Raising Children as Strategic Cosmopolitans:
Increasing English-Speaking Preschools in Tokyo and Japanese Affluent Families’ Educational Strategies
Hiroki Igarashi
(University of Hawaii at Manoa / University of Tokyo)

1. Introduction
This research aims to investigate how Japanese families have their children acquire “global competencies” in the era of a “global meritocracy” (Brown and Tannock 2009) where worldwide business corporations seek talent beyond national borders. Since foreign language communication skills are a part of global competencies, I investigate educational strategies of Japanese families who send or sent their children to English-speaking preschools in Tokyo: why they sent their children to the international preschools and how they navigate their children’s future educational careers. English-speaking preschools are private, expensive and non-accredited school institutions that provide daycare for preschool children under an English-speaking environment with a presence of foreign teachers. According to ALC (2009), the number of English-speaking preschools has dramatically increased 17 times from 18 in 2002 to 312 in 2009.

Thus, this study examines how English-speaking preschools are used and consumed by affluent Japanese families and how they use the institutions as exclusionary strategies to provide advantages to their children in the rapidly changing educational, economic and societal environments.

2. Literature Review
In today’s society where the consequences of globalization and neoliberal economy affect our daily lives, the existing literature argue that a new type of competencies, called “global competencies” came to be promoted by Japanese business world and government since the 2000s. Global competencies, which overarch postmodern competencies, presuppose the prevalence of a global meritocracy. The definition of global competencies is, according to Japan Business Federation (2011), ones that comprise a fundamental skill as a business person, challenging spirit without being preoccupied with ready-made ideas, communication skills in foreign languages, and willingness to engage with foreign others. Mitchell (2003) argued that Western industrialized nations had reformed their educational policies to motivate their citizens to be “strategic cosmopolitans,” ones “oriented to excel in ever transforming situations of global competition, either as workers, managers or entrepreneurs” (388). Now the similar educational reform is taking place in Japan.

In the domain of early childhood education, it has been observed that some groups of Japanese families engage in educational strategies to have their children obtain global competencies. However, the existing scholarship on family’s educational strategies in the domain of early childhood education presupposes a national meritocracy, neglecting family’s global-meritocracy-aware educational strategies. Therefore, this study aims to unpack how Japanese families are adapting to the trend of a global meritocracy in the domain of early childhood education.

3. Methodology
I have conducted an ethnography in English-speaking preschools in Tokyo. I have conducted open-ended interviews with 15 directors, school principals or head teachers of those schools as well
as those of prep schools for Japanese private elementary schools and kindergartens. I have also observed several of those schools to see the interaction among children, parents and teachers. In addition, I also conducted open-ended interviews with 18 Japanese families, mainly mothers, who sent their children to English-speaking preschools. I asked the reasons why they had sent their children to the preschools, their vision on their children’s future educational careers, and their values on education and childrearing. Since this research is still ongoing, I introduce my findings as a progress report.

4. English-speaking Preschools

English speaking preschools can be classified into three types: 1) ones affiliated with international schools, 2) daycare-type schools, and 3) kindergarten-type schools. The second and third types, which target Japanese children, are the ones on increase lately. Since the English-speaking preschools are independently run institutions, their tuitions are generally three to four times more costly than regular Japanese kindergartens. In addition, the majority of the schools are established in the upscale residential areas. To target and appeal to the affluent families who have small children, they develop a branding strategy—their school philosophies and slogans employ specific terms associated with global and post-modern competencies, such as creativity, individuality, problem-solving skills, communication skills, cosmopolitan perspective and orientation in order to distinguish themselves as cutting-edge and global oriented from other Japanese schools.

5. Affluent Families’ Educational Strategies

As the English-speaking preschools target affluent families, all of my interviewees are from higher-socioeconomic backgrounds although their educational attainments vary from high school to graduate school. The majority of my interviewees views that providing such an international-minded education will widen their perspective and their children’s future educational and job opportunities. Some families go to English-speaking countries with their children during summer vacation and have their children go to the local summer schools to have international experience.

Based on the interview with the mothers, the patterns of parental school choices are classified into three patterns: From the preschools to 1) international schools, 2) to Japanese private elementary schools, and 3) to Japanese public elementary schools. How the families choose either of the patterns for children vary, based on their income levels, educational attainments, experiences living in overseas and working with foreign customers, and the number of their children, etc.

6. Conclusion

This research reveals that the educational site of English-speaking preschools has expanded to provide children of affluent families as advantages in a global meritocracy. Japanese affluent families conscious about changing societal circumstances actively consume and use the educational site as exclusionary strategies, hoping that their children acquire global competencies and become successful “strategic cosmopolitans.” Although it is difficult to assess the effects of the preschools on their children’s future educational trajectories, it can be argued that who can access to a global mobility by acquiring global competences is more and more a matter of families’ economic resources.

7. References

ALC, 2009, Kodomo Eigo Catalogue (Children’s English Catalogue), ALC.
Honda, Yuki, 2005, Tagenkasuru ‘nouryoku’ to nihonshakai (Increasingly multifaceted “competencies” and Japanese society), NTT shuppan.