughout Japan, the *Daimyo* school was founded, offering samurai and commoners alike education. In addition to Japanese and Chinese history, calligraphy, composition, and manners, the curriculum is founded on Confucian principles. Astronomy, geography, military science, Dutch studies, and Chinese and Western medicine are taught in a number of schools. Character education is the most important education that focuses on manners, language, thrift, toughness, and sensible attitudes about food and drink.

3) *Shijuku (private academy)*

The *Shijuku* school is a school for private groups that provides education for the samurai class from elementary to high level. Approximately 1.100 schools offered courses in medicine, Dutch studies, Western subjects, military subjects, and even navigation during the Tokugawa era. At *shijuku* school, a student's performance and test results are considered their basic achievement.

4) School *Terakoya* (temple children)

At first, only Buddhist temples operated these school. Over time, regular individuals were able to attend this school. The majority of *terakoya* schools emphasize reading, writing, and arithmetic. Additionally, there are *terakoya* schools that teach geography, history, science, military arts, and English. The requirements for attendance are informal and can be readily into the business or farm's work schedule. *Terakoya* school was closed during the farming season, allowing pupils to work as farmers.

At the end of the Tokugawa Era, there were 14,000 *terakoya* schools and more than 17,000 teachers. Teachers do not have licenses or certification, but volunteers include retired officials, social-minded samurai, and educated commoners. Students do not pay fees and teachers are not paid so the school is managed from donations. Although teachers are not paid, they have great authority and are highly respected. Simple basic textbooks prepared by teachers are closely related to students' daily life and job expectations as adults. Some examples of basic textbooks are farmer readers, bumper crops, increasing profits for farmers, trader readers, wholesale readers, navigation readers, and shipping readers.

b. Meiji

In the *Meiji* Era, transition facilitation took place very rapidly, namely changing Japan from a feudal country to a modern country. In this era, Japanese society was formed to prepare itself for modernization and the national education system. At first, the Japanese government only translated Western textbooks for use in schools. However, the Japanese government recognized that schools could be used as a boost to national pride. In the end, the government asked schools to adapt stories of American or European victories to stories of Japanese war heroes so that they could form a strong spirit of patriotism. Apart from that, the Japanese education system is also directed at creating a unique Japanese culture. Japan also no longer uses traditional Chinese symbols in its writing.

The government also sends thousands of students abroad to study at foreign universities. Not only that, the government also selects people who will visit other countries to learn about culture, industry and the military. Through this experience, the Japanese people decided to choose the right system that could be

implemented in Japan. For example, they adopted the education system in the United States.

In 1890, the education system in Japan reflected Japanese values more than Western values. When the Japanese emperor visited schools in Japan, he found that there were some Japanese students who spoke English and could not translate into Japanese. This gave rise to educational principles and concluded that the decline of Japanese culture was caused by Western education.

2. Education Curriculum Policy in Japan

Japan has a curriculum policy that penalizes parents for their children's absences from school. The Compulsory Education and Education law states thus, establishing a measure of coercion to promote civilized conduct. In Japan, education is required for nine years. Education must also be adapted to the child's mental and physical development.

Japan is currently recognized as the country with the highest level of education in the world, and has one of the best education systems in Asia (Yanuar, 2021). Following the reforms implemented during the Meiji restoration, specifically the departure from the Tokugawa leadership period known as the Dark Ages, Japan's educational progress got underway. Under Emperor Mutsuhito, Japan experienced a very significant transformation, especially in the field of education. Japanese National Education Regulations (*School Education Law*) in 1947 established the existence of a basic education system. The education system in Japan is divided into four levels, each of which has certain goals, vision and mission, namely: 1) *Shougakkou* or Elementary School for six years; 2) *Chuugakkou* or Junior High School for three years; 3) *My dear* or High School for three years; and 4) *Daigaku* or College for four years (Azizah et al., 2025).

The Japanese curriculum is known as *Gakushuu Shidouyouryou* (GS), implemented in accordance with applicable law. *Gakushuu Shidouyouryou* (GS) functions as a guide to various levels of education, namely elementary school level (*shougakkou*), junior high school (*chuugakkou*), affiliated schools (*chuutouu kyouiku gakkou*), high school (*you*), and special secondary schools (*tokubetsu shien gakkou*). For kindergarten (*youchien*), the term used is *youchien kyoni kuyouryou*. This curriculum was developed and reviewed for three years before being implemented (Yanuar, 2021).

The Japanese curriculum is specially prepared by the Curriculum Planning Department. This curriculum development does not only focus on changing subjects or teaching methods, but is flexible and responsive, allowing teachers to adapt learning activities to class conditions. Since 1947, the educational curriculum in Japan has undergone several changes and updates, namely starting in 1951, 1956, 1961, 1971, 1980, 1992, 2002, and until 2011. In preparing the curriculum, the Japanese Ministry of Education emphasized several important points, such as development of students' physical and spiritual balance, harmony with the environment, attention to the stages of students' growth, and school character (Yanuar, 2021).

This education system not only contributes to progress, but also has a positive impact on children and society. Education in Japan shows extraordinary potential, as can be seen from the increasing cognitive abilities and motivation of students in line with people's interest in continuing to learn. To ensure the relevance and quality of the curriculum, curriculum development in Japan involves various stakeholders, including industrial workers, educators, and students. The Japanese government makes changes and updates to the curriculum every ten years as part of its commitment to continuous improvement in education and prepares students to face the challenges of the times (Irawati and Maulidiyah, 2021).

3. Educational Curriculum Principles in Japan

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan made modifications to the Japanese curriculum by emphasizing the principles *Chi-Toku-Tai*. This principle is in line with the three types of knowledge identified by Bloom (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor). Cognitive is the extent to which individuals assess life in accordance with their expectations or ideal standards, and individuals with a high cognitive component are able to assess whether these expectations or ideal standards are in accordance with their lives. Affective is the positive and negative emotions experienced by individuals, and individuals who have high affectivity will feel positive emotions more often (Reinita & Wulan, 2023). Psychomotor is a motor activity or skill or movement (Watini, 2019).

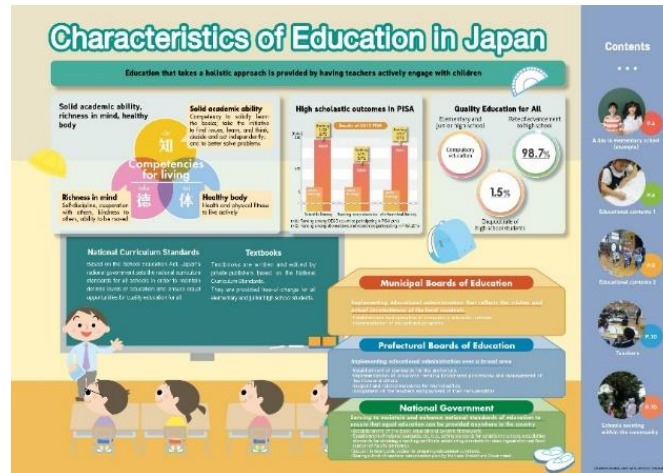


Figure 1. Characteristics of Education in Japan

a. **Chi (知) or Solid Academic Ability**

Chi refers to the competency to learn the basics solidly in order to understand science; take the initiative to find problems, learn and think; make decisions and act independently; and improve problem-solving abilities. Learning emphasizes students' independence to explore knowledge by identifying problems that occur in life and independently proposing solutions or actions to overcome them. This approach supports the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

b. **Toku (徳) or Richness in Mind**

Toku refers to the competence of self-discipline, cooperation with others, kindness towards others, and the ability to be moved by the feelings of others. At the initial education level, teachers apply lessons such as moral education and environmental studies which aim to equip students to understand the importance of moral values and character, as well as the surrounding environment as the main source of learning. Apart from that, there is a special time for lunch and cleaning activities, which also serves to build students' character and moral values through interaction with peers and mutual respect.

According to Santrock (2011) in (Prawinda et al., 2023), character education is education that is carried out with a direct approach to children to instill moral values and provide lessons about moral knowledge to prevent prohibited behaviour. The character values in character education that can be instilled are general values where all religions, traditions and cultures will definitely uphold these values (Arga Maulana & Khotimah, 2022). According to Sinurat (2022) in

(Kusumawati et al., 2025), a philosopher named Kilpatrick argued that moral education can develop through the opinions of various experts regarding aspects of character, morality and religious values.

c. ***Tai (体) or Healthy Body***

Tai relating to the physical or body. This principle is related to psychomotor aspects. *Tai* refers to the competency of health and physical fitness to support active living. This principle is generally applied in physical education lessons and during recess, where students are allowed to play with their friends which is important for developing physical health as well as motor skills.

4. Early Childhood Education Curriculum in Japan

Early childhood education curriculum in Japan has been updated and modified frequently since the start of the Meiji era in 1862 to meet the needs of young children (Nanakida, 2014). Following careful cooperation, MEXT released the curriculum standards early childhood care and education in 2008. MEXT released National Curriculum Standards for Kindergartens and Guidelines for Child Care in Day Care center in addition to these curriculum standards. By following these curriculum standards and guidelines, all young children between the ages of 3 to 5 can enjoy the same quality of education in building a good foundation for lifelong learning.

Generally, children between the ages of 0-3 typically lack a dedicated space for care and education. Nonetheless, in addition to physical development, children's intellectual; and social-emotional development will be prioritized. Meanwhile, children between the ages of 4-6 focus on health, human relationships, the environment, language and expression. In addition, early childhood education in Japan also includes playing activities, singing, observing, listening and speaking, crafts, and other activities so that each kindergarten can choose its own educational content and practices.

Specific instruction aimed at early childhood literacy and numeracy skills is rarely clearly visible, but these abilities are developed through activities with peers based on the group's emotional stability (NIER 2011). Emphasis is also placed on independence in necessary basic living habits. Teachers not only provide instructions for specific activities but also during a child's play time and in other aspects of life. However, instructions are not given in the form of orders, but in the form of suggestions and advice which encourages children's initiative. Media and learning

resources are placed in the classroom so that children naturally have the desire to play without coercion.

Regarding basic life skills, young children in Japan learn to brush their teeth after lunch, *toilet training*, and change clothes. Activities in the classroom increase as children get older. Many kindergartens in Japan provide English lessons taught by native speakers (once a week for 4 to 5 years old). During school festivals, young children are given the opportunity to perform in English-language plays. Apart from that, children aged 4 to 5 years are also scheduled to learn dancing once a week and wind orchestra once a month. Apart from that, computer skills are also taught to children as young as 5 years old (Kaur, 2019).

Educational content and learning methods in Japan have quite high differences between early childhood education and elementary school education. Therefore, first grade children at the elementary school level often experience difficulties in dealing with changes and gaps so they cannot concentrate on learning and have difficulty listening to instructions from teachers (Kaur, 2019).

5. Types of Early Childhood Education in Japan

There are two types of early childhood education in Japan, namely *Youchien* or Kindergarten and *Hoikuen* or Child Care Center. The main difference between the two lies in the operating hours. *Youchien* usually operates from 08.50 to 13.30, meanwhile *Hoikuen* opens longer, namely from 07.00 to 19.00. Young children whose parents work are the target audience for *Hoikuen*. Both parents must have a certificate of employment in order to register a kid at *Hoikuen* (Muzaki, 2020). Depending on local *Hoikuen* laws, *Hoikuen* is also referred to as a nursery school that offers spaces for young children ages 6 months to 6 years.

a. *Youchien* or Kindergarten

Youchien focuses on educational goals by offering more lessons. *Youchien* focuses on three main things, namely: 1) providing as many experiences as possible to children; 2) facilitate learning through play; and 3) support children's development according to their individual traits and characteristics. The aim of this approach is to build life skills and provide a strong foundation for the next steps in their lives (Mulyadi, 2020). Children in *Youchien* are usually required to bring a packed lunch, although some kindergartens provide lunch. The curriculum includes subjects such as mathematics, physical education, writing,

and reading. Children are also required to wear the institution's uniform. Registration at *Youchien* usually opens after the child's 3rd birthday. One year later, they can continue to the youngest class in kindergarten (*Nenshou*) (Widjayanti et al., 2024).

b. *Hoikuen* or Child Care Places

Hoikuen are under the auspices of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (*Kousei Rondoushou*). Objective *Hoikuen* can include five main things, namely: 1) physical and mental health; 2) social interaction; 3) interaction between environment and society; 4) language skills; 5) artistic and creative expression abilities (Mulyadi, 2020). Parents do not need to provide packed lunches because the school has prepared them. Academically, *Hoikuen* places more emphasis on activities that are fun for children such as crafts, sports, storytelling and music, so that formal lessons may feel lacking in comparison to *Youchien*. *Hoikuen* also does not have a special uniform and does not set academic targets that must be achieved by children. The main purpose of *Hoikuen* is to support children's growth and development, both physically and mentally. As part of his commitment, *Hoikuen* collaborates with doctors, nurses and nutritionists to ensure the welfare of children in their care (Widjayanti et al., 2024).

6. Insights for Indonesian Early Childhood Education

The Japanese early childhood education system offers several valuable insights that can be considered for improving Indonesia's early education framework. One of the most notable aspects is Japan's emphasis on character education (*Toku*) from an early age, integrated not only in classroom teaching but also through daily routines like cleaning, shared meals, and collaborative activities. Indonesia could strengthen character-building by embedding such values into structured daily activities at school, creating a more holistic developmental environment.

Another key takeaway is the Japanese commitment to child-centered learning, where teachers act more as facilitators rather than instructors. Instruction is delivered through suggestion and play, not through rigid directives, which helps promote children's independence, creativity, and self-regulation. Indonesian early childhood educators could adopt this flexible approach to foster more meaningful engagement and learning autonomy.

In addition, Japan's attention to developmentally appropriate practices—where learning content is tailored to children's growth stages—is a practice that ensures learning is both age-appropriate and effective. This principle is especially important in the transition from early childhood to elementary education, a stage where Indonesian students also often experience adjustment difficulties. Japan addresses this with a soft and playful transition, which Indonesia could learn from.

Furthermore, the integration of health and well-being into early childhood programs—as seen in the collaboration with health professionals in *Hoikuen*—underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach to early education. Indonesia may benefit from establishing stronger collaboration among educators, pediatric health workers, and nutritionists within early childhood institutions.

Finally, Japan's regular and systematic curriculum review every ten years ensures the curriculum remains relevant to societal changes. Indonesia could implement a more structured review mechanism for the PAUD curriculum, involving practitioners, experts, and stakeholders to ensure adaptability and global competitiveness.

Closing

This study aimed to explore the historical evolution, policy orientation, principles, and practices of the Japanese education curriculum, with a special focus on early childhood education, and to draw insights that could inform the development of Indonesia's early education system. The findings revealed that Japan's curriculum has evolved dynamically from the Tokugawa to the Meiji era, demonstrating a strong commitment to educational modernization, national identity building, and holistic human development. The transformation was marked by a transition from rigid, class-based education to a more inclusive and standardized national education system, anchored in character formation and intellectual rigor.

Central to Japan's curriculum philosophy is the Chi-Toku-Tai principle, which integrates cognitive (Chi), affective (Toku), and psychomotor (Tai) domains. These principles are deeply embedded in early childhood practices, where learning is child-centered, experience-based, and intertwined with daily life activities. Japan's curriculum emphasizes the development of autonomy, empathy, and physical well-being alongside

academic knowledge, implemented through pedagogical strategies that prioritize suggestion over command, cooperation over competition, and process over product.

The comparative review with Indonesia underscores several key areas for potential adaptation. These include the systematic integration of character education into everyday routines, a child-initiated and flexible learning approach, greater alignment between curriculum and children's developmental stages, and enhanced collaboration between educators and health professionals. Moreover, Japan's regular curriculum evaluation cycle offers a model of responsiveness and continuous improvement that Indonesia could emulate to maintain curriculum relevance and competitiveness.

Future research could examine the practical challenges of adopting Japanese curriculum elements within the socio-cultural and institutional contexts of Indonesia. Further comparative studies may also investigate teacher training systems, parental engagement models, and school-community partnerships in Japan that support curriculum delivery. Ongoing studies may explore pilot implementations of selected Japanese practices in Indonesian early childhood settings to evaluate their feasibility and impact.

Ultimately, understanding Japan's education curriculum offers more than historical or theoretical insights—it provides actionable guidance for countries seeking to build an early education system that is equitable, adaptive, and attuned to the holistic needs of children in the 21st century.

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