

Pathways to Access Center-Based Early Childhood Education and Care for Families of Foreign Origin in Japan: A Qualitative Analysis Using Levesque's Framework of Access

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Abstract

The number of foreign residents in Japan is increasing, and correspondingly so is the number of preschool-age children of foreign origin living in Japan on a mid- to long-term basis. Thus, it is increasingly important to ensure opportunities for early childhood education and care (ECEC) for these children with diverse origins. Although previous studies have shown a higher rate of non-enrollment in center-based ECEC in children of foreign-national parents compared with children of parents of Japanese nationality, only a limited body of research has comprehensively examined the details of the process through which children of foreign origin gain access to ECEC opportunities. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents from 23 families to identify facilitating and inhibiting factors faced by families of foreign origin who wish to enroll their children in center-based ECEC in Japan. These interviews were analyzed with the aid of the theoretical framework by Levesque et al. As a result, facilitating and inhibiting factors for both service users (parents) and service providers (ECEC facilities and municipalities) were identified. The author found that access to ECEC for families of foreign origin is often a reversible process, with families potentially returning to earlier stages of the process—even after reaching the final stage. It was also confirmed that ECEC access for families of foreign origin is constrained by language and institutional barriers and is promoted by social support from diverse communities. These findings suggest that improved access to ECEC for children of foreign origin requires provision of appropriate enrollment information to the diverse communities that these families engage with, including communities of ethnic minorities, workplaces, and universities.

Keywords: Early childhood education and care, Access to services, Accessibility, Qualitative study

Introduction

In Japan, the number of foreign residents is increasing and so too is the number of preschool-age children of foreign origin living in Japan on a mid- to long-term basis. The number of foreign residents in Japan reached a record high of 3,588,956, up from 177,964 (5.2%) at the end of the previous year (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2024a). The number of preschool-age children of foreign origin living in Japan is 118,863, approximately 1.5 times the number from 10 years ago (author's calculation based on foreign resident statistics from 2013 and 2023, published by the Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2024b). Thus, early childhood education for children of foreign origin in Japan is increasingly important.

In Japan, three primary types of facilities provide center-based early childhood education and care (ECEC): nursery schools (Hoikuen), kindergartens (Yochien), and children's centers (Kodomoen), which have both nursery school and kindergarten functions (Children and Families Agency, 2022). This

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study collectively refers to these different types of institutions as “center-based ECEC facilities.” When enrolling a child in an ECEC institution, the local government of the child’s place of residence grants a “childcare certification” based on the reason for the childcare needs. Depending on the certification, the type of ECEC facility, the hours of care, and the financial burden borne by the family for ECEC will differ. Nursery schools provide care for children between the ages of 0 and 5 in place of parents who cannot care for their children at home due to work or other reasons. In addition to standard daycare hours from morning to evening, extended nighttime care is available as needed.

Kindergartens are regarded as facilities that provide early childhood education in preparation for school entry. Childcare hours are short, lasting until early afternoon. Although there are differences in the objectives and functions of nursery schools and kindergartens, both types of institutions provide ECEC for children before they enter elementary school. Nursery schools and kindergartens work to ensure the development of children in the preschool years, serving as institutions that support early childhood growth (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2005). Although nursery school and kindergarten are not compulsory in Japan, approximately 99% of 5-year-old children attend nursery school, kindergarten, or a children’s center as children aged 3 years or older are eligible for free preschool education (Children and Families Agency, 2023). Thus, most children enter elementary school after attending these center-based ECEC facilities. The internationally recognized term “early childhood education and care” encompasses all formal and informal systems and institutions that serve children before they enter primary education (OECD, 2001). Therefore, ECEC is not limited to what is provided by families, nursery schools, or kindergartens. However, for the sake of convenience, this research refers to institutions that provide ECEC as “ECEC facilities.”

Kachi et al. (2020) reported that children with foreign national parents are about 1.5 times more likely not to be enrolled in center-based ECEC than are children with parents of Japanese nationality. Furthermore, in a survey conducted by Minato Ward, Tokyo (2023), 9.8% of children of foreign national parents do not attend center-based ECEC and are cared for at home, compared with 2% of families where both parents are Japanese nationals. Furthermore, a survey in Ayase City, Kanagawa Prefecture, found that 41% of foreign national children in the municipality were not enrolled in center-based ECEC (Kanagawa International Foundation, 2023). In a survey of 260 foreign national children of school-entry age registered in Hamamatsu City, Shizuoka Prefecture, the overall non-enrollment rate in ECEC was 11%. The rates varied by nationality: 24% for Filipino, 12% for Brazilian, and 8% for Peruvian children (Hamamatsu City, 2018). As described above, there are already clear disparities in access to education at the preschool stage. Other countries have promoted moves to make ECEC free or compulsory as well as more accessible to parents and children from ethnic and cultural minorities on the basis of research showing the positive impact of early intervention for preschool age children upon starting schooling and even over the entire lifespan. On the other hand, national policies in Japan have primarily focused on school adaptation and Japanese-as-a-second-language programs for children of foreign origin at the elementary school level and above. Furthermore, there is a lack of national and local government policies, systems, and measures to support children of foreign origin before they enter primary education (Mitsui, Han, Hayashi & Matsuyama, 2018). As a result, research on access to center-based ECEC for children of foreign origin remains in its nascent stages. Based on the above, the purpose of this study is to identify facilitating and inhibiting factors in the access of center-based ECEC opportunities for families of foreign origin in Japan who wish to enroll their children in center-based ECEC. To achieve this objective and clarify the current status of the ECEC enrollment process, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 parents from families of foreign origin who were raising

children in Japan. This study is structured as follows. First, the theoretical background is organized through a review of previous studies. Next, the research methodology is described, including the data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, interview results are presented, in order to clarify facilitating and inhibiting factors to center-based ECEC access for families of foreign origin in Japan.

Literature Review

Levesque et al. (2013) analyzed the definition of healthcare access based on previous studies and pointed out the polysemy of the term “access”, and the broad scope it encompasses—from the perception of need to the eventual receipt of care benefits. For example, studies on center-based ECEC access are largely divided into three categories: (1) those related to availability (potential access), (2) those related to the process of reaching service utilization (utilization pathway), and (3) those related to the actual situation at the time of service (realized access). Table 1 summarizes existing studies on access to center-based ECEC in Japan, including those focusing on families of foreign origin as well as broader studies relevant to them.

Table 1 Studies on access to center-based ECEC in Japan relevant to families of foreign origin

Availability of ECEC (Potential access)	Process of reaching ECEC (Pathway to utilization)	Utilization of ECEC (Realized access)
Facility placement based on home–work–facility proximity and commute efficiency (e.g., Pred & Palm, 1978; Miyazawa, 1998). Factors behind regional disparities in childcare supply and demand (e.g., Wakabayashi, 2006; Wakabayashi et al., 2023).	<u>Research that comprehensively examines the process through which families with foreign origin access and enroll in center-based ECEC remains limited.</u>	Childcare practices in ECEC facilities and the experiences of caregivers and parents of foreign origin (e.g., Hotta et al., 2010; Uchida, 2017; Hori et al., 2017; Wadaue et al., 2017; Ashizawa, 2020; Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting, 2020, 2021; Maeda, 2022; Tanaka et al., 2023; Nishimura & Omichi, 2024)

Source: Table generated by researcher

In Japan, with the advancement of women’s participation in the workforce, the issue of childcare waiting lists has emerged as a significant challenge, with the demand for childcare services exceeding the available supply in local communities. Another issue is regional disparities in the distribution of childcare services. In order to solve the imbalance between supply and demand of childcare services, as represented by these unresolved issues, researchers, particularly in the field of human geography, are focusing on the “availability” of childcare facilities in order to analyze facility placement that would balance childcare and work by considering the proximity of homes, ECEC facilities, and workplaces and the time required for drop-off and pick-up (e.g., Pred & Palm, 1978; Miyazawa, 1998). Additionally, given that factors such as household composition, women’s employment status, and regional differences in lifestyle and work patterns influence childcare demand, studies have examined factors contributing to regional disparities in the supply and demand of childcare services in response to local childcare needs (Wakabayashi, 2006; Wakabayashi et al., 2023).

There is also a large body of research on the actual use of center-based ECEC after access to ECEC is realized, including the relationship between caregivers and parents of foreign origin who use ECEC facilities. For example, studies have analyzed the status of multicultural childcare initiatives in nursery schools, caregivers’ perceptions of parents and children of foreign origin (Hotta et al., 2010; Uchida, 2013; Hori et al., 2017; Wadaue et al., 2017; Ashizawa, 2020; Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting, 2020; Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting, 2021; Maeda, 2022), and the childcare practices of nursery school teachers of foreign origin (Sasaki, 2015; Ohsaka & Inaba, 2024). Other studies have interviewed foreign parents with children enrolled in center-based ECEC in order to

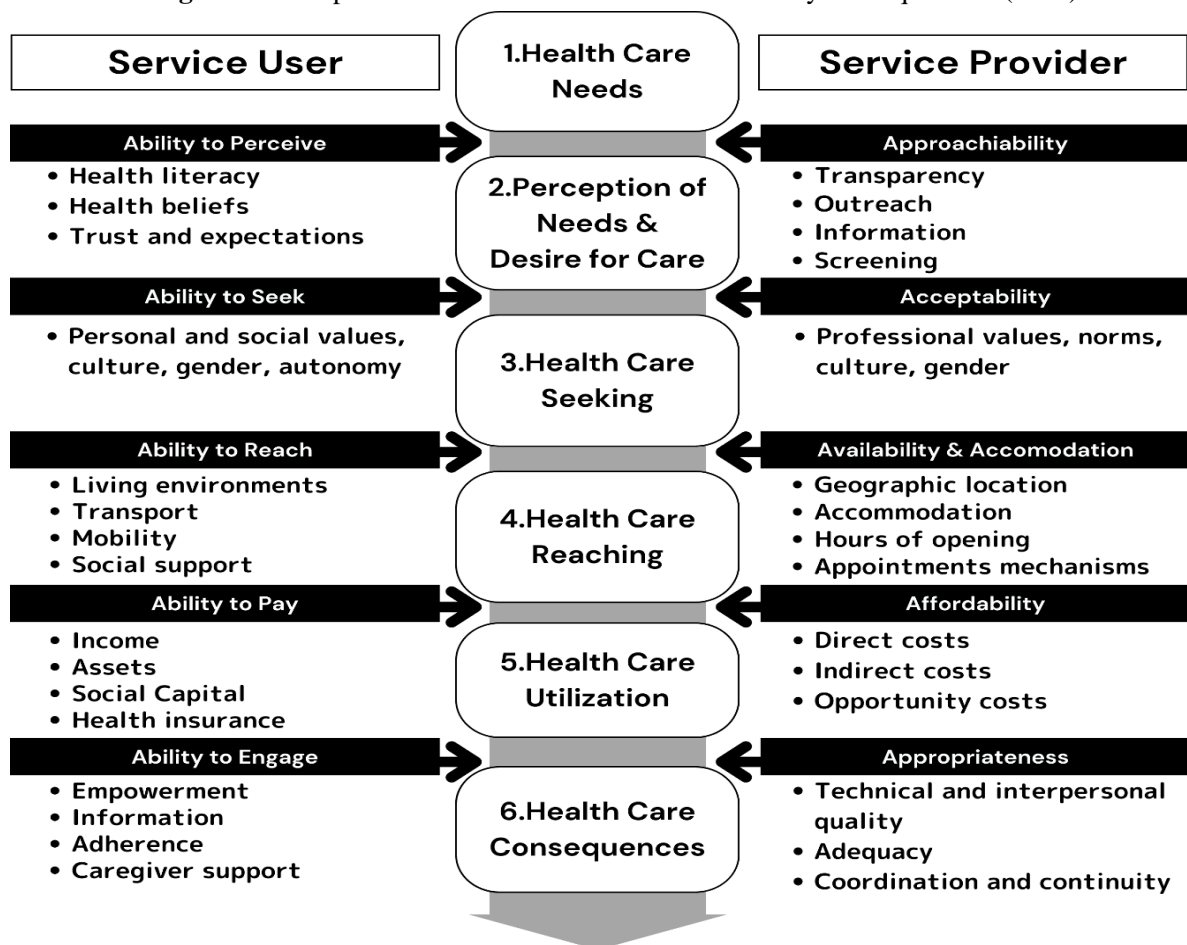
analyze the challenges faced after starting a preschool program (Tanaka et al., 2023; Nishimura & Omichi, 2024).

As mentioned above, children of foreign parents in Japan are less likely to attend center-based ECEC than those of Japanese families. Several studies have examined the prevalence and status of children of foreign origin without ECEC opportunities (Utsumi, 2021; Toriumi, 2021; Yamada, 2022; Miyama et al., 2019). Given that some parents and children do not have access ECEC opportunities, an essential focus is not only availability of center-based ECEC and the experience and quality of ECEC service providers once access is realized but also the pathway to access enrollment. Identifying factors that hinder access to center-based ECEC and considering strategies for improvement are critical. However, only a limited number of studies have comprehensively examined the process in which these families enroll and gain access to ECEC opportunities.

Theoretical Framework for Access to Care

There is an accumulation of domestic and international research on facilitators and inhibitors of access to medical and health services for foreign residents, such as a study analyzing the current status of access to medical and health services in a Filipino community in Japan (Yokota, 2016), a study analyzing access to medical and health services among Brazilian children with special medical needs (Motogi et al., 2016), a study examining characteristics of foreign residents with difficulties accessing medical care in terms of inhibiting factors and effective support measures (Morita et al., 2021), and an analysis of inhibiting factors of medical examination behavior among foreign HIV-positive people in Japan (Nakao & Yamamoto, 2013).

This study examined the process by which families of foreign origin access center-based ECEC opportunities with the aid of Levesque et al.'s (2013) theoretical framework for individuals accessing health care (see Figure 1). Levesque et al. (2013) define access to health care as “the opportunity to reach and obtain appropriate health care services in a situation of perceived need for care.” The process can be organized into six steps: (1) the need for health care, (2) perception of needs and desire for care, (3) seeking health care services, (4) reaching services, (5) utilization of services, and (6) consequences. These steps also involve the abilities of service users to perceive, to seek, to reach, to pay, and to engage, whereas the attributes of the service provider includes approachability, acceptability, availability, accommodation, affordability, and appropriateness of services. The health care access framework of Levesque et al. (2013) has aided national and international research as a model that reveals complex factors in access to health care services, especially for people with certain attributes such as pregnant refugees in Germany (Henry et al., 2019), migrants residing near the Mexico-US border (Infante et al., 2022), and migrants of South Asian origin residing in Hong Kong (Vandan et al., 2019). Another study examined healthcare access during the COVID-19 pandemic among refugees living in Portugal (Portela et al., 2024) and among transgender persons infected with HIV (Fauk et al., 2019). The present study aims to identify facilitators and inhibitors of access to ECEC opportunities for families of foreign origin raising

Figure 1 Conceptual framework of access to health care by Levesque et al. (2013)

Source: Adapted from Levesque et al. (2013); layout changed from vertical to horizontal by the author.

children in Japan, with the model by Levesque et al. (2013) adopted as a framework to organize and examine the results extracted in the qualitative study.

Methodology

Between November 2023 and December 2024, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 40 to 60 min each were conducted with 23 parents from families of foreign origin residing in Japan. Participants were selected using snowball sampling and theoretical sampling, with a focus on families in which the mother, father, or both parents were of foreign origin and are raising (or had raised) preschool-aged children in Japan.

In Japan, parents are not required to enroll their children in nursery school or kindergarten, so each family can decide whether or not to send their children to center-based ECEC depending on the family's educational policy. Therefore, this study excluded parents who did not wish to enroll their children in a center-based ECEC and sampled only those families who did.

The researcher recruited several participants from the researcher's network, with new subjects recruited to refine concepts and categories identified through data analysis. Furthermore, to ensure participation in the interviews by not only families who eventually enrolled their children in center-based ECEC but also families who were unable to do so for various reasons despite their wishes, this

study sought the cooperation of NPOs and other supporters who assist parents and children of foreign origin to gain broad experience of the target population.

In the interviews, participants were asked to speak freely, focusing on their family structure, time of arrival in Japan, current status of childcare-related support, reasons for wanting to enroll in center-based ECEC, and experiences in gathering information and procedures when selecting an ECEC facility. All interview data were assigned codes by semantic cohesion using qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA). These codes were then organized to create subcategories. Subcategories were organized by process, from the point at which parents wished to enroll their children in center-based ECEC to the point at which they started the program.

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to elucidate the detailed process through which families of foreign origin attempt to enroll their children in nursery school and kindergarten—an aspect that is not fully captured by previous quantitative research. In particular, gaining an in-depth understanding of the realities faced by minority groups, such as parents of preschool-aged children of foreign origin seeking enrollment in Japanese ECEC facilities, is expected to contribute to the improvement of policies and support systems.

Ethical Considerations

A written explanation was provided regarding protection of personal information, the voluntary nature of participation, and the possibility that some of the provided information may be modified and published in academic conferences or scholarly papers. Consent was obtained before proceeding, and participants were asked to sign a consent form. Prior to the interviews, participants' preferred interview language was confirmed, and interpreters were arranged as needed. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any time at their own discretion and that even after the interview, they had the right to revoke their participation and request deletion of their interview data. Interviews were conducted either in person or online via Zoom. For in-person interviews, a quiet location ensuring privacy was secured. The collected data were anonymized to protect participants' privacy and handled with strict consideration for confidentiality.

Results

Basic information about the families to be interviewed

A breakdown of the origin of parents participating in the interviews is shown in Table 2. Participants came from Vietnam (n=15, 33%), Nepal (n=7, 15%), Japan (n=6, 13%), Indonesia (n=4, 9%), China (n=3, 7%), South Korea (n=3, 7%), the United States (n=2, 4%), Brazil (n=2, 4%), Egypt (n=2, 4%), Philippines (n=1, 2%), and Canada (n=1, 2%). Of the 23 families of foreign origin, 17 (74%) families had both parents from abroad. An asterisk (*) in the Table 2 indicates a parent who participated in the interview.

Table 2 Summary of interviewees

ID	Mother Country of Origin	Father Country of Origin	Number of Children	Mother Arrival in Japan	Father Arrival in Japan	Language used in Interview
1	USA*	USA	1	2022	2022	English
2	Nepal*	Nepal	2	2012	2008	Japanese
3	Indonesia*	Indonesia	2	2016	2016	English
4	China*	China*	1	2022	2019	Chinese
5	Brazil*	Brazil	2	1991	Not Specified	Japanese
6	Vietnam*	China	1	2012	2012	Japanese
7	Philippines	Japan*	2	2004	N/A	Japanese
8	Vietnam*	Vietnam	2	2023	2019	Vietnamese
9	Indonesia*	Indonesia	1	2018	2018	English
10	Vietnam*	Canada	2	2007	2009	Japanese
11	Japan*	Nepal	1	N/A	2013	Japanese
12	Korea*	Korea	2	2005	2005	Japanese
13	Nepal	Nepal*	1	2022	2014	Japanese
14	Vietnam*	Japan	2	2013	N/A	Japanese
15	Vietnam*	Vietnam	2	2018	2013	Vietnamese
16	Japan*	Korea	1	N/A	2008	Japanese
17	Vietnam*	Vietnam	3	2016	2014	Vietnamese
18	Vietnam*	Japan	3	2010	N/A	Japanese
19	Vietnam*	Japan	2	2017	N/A	Japanese
20	Nepal*	Nepal	2	2016	2014	Japanese
21	Vietnam*	Vietnam	1	2022	2023	English
22	Vietnam*	Vietnam	2	2023	2015	Vietnamese
23	Egypt	Egypt*	3	2019	2019	English

Source: Created by researcher. "Arrival in Japan" refers to the start of medium- to long-term residence, excluding travel and short-term study abroad. An asterisk (*) in the table indicates a parent who participated in the interview.

Results for each step of the enrollment process are presented in Figure 2.

The following section explains the process by which families of foreign origin access center-based ECEC based on interview findings. Text added by the author is shown in parentheses.

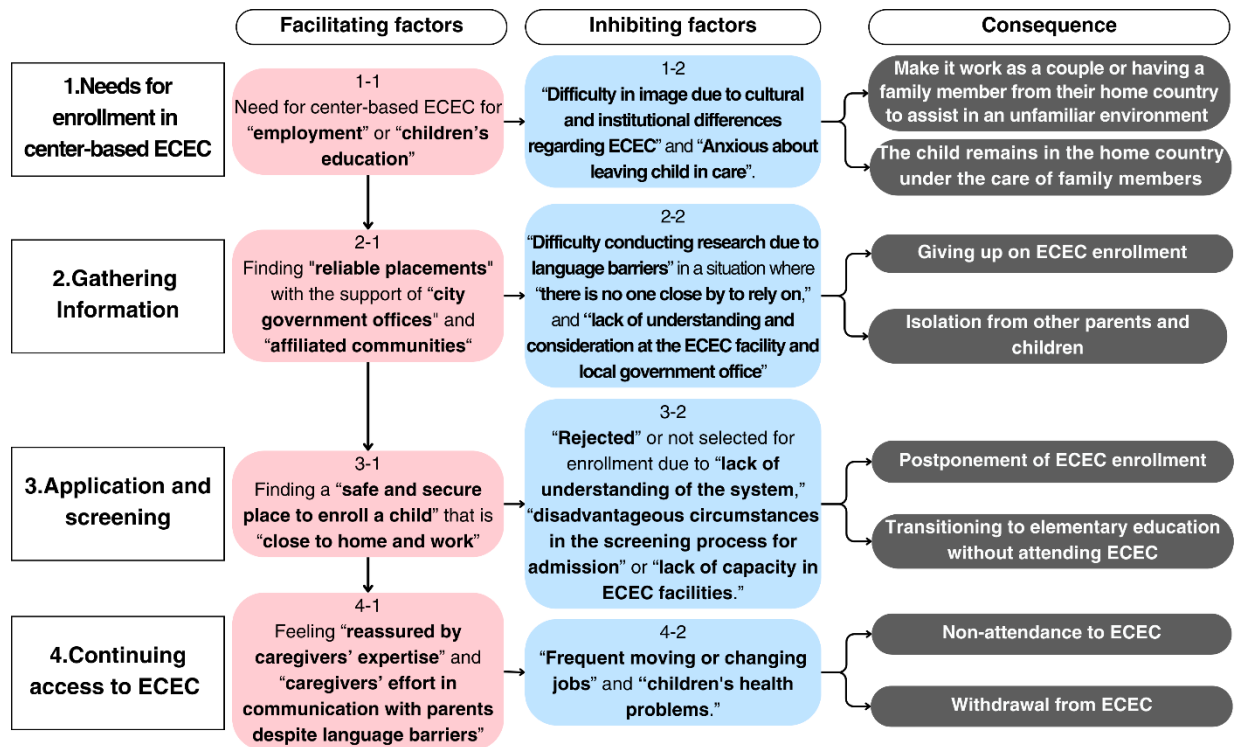
1. Needs for enrollment in center-based ECEC

1.1 Facilitating factors: Need for center-based ECEC for “employment” or “children’s education”

Most parents in this study were working in Japan and had medium to long-term plans to stay in Japan, whereas others who were currently studying abroad in Japan were considering returning to their home country after a certain period. However, the families wanted their children to “learn Japanese as soon as possible” and “become accustomed to the Japanese environment” in anticipation of “schooling” in Japan, indicating that they viewed enrollment in center-based ECEC as an experiential and educational opportunity for their children prior to primary education.

To engage with different cultures, different ideas, maybe. You know, Japan is very famous for technology. (...) So, I want my children to be, to experience the same, the same environment as Japanese children. (ID_3)

Because I want to live in Japan for a long time in the future. I want them to go to nursery school and get used to Japanese life as soon as possible. (ID_8)

Figure 2 Facilitating and inhibiting factors in access to center-based ECEC by families of foreign origin

Source: Created by researcher

Additionally, parents' ability to enroll their children in early childhood education is crucial for achieving their purpose of coming to Japan, especially when returning to work after parental leave, relocating to Japan for employment, or studying in Japan as an international student.

I came to Japan to earn a living, so if I can't leave my child in daycare, I can't work. (ID_22)

1.2 Inhibiting factors: "Difficulty in image due to cultural and institutional differences regarding ECEC" and "Anxious about leaving child in care"

It became clear that when parents wanted to enroll their children in center-based ECEC and began preparing for enrollment, they were confronted with cultural differences between their home country and Japan regarding the ECEC system. For example, parents from Nepal had no experience attending ECEC facilities themselves as children, given their upbringing in which children were cared for at home by their parents or grandparents.

Generally, everyone is at home with their families, so grandma and grandpa, my own mother, me, and my brothers are all together, so people don't go to nursery schools very often. (ID_2)

Parents from Indonesia also spoke about how they often used live-in babysitters in their home country.

But it was like in a small city... So usually working moms get support from their family, their parents. Grandparents take care of their grandchildren or (...) there's your babysitter. (...) who live together with you because labor is cheap in Indonesia. (ID_9)

In addition, parents from Vietnam said that, among parents who work, many leave their children with grandparents because the maternity leave period is shorter than in Japan and the safety of childcare facilities is not guaranteed.

In Vietnam, the maternity leave period is very short and they only give mothers 6 months off. (...) So people often ask family members to take care of children.

Nursery schools and kindergartens in Vietnam are not all managed by the government like in Japan. That is why there are all kinds of problems. There are also places where violence occurs. So mothers are very worried about it and ask family members to take care of their children. (ID_18)

As described above, the ECEC system and child-rearing environment in Japan often differ greatly from those in their home countries, and it is evident that they “cannot imagine (ID_11)” life in a Japanese ECEC facility or leaving their children in the care of strangers. Families of foreign origin raising children in Japan manage to “make it work as a couple (ID_1, 4, 7, 18, 20, 21)” in an unfamiliar environment, or they overcome challenges by having a family member from their home country, or in many cases, their mother, come to Japan to help raise their children (ID_6, 10, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19, 21). Lacking a clear picture of the enrollment process and the difficulties associated with enrolling their children, some families of foreign origin opted to have their children raised by relatives in their home country while the parents worked in Japan (ID_2, 21, 22). On the other hand, there were some families who, after securing a pathway to enrollment in Japan, decided to bring their children from their home country to join them (ID_21, 22).

2. Gathering information

In Japan, parents must select their desired ECEC facility and apply to the local government or kindergarten in their area of residence. Each ECEC facility has a different childcare/education policy, emphasis on activities, childcare hours, and capacity, and so parents must gather this information before selecting an ECEC. In Japan, the shortage of available slots in childcare facilities and the issue of childcare waiting lists remain significant challenges for families seeking enrollment. Finding a childcare facility that aligns with a family’s needs while also having available spots is a highly demanding task, even for Japanese parents.

2.1 Facilitating factors: Finding “reliable placements” with the support of “city government offices” and “affiliated communities”

When parents of foreign origin seek to enroll their children in center-based ECEC, municipal offices such as city or ward offices serve as important touchpoints. A certain level of awareness among parents was observed that, considering their lack of knowledge about enrollment systems and the types of ECEC facilities available in their area, the first step should be to inquire at the local government office (ID_4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 19, 20). In many cases, information is obtained from the city government offices on available ECEC facilities that are near the home or workplace. When applying for ECEC in Japan, applicants often rank five to eight ECEC facilities in order of priority. Given the limited number of available slots in childcare facilities, applicants are selected from a pool of candidates with a risk of not being accepted. Therefore, it is advisable to apply to multiple ECEC facilities to increase the chances of enrollment. However, interviews revealed that some families visited and applied to only the childcare center recommended by the ward office rather than exploring multiple options.

I don't really know the difference between nursery school and kindergarten. I just know that the city office told me that there are still open spots available, so I just sent her there. (ID_8)

I applied for that (ECEC facility) as my first choice. (At the ward office), I heard about that ECEC facility only. I was told that I would probably be able to enter the place. (ID_22)

In addition to ward offices, parents obtained necessary enrollment information and received support with the application process through their affiliated communities. This study identified the following four types of communities that played a role in supporting enrollment:

Community 1: People of foreign origin raising children in Japan

In some cases, parents can receive support for ECEC enrollment from a community of people from the same country who are raising children in Japan. Parents of foreign origin living in Japan or in the same area may also create an online community through social networking services where they can ask questions about preschool and child-rearing. This is reassuring when there is no social support close by, such as when parents are new to Japan or live in areas with few parents of the same origin.

I got a lot of information from the community of Chinese mothers who are raising their children in Japan. (ID_4)

I joined those groups by joining a Facebook community, a community of Vietnamese mothers in Japan. (ID_17)

We have an Indonesian community, so we can communicate via group chat in WhatsApp. So, we asked how to enroll our children in Hoikuen(nursery school), and then they gave us information that we have to go to the ward office. (ID_3)

Community 2: Japanese friends and neighbors

Parents of foreign origin also received support for ECEC enrollment from Japanese friends and local acquaintances. For families who had recently arrived in Japan or relocated, having someone nearby who could understand and explain information about local nursery schools and kindergartens, as well as assist with enrollment documents in Japanese, was crucial in overcoming language barriers.

Because the apartment manager knows English and Japanese.

(Author) Do they come to Hoikuen (nursery school) with you?

Yes. It's only in the beginning of the enrollment that we have to deliver everything. We have to deliver our concerns, everything at the beginning of the year. (ID_3)

Community 3: Religious groups

Parents in Japan who regularly attend religious community gatherings also receive information about ECEC and childcare from other parents in the same religious group.

I said that we want to enroll (child's name) in Yochien (kindergarten), but I have no idea what to do or which Yochiens are good, which ones are bad. And so a couple of them (in the religious group) gave me recommendations, and separately, they each both said the name of the Yochien that we are now enrolling (child's name) in. (ID_1)

Community 4: Workplace colleagues and university networks

Research participants residing in Japan for work or study obtained information about childcare enrollment through workplace colleagues and international student networks. Although the level of support from employers and the nature of colleague relationships varied, some participants received assistance from their workplaces with enrollment procedures, whereas others exchanged information with colleagues who were also raising children and received their recommendations on childcare facilities.

I shared and asked for various kinds of information from colleagues who also had children. (...) For example, how to handle situations when a child is sick, or about the sick-child daycare system, which allows parents to leave their child in care without taking time off work when they are too ill to attend daycare. (ID_10)

My husband's company took care of all the (enrollment) procedures for us. (ID_17)

2.2 Inhibiting factors: “Difficulty conducting research due to language barriers” in a situation where “there is no one close by to rely on,” and “lack of understanding and consideration at the ECEC facility and local government office”

Participants revealed difficulty obtaining information about ECEC enrollment when not belonging to a community or when other parents in their community lacked experience with ECEC enrollment in Japan.

These two families (of foreign origin that I know) cannot distinguish between nursery schools and kindergartens, so I didn't ask them much. When I was choosing those nursery schools, I just chose those two that were closest to my house as my priority, if they were available there. (ID_8)

There's no information among foreigners. (ID_12)

Furthermore, even when families belonged to a community, some parents found differences in household circumstances, such as their child's age or their employment situation, —meant that others' experiences did not always apply to their own. Additionally, even when families found others in similar situations, they sometimes lost access to their support network due to factors such as relocation or returning to their home country.

Parenting is different for everyone. And in my case, it's a bit different too because my child is biracial. So that part is completely different. The food is different, and the language is different as well. (ID_6)

At that time, I didn't have any acquaintances—neither Vietnamese nor Japanese. In my company, there was only one other person who was married. (ID_18)

In Japan, most information related to ECEC enrollment is available only in the Japanese language. The extent to which enrollment documents are translated into multiple languages and interpreters are provided varies significantly between areas with high concentrations of foreign residents and those where they are more dispersed. Many local governments have machine translation functions that allow their websites to be displayed in multiple languages. However, information on ECEC enrollment is difficult to fully understand even with machine translation, as there are many systems and proper nouns that are unique to Japan. During the enrollment process, many situations require

communication in the Japanese language, such as nursery school visits and pre-enrollment interviews with caregivers or municipal office staff. In this context, acquaintances or friends who can serve as interpreters are valuable resources. However, finding such individuals and arranging for them to accompany parents is not always easy.

I can't do that by myself because again I don't have the language to be able to just do a Google search like I do in my home country really easily. (ID_1)

There are disadvantages, such as when going to visit a daycare center, members (of the community who can interpret) are not always available, so there is a time lag before the visit. (ID_23)

Additionally, there were cases where municipal offices and ECEC facilities provided insufficient information regarding the enrollment process for families of foreign origin. Instances of insensitivity toward the cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds of these families were also observed. In Japan, children of foreign nationality not attending school has become an issue, and the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has issued its “Guidelines for the Promotion of School Enrollment of Foreign Children and the Monitoring of School Enrollment Status” (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2020). On the other hand, the degree of information provision and procedural support at local government offices regarding ECEC enrollment varies widely.

When my child entered elementary school, the process went smoothly. But as I mentioned earlier, when it comes to nursery schools and kindergartens, there was hardly any support. It was pretty much just handing over an information booklet, and that was it. (ID_4)

In some cases, parents were told to enroll their children in an international school even though they wanted to attend a local ECEC facility.

They told me, “there are no available spots.”

They said, “since there are no openings in nursery schools, why don't you send your child to a school for foreigners instead?” It felt like they were saying, “Because the parents don't speak Japanese, just go to a foreign school.” (...)

I was asked, “Why do you even need to work?” by the person in charge of nursery school applications at the city office. (ID_5)

In some cases, parents must visit the ECEC facility for a tour or interview before applying for nursery school or kindergarten. At such times, some teachers spoke to parents of foreign origin in an inconsiderate manner.

If I tell them at daycare that I don't use Japanese at home, and they say, “that's not good for your child,” or something like, “please use as much Japanese as possible at home,” I won't go there. (ID_10)

There were also children who were refused enrollment due to their parents' Japanese language skills, even when the parents wished to enroll their children. In addition, depending on the timing of their arrival in Japan, some parents were denied enrollment due to the short period of time between enrollment and entrance to elementary school.

So, I went there and then I asked, but I think we could not communicate so well (in Japanese), so they said my child cannot join the Yochien. (ID_9)

I felt that some nursery schools didn't seem to be welcoming toward foreigners. They indirectly told me, "You may not be able to be admitted to the nursery school," which gave me the impression that they didn't really want foreign families to enroll. (ID_23)

I had heard that in Japan, when a school refuses or rejects a request, they do so in a very gentle manner and without causing too much trouble. I was a little angry at the way they kept putting things off, even though we had clearly expressed our wish to enter the school. (ID_4)

As a result, it became clear that children who are forced to be cared for at home spend their time "watching YouTube and drawing pictures (ID_7)" until they start school, and they are isolated from other parents and children.

A lot of times we go to the park all the time during the week, but I would say 80% of the time when we go to the park, there's no one else there. (ID_1)

On the other hand, in cases where children entered elementary school without having first attended an ECEC facility, parental narratives revealed that local learning support programs for children of foreign origin played a crucial role. These programs provided opportunities for children to interact with peers and prepare for formal schooling.

3. Application and screening

Parents must apply for certification of their need for childcare based on factors such as child's age and parents' employment status before enrolling their child in their preferred nursery school or kindergarten. This certification is required to access center-based ECEC facilities. The process involves gathering the necessary documents for certification, completing enrollment application forms, assessing available spots at different facilities, and strategically selecting and applying to facilities with a higher likelihood of acceptance.

3.1 Promoting factor: Finding a "safe and secure place to enroll a child" that is "close to home and work"

Enrollment in ECEC involves entrusting one's child to someone else, and therefore trust between the service provider and parents is a crucial element. Families of foreign origin prioritized entrusting their child with a sense of security when visiting nursery schools and communicating with caregivers.

Of course, there's a lot of information out there, but for me, a nursery school is simply a place to leave my child. As long as my child is taken care of in a safe and secure environment, that's all that really matters to me. (ID_10)

3.2 Inhibiting factors: "Rejected" or not selected for enrollment due to "lack of understanding of the system," "disadvantageous circumstances in the screening process for admission" or "lack of capacity in ECEC facilities"

In Japan, the largest number of center-based ECEC openings occur in April when the school year begins, and there is a high likelihood of enrollment. For this reason, many applicants wish to enroll their children in April, but parents must apply for enrollment in the fall of the previous year, which is

an early deadline. In some cases, ECEC enrollment was delayed due to insufficient understanding of the system, such as the application schedule.

With that April admission, the deadline was probably October or November before that fiscal year. I just didn't know about that opportunity. It was my first child, and it was my first experience, so I went to apply after the New Year, sometime in January or February. (ID_6)

In the enrollment screening process, parents are assigned points based on their reasons for needing childcare, such as their employment situation, with selection prioritized by highest scores. Accounts from parents of foreign origin who came to Japan for work or study indicated that statuses such as “international student” or “currently seeking employment” tended to receive lower scores in the screening process, making it more likely for them to be rejected for enrollment.

Maybe at that time, maybe my husband was, you know, an international student, a graduate student (...) so that's why we didn't get in. (ID_10).

I am planning to return to work this month or so, but the company I was working for has been slow to respond, so there is a chance that I may not be rehired, so I am currently doing another job search. (ID_15)

In addition, most spaces are filled with children brought up from the 0- and 1-year-old classes, and depending on the child's age at the time of arrival in Japan, they are likely to be placed on a waiting list.

Enrolling in a class at the middle of the year at age 2 is extremely difficult. Everywhere is already full, or that's just how it feels. (ID_6)

4. Continuing access to ECEC

The interviews in this study also identified findings related to continuity of childcare after enrollment had been secured.

4.1 Promoting factors: feeling “reassured by caregivers’ expertise” and “caregivers’ effort in communication with parents despite language barriers”

As a contributing factor to continued enrollment, some parents expressed a strong sense of reassurance in the professionalism of ECEC service providers and felt as though they were co-parenting with them.

The teachers noticed it—they recognized the changes in my child and what was different. I think that's a really great aspect. Since the teachers have received proper training, they also understand children's psychology. I truly feel that they are more capable than I am in that regard. (ID_18)

Regardless of whether caregivers could speak a foreign language, the sense that they were trying to communicate and support parents of foreign origin played a crucial role in building trust. Their willingness to engage and accommodate the needs of these families fostered a stronger sense of connection between caregivers and parents.

The principal—she’s very nice and she supports me and also gives me much information. So I think that this is good for my baby. So, I send him there. She does not speak English, but she tries to use an app for translation and explains to me how it is possible. (ID_21)

4.2 Inhibiting factors: “Frequent moving or changing jobs” and “children's health problems”

However, even after an ECEC placement decision, the child might need to leave or change their ECEC facility due to frequent relocation or job changes. Then, parents must restart the enrollment process from the beginning to enroll their children at a new location. Clearly, ECEC enrollment might be impossible or postponed due to lack of capacity at other ECEC facilities or relocation timing.

I wanted to look for a job, but after three months, my husband got a new job here, so we moved. (ID_9)

“(Child’s name) has been transferring between schools a lot. We enrolled in (nursery school name) partway through, when they were one year old, or maybe even younger. Then, when my husband got a new job, I think around the age of two or three, we moved to (nursery school name). Then, we had to transfer again when we moved to (region name). When we arrived in (region name) at age four, we tried to enroll in (nursery school name), but we couldn’t get in. (...) There have been many transfers—probably about four different places in total.” (ID_10)

Some parents temporarily returned to their home country to raise their child due to concerns about navigating unfamiliar parenting practices or giving birth to a second or subsequent child. Then, after a certain period, they returned to Japan. After enrollment, children also commonly contract various infectious diseases in daycare settings. Some parents shared experiences of repeated illnesses leading to prolonged absences from an ECEC program, which made them reconsider continued enrollment.

(With regard to the reason why she quit an ECEC facility and returned to Nepal) When my child was 8 months old, we enrolled in daycare, but then we left and stayed in Nepal for about 4 months. After that, when my child was around 1 year and 3 months old, we re-enrolled in nursery school. But since life in Nepal and Japan is quite different, I wasn’t really accustomed to it at first. (ID_20).

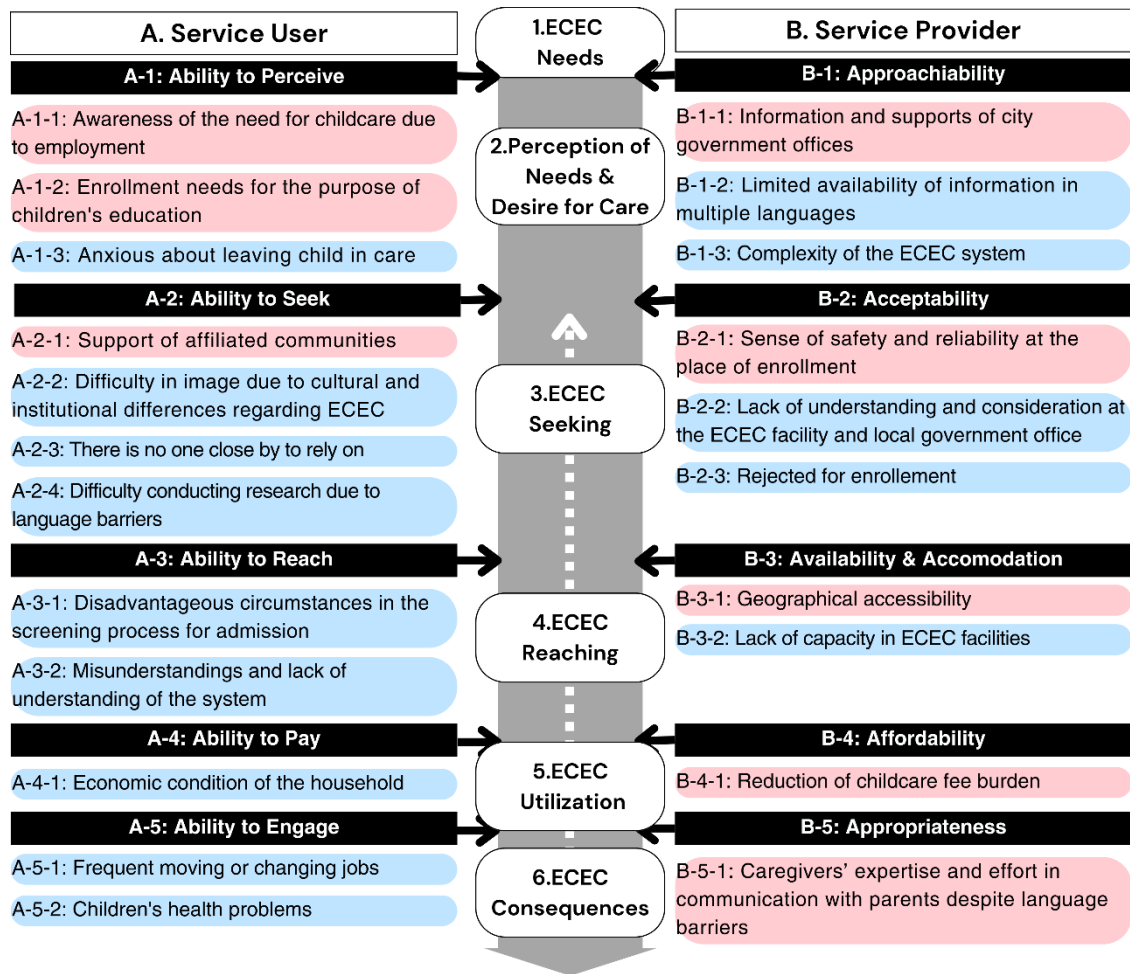
My child was in Japan until the age of four, then we went back to (home country) and stayed there for about a year and a half. We were in (home country) until my child was nearly 5 or 6 years old. When my child was a little over three, they were diagnosed with (child’s disability), and I started feeling overwhelmed. I thought about returning to my family home for a while. (ID_5)

Discussion

This study examined facilitating and inhibiting factors in the process of “recognizing needs for enrollment in center-based ECEC”, “gathering information and selecting ECEC facilities to apply”, “applying for placement” and “continuing access to center-based ECEC” for families of foreign origin in Japan who wished to enroll their children in center-based ECEC. These results were categorized by

ability on the part of service users and service providers with the help of Levesque et al.'s (2013) health care access model (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 Access to center-based ECEC organized within the framework of Levesque et al. (2013)



Source: Adapted from Levesque et al. (2013); the layout was modified from vertical to horizontal, and facilitating factors (pink) and inhibiting factors (blue) identified in this study were added by the author.

To a certain extent, concepts extracted from the interviews regarding the enrollment process for children of families of foreign origin in Japan fit into Levesque et al.'s (2013) framework. Levesque's framework illustrates that access to healthcare progresses through multiple stages, shaped by the complex interaction of user- and provider-side factors. When this framework is applied to access to ECEC, it becomes evident that families of foreign origin often experience disruptions or regressions along the way, as both user-related and provider-related factors can cause them to return to earlier stages in the process. (This reversibility is visually represented in the figure3 by white arrows indicating the possibility of returning to earlier stages.) In Japan, it is not the duty of parents to enroll their children in a nursery school or kindergarten. Therefore, nursery schools and kindergartens operate on an application basis, whereby local governments and kindergartens screen applications from parents, and parents must prove and sometimes negotiate their own family's need for childcare. Furthermore, a major issue in Japan is the "waiting child problem," involving a mismatch between demand for childcare services from families in need and supply of services available at ECEC facilities. It is not easy for parents to enroll their children in an ECEC facility of their choice. This study confirmed the existence

of situations where parents are easily disadvantaged in the screening process, such as with the statuses of “searching for employment opportunities” or “international student” or where parents are refused ECEC enrollment due to “timing of arrival in Japan,” “status of residence of the family,” or “inability to communicate in Japanese.” Additionally, even when families successfully navigate every step and secure enrollment, characteristics of families in Japan—such as frequent relocations, job changes, and the need to travel between their home country and Japan for various reasons—often require them to withdraw from ECEC opportunities.

In such cases, it is crucial for service providers, including local governments and childcare facilities, to recognize barriers to enrollment faced by families of foreign origin as identified in this study. Proactive measures such as disseminating information in multiple languages and providing interpreters can play a significant role in ensuring that children of foreign origin gain access to and continue receiving ECEC opportunities. This study also revealed that communities of affiliation, such as groups of people who share the same national origin, religion, and place of employment, help overcome the lack of information as well as language and institutional barriers to ECEC enrollment. Therefore, providing appropriate information related to ECEC, not only to families of foreign origin but also to their ethnic minority communities, companies, and universities, would improve access to ECEC for children of foreign origin. Under the current system, barriers to enrollment identified in this study—such as frequent domestic and international relocations and residency status issues—have not been fully addressed, potentially leaving some children of foreign origin without access to center-based ECEC. To ensure that these children can access alternative ECEC opportunities and to prevent both them and their parents from becoming isolated within the community, it is essential to establish community-based support structures—such as culturally responsive preschool preparation programs and children's spaces—where children can interact with peers, learn, and develop school readiness.

Limitations of this study include having participants primarily from two-parent households with residency status, such as those with work or family stay visas. Thus, the study does not analyze the process of accessing center-based ECEC opportunities from the perspectives of refugee families, families with undocumented status, or single-parent households. Additionally, the sample might be biased toward specific groups as participants were recruited through the author's networks, including foreign communities and support organizations with which the author is affiliated. This study interviewed some parents who wanted to obtain an ECEC opportunity but whose children had reached school age before they could do so. However, it is necessary to continue tracking families who remain unable to secure access to ECEC and who are not connected to any communities or support organizations. In doing so, future research can further refine its understanding of factors that hinder access to ECEC for children of foreign origin in Japan. In addition, this study was a qualitative analysis of the processes involved in accessing center-based ECEC for the parents of 23 families, and a quantitative study is warranted to determine the status of access to preschool education for a broader population of foreign origin raising children in Japan.

Conclusion

In Japan, parents are not required to enroll their children in nursery school or kindergarten. However, given the Japanese government's active promotion to recruit foreign workers and international students, increasing numbers of people are coming to Japan for employment or education. Certainly, the ability to enroll their children in center-based ECEC plays a major role in their ability to achieve the purpose of their migration to Japan. For parents of foreign origin raising preschool-aged

children in Japan, which can be a brand-new environment, ECEC facilities such as nursery schools and kindergartens serve not only as spaces for children's growth, development, and school readiness but also as the first long-term formal support that many foreign parents engage with for over a year. As such, these institutions represent a crucial social resource in the lives of families of foreign origin in Japan. Given the growing severity of labor shortages in Japan, the government has been actively promoting employment of foreign workers. For Japan to remain a desirable destination for people from other countries, it is essential to establish a supportive environment where they can work and live with a sense of security. Moreover, further shifts in awareness and policies are needed to ensure the retention and active participation of these workers in Japanese society (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2024). The "Roadmap for Realization of a Society Coexisting with Foreign Residents" states the need for the national government, local governments, support groups, and other related organizations to cooperate and collaborate in understanding the support needs of foreign residents and to support their inclusion in society and ensure safe and secure living conditions (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2022). Essential components of fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for foreign professionals in Japan include ensuring their equitable access to information about childcare and ECEC opportunities and creating an environment where all children can grow up safely and securely while reaching their full potential in society.

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