



Children (persons) with disabilities and clay

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Introduction

A “clay room” was introduced at Biwako Gakuen, the first facility for children with severe motor and intellectual disabilities (SMIDs) in western Japan, and various changes were brought about through the response of children with SMIDs to methods of playing with clay tailored to each individual. This report analyzes the influence of clay on children with disabilities by looking at the history of this program and its influence on the children who took part in it.

Materials used

Writings: Biwako Gakuen 1983, *Sōritsu 20 shūnenkinenka biwakogakuen no 20 nen 1963-1983* [20th anniversary of founding commemorative magazine: 20 years of Biwako Gakuen 1963-1983]; Biwako Gakuen 2003 *Inochi deai, kizuna biwakogakuen no 40 nen* [Life – encounters, bonds – 40 years of Biwako Gakuen, Biwako Gakuen; Itoga, Kazuo, 1968 [1998], *Fukushi no shisō* [Welfare thought], NHK Books; Suizu, Tetsu *Nendo no katsudō kara* [From clay room activities]; Tanaka, Keizō, 2008, *Nendo de nyanyunyo* [Nyanyunyo with clay], Iwanami Junior Shinsho; Tanaka, Keizō, 1995, *Nendo to shōgaji to nyanyunyo: ryōiku jissen kiroku* [Clay, children with disabilities, and nyanyunyo: a record of ryōiku practice].

Photographs of works of art:

Clay works displayed in the clay room, from the Biwako Gakuen commemorative magazine cited in the list of writings

Interview survey: Tetsu Suizu, the person in charge of Biwako Gakuen’s clay room



History of clay programs

1947: Began making bricks out of clay taken from the Nangō district of Ōtsu City, which had opened Ōmi Gakuen the previous year

1961: Ichiji Tamura, who had become the superintendent of the “Ichi baku dormitory” after it became independent of Oumi Gakuen, changed the use of clay from producing goods as occupational training to free expression under the guidance of potter Kazuo Yagi (1918-79). Implemented by Ouchi Yoshinaga, a clay program based on the policy of “let them do as they please, don’t interfere” was initiated.

1971: Keizō Tanaka received instruction from Yoshinaga and inaugurated a clay program at the second Biwako Gakuen (now Medical Welfare Center Yasu). He built a kiln for firing the works of art. Every day the children would come to the clay room and play in whatever manner they chose, including feeling the sensation of clay in their hands, painting their faces with it, licking it, enjoying the sounds it makes, piling it up, and wearing it on their heads. The first head of the school, Hidehiko Okazaki, noted that “no matter how the clay was handled, it seemed to accept it without ever asserting itself” (Okazaki 1983).

1979: The first clay room in a Japanese facility for children with SMIDs was completed.



When he first touched the clay, Masanobu, who cannot see, turned red with anger and reached the point of engaging in self-harm by biting his hands. But by not giving up and continuing to try, with muddy clay that is pleasant to the touch we eventually got him to participate. (Quote from Tanaka 2008)

“It feels good, it tickles.” Osamu, without speaking, ran around and stopped wherever he liked, confirming the texture with his fingers and lips. (Quote from Tanaka 2008)



PHOTO: SMID, Suizu, Nurse (Biwako Gakuen 2018.6.22)

Recent years: Clay programs have been implemented for people with all sorts of disabilities, allowing them to enjoy themselves in whatever manner suits their own preferences and abilities. The “clay room” has been in continuous operation for half a century, liberating the minds of children with SMIDs and resulting in the creation of many works of art. Eitatsu’s works were displayed at the Kyoto Municipal Museum’s 3rd “Earth and Color” exhibition, an exhibition entitled “The earth sings – the world of people with cognitive delays” was included in the international ceramics exhibition “Ceramic World Shigaraki” in 1991, and Koumei, a person with SMIDs, completed three ceramic reliefs, one of which was added to the Collection de l’Art Brut museum in Switzerland. Works created in the “clay room” have also been included in many other art exhibitions.

Development from clay to sensory play: Tanaka emphasized the importance of stimulating the senses of people with SMIDs with available materials. He understood the effectiveness of engaging the five senses, and came up with sensory play tailored to the preferences of each individual using things like millet, soy beans, water, bubbles, and *yubukuro* (a plastic bag filled with hot water). Mr. Suizu has continued this tradition. From an operational perspective, all of the costs of the clay room, including personnel, are born by the facility.

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What does playing with clay mean to the people who do it?

The influence of clay: The limbs of children with SMIDs that had not moved begin to move naturally toward clay. Playing with clay also has other effects that were not originally intended, such as problematic behavior being reduced by children with SMIDs being focused on the clay.

Proprioception: When you strike something like clay or *yubukuro* hard, it gives a powerful stimulus not only to your palm but also to your bones and the muscles in your wrist. The sense that conveys this movement to your brain is called “proprioception” (Suizu). For someone who cannot move their limbs, this stimulation, along with the stimulation of massage being given at the same time, is important for their self-awareness of their own arms, legs, and head. It also gives them an opportunity for physical contact with their caregivers. Going to the clay room and playing with clay can thus be said to have “significance/an important role” in their daily lives.

“Works of art are the remnants of play”: Tanaka says that “play” cannot be given enduring form. It is the happiness and joy the participants feel while playing with the clay itself that should be considered a “work of art,” and the physical objects they leave behind should be considered the “remnants” of their having played with clay. “Snoezelen,” a form of therapy begun in the Netherlands in the 1970s, “represents a state of searching for the outside world while relaxing comfortably” (Ota). Suizu’s approach can be viewed as similar to Snoezelen. Itoga saw it as “being faced with the practical question of how to live from the perspective of standing on their side and living together with them” (Itoga [1968] 1998). In comparison to forms of therapy used elsewhere, the approach of the staff based on this philosophy can be thought of as having given the clay program at Biwako Gakuen a stronger character of “playing” with the pleasant sensation and stimulation of clay rather than “creating works of art.”