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Educational Reform for Immigrant Youth in Japan

June A. Gordon

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Abstract Transnational migration is seldom associated with Japan even though Japan has been dependent on immigrants for several generations. The research presented in this article explores a reform effort viewed as radical within the Japanese context that took place in a metropolitan school known for having one of the largest number of immigrant students in Japan, most of whom hail from Latin America, Southeast Asia, and China. While many of these “Newcomers” are of Japanese ancestry, absence from the homeland for two to four generations has left them without the cultural and linguistic skills to navigate the nuances of Japanese society. As a result, schools, which have never had to respond to the needs of immigrant youth, find themselves at a loss as to how to integrate young people whose parents have been drawn back from the Japanese diaspora through government policies designed to assuage the labor shortage of the 1980s and 1990s. Over the course of 5 months of ethnographic field work in the community in which this school is located the author offers insights gleaned from extensive time spent with social workers, translators, government workers, teachers, staff, students, parents, and community liaison volunteers, all of whom shared their frustrations and challenges with the education of immigrant youth within the context and constraints of Japanese schools.

Keywords Japan · Immigrants · School reforms

Introduction

Japanese society has long attempted to maintain the image of ethnic and linguistic homogeneity (Befu 2002; Lie 2003) while neglecting the schooling of its longstanding minority and low status residents, including Burakumin, Ainu, Okinawans, and Zainichi Koreans (Hicks 1997; Weiner 1997; Ishikida 2005). A small but steady flow of immigrants to Japan from Asian and Middle Eastern nations has been even less acknowledged (Yamawaki 2003). However, over the last 35 years there has been a very

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different set of immigrants who offer new and different challenges to Japanese schooling. These are the children of families from different parts of Asia and Latin America who have come to be known as “Newcomers” (Tsuneyoshi 2002). The causes of their arrival are complex. A combination of Japanese affluence, Japanese disinclination to engage in physical labor, fear of foreigners from non-Japanese/or non-Asian cultures, a declining birth rate and aging population, economic crises in South America, demands for reparations to Chinese orphans, and pressure to accept refugees from Southeast Asia have all played a part in the coming of these Newcomers to Japan (Reis 2002; Douglass and Roberts 2003; Tsuda 2003).

Even though immigration to Japan has been in existence for hundreds of years, it has not, until recently, demanded significant attention from teachers and community leaders. One of the main reasons for this is that today’s immigrants, for the most part, are not going home as was anticipated (Yamanaka 2003). Economics, family reunion, and the birth of children in Japan have contributed to a settling in, even as the presence of “Newcomers” proves unsettling to many Japanese nationals (Linger 2001). Fuji School, the site of this research, brings together the young people from a rather select group of countries: Brazil, Peru, Colombia, China, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Many, but not all, of the immigrant students are ethnically Japanese but have no knowledge of Japanese language or of the educational system. They are descendants of Japanese nationals whose situation will be discussed further under “Definitions.” For the most part these children were born in Japan after their parents came as immigrants, refugees, or migrant workers, called *dekasegui* (Usui 2006). To the untrained eye, most could pass for Japanese because many of them are, in fact, ethnically Japanese but living as foreigners in Japan (Shimizu et al. 1999). While the intense ethnographic research referenced here takes place over 5 months living in the area under discussion, it is nested within a much larger project which took place over 10 years and included over 30 public schools (Gordon 2005a, b; 2006; 2009). This early work explored educational programs for “marginalized youth” throughout Japan, some of which were established through government edict and others through the efforts of local Japanese teachers and communities (Gordon 2006). It is within this broader context of Japanese schooling that Fuji junior high school was selected as the focus of this article.

Theoretical Framework

Starting in the mid-1980s the Japanese government, in need of low-wage workers who would not upset the balance of this perceived homogenous society, made certain policy decisions that would enable certain immigrant groups to enter Japan on special visas with the expectation that they would be here temporarily and would accept the rather unacceptable jobs offered them (Tsuda 2003). What was not anticipated was that they would not only remain in Japan and have children, but that they would also send for or bring their children with them from their “home countries.” I put “home” in parentheses because many of these immigrant families are ancestors of Japanese people who were either left behind (such as the Chinese during the Sino–Japanese War) or were sent away (such as the *Nikkei* in South America). In both cases, the question of what is the home or host country is up for debate. In the case of Southeast Asian refugees, most of these people lived in Thai camps prior to arriving in Japan. They have little memory of

a “home” country. In all cases, government policies have played a major part in their location/dislocation not only physically but also psychologically.

Children of these immigrants are the focus of this study, given that most were born in Japan and are held accountable for operating within a system that has not yet accepted their presence. Schools face the challenge of educating youth who are not bound by the compulsory education law that otherwise mandates not only attendance but also qualified teachers who are able to attend to the needs of children and their parents. How to respond to the transnational experience of immigrant students, especially those whose parents have been drawn back from the Japanese diaspora through government policies, has become a daunting task for many schools. As noted by several scholars (Suarez-Orozco et al. 2011), it is imperative that anthropological studies construct a theoretical framework to examine the transnational context for immigrant youth. Such a framework would enable us to transform the institutional structures, theoretically designed to educate young people for a complex and yet unknown world, in which these immigrant youth would be able to utilize their transnational experiences to assist in the process of working towards greater tolerance and depth of understanding as we all acknowledge our roles as global citizens. I argue that an understanding of the intersection of diaspora studies (Brubaker 2005; Cohen 1997; Gilroy 1993; Hall 1990; Safran 1991; Tölölyan 1991) with immigrant education (Lukose 2007) will provide such an alternative and more useful framework to examine the education of immigrant youth in Japan.

Diaspora and Immigrant Education

In this paper, I suggest the term “diaspora” can be viewed as a category of practice and process, which can capture the nuances of the imagined communities and cultural production of the communities (Brubaker 2005; Ma 2003). Diaspora as a theoretical framework will appropriately provide an approach to better understand and interpret the “imagined communities” and “cultural production” of immigrant youth in Japan. No student is singularly positioned in a certain school; this is particularly true for immigrants. Rather, they are situated in a complex historical and political context. For future studies, it is necessary to investigate the complexity of these contexts and critically examine the status of being an immigrant as part of the production of a national assimilationist framework. For example, who are these immigrant youth in the school? How are they different from each other? How are they viewed by their teachers and peers? How do they imagine themselves and their futures within the context of Japanese society? What is the political relation between their “home” country and Japan and how do educational policies based on this relationship impact their lives?

Transnational Migration and Transnational Social Field

Transnational migration is viewed as a process through which immigrants are able to create multiple social relations and link themselves both to home and host countries as proposed by Glick-Schiller et al. (1995). They indicate the perspective of transnational migration would make researchers to realize the fact that the immigrants live their lives across national borders and respond to the constraints and demands of two or more states (p. 54). What they emphasize is the urgent need to redefine the concept of

immigrants and examine the role political factors played in constructing the image of immigrants as uprooted people. Earlier work by Glick-Schiller and Blanc-Szanton (Basch et al. 1994) and Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) define the social field within transnational migration research as a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized and transformed. As they state, the perspective of a transnational social field is a powerful tool to draw attention to the changing nature of political activism and the nation-state and how these are shaped and shape the transnational social fields in which they are embedded.

This article provides a lens into the attempts of leaders within one school to embrace the complexity of attending to both home and host country as they acknowledge their role as radical educators on the cusp of a phenomenon that is fast becoming a part of daily life in urban Japan. Use of both diaspora studies and a transnational framework will shift our perception of nation-states limited by the national boundaries and immigration constructed within home country to a larger context, which will give us an opportunity to not take the national boundaries for granted and more importantly, to reflect on our own position in order to interrogate the issue of immigrant education.

Context

Location and Dislocation: Early Field Notes

As American military jets roar overhead in preparation for uncertain dangers, teachers and staff members continue to give their lessons in Japanese to non-Japanese speakers who can barely understand what is being said even if they could hear clearly. Students have that well-known, bewildered look, and when asked to respond, turn to each other for support, assistance and mercy. I am shocked that teachers do not pause when the sky cracks, which is often. The U.S. military base is next door. I now understand why this school has been placed here “in the countryside.” No one else wants to live here on the edge. Children who need the best conditions to learn are given the least desirable.

Fuji is a public junior high school on the outskirts of Japan’s largest metropolitan area that has become home to a large number of immigrants who have not found affordable and welcoming accommodations elsewhere in this massive urban sprawl. The school serves the local community, many of whom live in government subsidized housing. And even though only 10 % of the total population of the school are identified as “Newcomers,” the school is still seen as distinctive in its orientation: attractive to those whose parents are foreign born but stigmatizing to those who are not. Ninety percent of the student body is composed of Japanese nationals who are the foundation of an entity largely ignored in Japan: the working poor.

Out of many schools in Japan studied by the author over a 10-year span, this one not only had the largest number and range of immigrants, but was also noted for having undertaken the most radical reforms to address the needs of foreign youth, their

families, and communities. These reforms were not superficial but rather required the commitment of teachers, staff, administrators, and volunteers as well as university sponsorship to transform not only the curriculum but also the staffing and organization of the school. The main reform is the creation of what are called “International Classes.” These include not only a radically different curriculum that focuses on the history of the students’ home countries, including colonialism and war, but also the hiring of special teachers and cultural intermediaries who serve as linguistic bridges for the children. While these reforms may not seem radical in an American or British context, it is definitely not normal for a typical Japanese school, which is geared to presenting a uniform curriculum to what is perceived to be a homogenous population whose home language is Japanese and whose parents are familiar with the nuances of Japanese society.

Definitions

The term “Newcomer” is not limited to people who have just arrived in Japan. It is normally used as a demarcation line between those who were brought to Japan involuntarily prior or during World War II as forced labor, known as “Oldcomers,” and those who have come voluntarily since the 1970s in order to improve their economic conditions or to escape war and suffering in their home countries (Ishikida 2005). Like most attempts at simplification, this bifurcation breaks down as we look historically at who left Japan at what time under what conditions for what purpose and whose descendants are now returning. “Oldcomers,” while not the focus of this study, are an important backdrop for understanding discrimination against immigrants. Most Japanese view “Oldcomers” as those people who are descendants of Koreans who were brought over to Japan after Korea was made a protectorate and then colonized in 1910. After the war, about 600,000 Koreans, out of the almost three million who were brought over as laborers to replace Japanese soldiers during the war, decided to remain in Japan. These people are called the *Zainichi*. Literally this means “in Japan,” but when it is used the label is almost totally in reference to Korean-Japanese, most of whom, even after many generations living in Japan and only speaking Japanese, are not viewed as Japanese nationals.

Newcomers

South American Nikkei

Nikkei is a term used to refer to people of Japanese ethnicity who are living abroad. The word literally means of “Japanese blood.” However, when used in contemporary Japan, it has a special meaning that references people whose ancestors left Japan in the early 1900s at a time when Japan was struggling to feed its population due to military expansionism and famine (Tsuda 2003; De Carvalho 2003a, b; Endoh 2009). These people fanned out across the Americas with the largest percentage going to Brazil to join Italian immigrants and replace African American slaves on sugar and coffee plantations. Two to three generations later, the children and grandchildren of these immigrants to South America moved out of rural poverty and into middle-class status

as they proved themselves valuable members of their respective host countries. Then, in the 1980s, when Japan was at the apex of its economic production and in need of workers and the Brazilian economy was in a slump, the two governments collaborated to bring South American Nikkei back to Japan to work in factory jobs that few Japanese Nationals wanted (Reis 2002).

The *Nikkei* arrived in Japan with dreams of being welcomed back “home,” of garnering wages many times higher than possible in their South American host country, of living in a modern metropolis where they would “fit in” due to their physiognomy, of helping out their families through remittances, and of returning soon to their respective countries with increased status and experience to resume and redefine their jobs back in South America. These were not only *their* dreams but also those they left behind, including their children who were often tended to by grandparents. But, as time passed, the *Nikkei* realized that they were living in one of the most expensive cities in the world, a life that consumed their wages, viewed them as foreigners, and had them working in difficult and dangerous jobs that were scorned by Japanese nationals. Unable to return to South America ashamed and empty-handed, they sent for their children and convinced them that their time in Japan would not be long (Gordon 2010). This perception of transience has haunted *Nikkei* youth and impeded their educational gains as both parents and children see the work required to succeed in the Japanese educational system as not worth the effort since “we will soon return home.”

Chinese

At Fuji School Chinese-speaking students sit alongside the *Nikkei*. Many of these also share Japanese ancestry and are known as *zanryuujido* or *tochinisei*. This particular set of Chinese youth are the descendants of Japanese families who moved, or were taken, to China during the Sino–Japanese War in the 1930s and were then orphaned or abandoned when the Japanese were driven out of China. Many of these children had grandparents who were taken in and raised by Chinese families. While they may have Japanese faces and be viewed as Japanese within China, their life experiences have given them a different culture and set of customs that demarcate them as Chinese within Japan where they too are viewed as foreigners (Ishikida 2005).

When these children first began arriving in Japan in the 1980s, having been given special visas to enable them to relocate, they spoke only Chinese. However, because of their familiarity with Chinese characters, the basis of one of the three Japanese writing systems, *kanji*, they could survive in school more easily as they could guess at many of the meanings of the words placed before them. One result of this is that Japanese teachers tend to ascribe intelligence to these Chinese youth over their *Nikkei* peers who are working from Spanish or Portuguese languages based on a Latinized alphabet. The favorable identity of the *zanryuujido* or *tochinisei* has been further shored up by their association with the rising power of China. This is true of all Chinese in Japan, whether they arrived as illegal laborers, scholars, or businessmen. As profound as Japanese discrimination against Chinese has been over the generations, it is now gradually changing and impacting attitudes towards Chinese youth. This is true of Koreans as well and though Fuji school did not have Korean youth, this is another group of young people who have suffered greatly under the narrow definition of what it means to be “authentic” Japanese.

Southeast Asians

Filling in the remaining chairs among the “Newcomer” students of Fuji School are the children of refugee families from Southeast Asia, nearly all from Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos. They share no common language or religion but rather a contested history of war against each other and foreign armies as well as their experience as refugees. They are *not* ethnically Japanese and therefore cannot “pass” as Japanese nationals as is sometimes attempted by the other two groups. The Southeast Asian children do not have a common cultural mythology of “Japan as homeland” as held by the other two groups. Some have only the stories of their guardians to explain why they are now in Japan, others have their own memories of running through fields at night, waiting for months in camps, losing parents, siblings, and friends. Their refugee parents did not expect to become residents of Japan — as with most of their fellow refugees, they saw Europe or North America as their likely new home and many have relatives who are thriving in these other contexts, especially France and California. But in Japan they are trapped in a system that has no way of accommodating them. There were only 10,000 of them allowed into Japan at the end of the American War, as it is called in Vietnam, in the late 1970s. Few have been allowed in since and this is largely permitted only for family reunification. Given the discrimination in Japan against foreigners, it is not seen as a desirable destination for Southeast Asians though recent arrivals of women from the Philippines and Indonesia as “health care workers” will, upon reaching their likely roles as wives and mothers, provide the next wave of foreign children to enter Japan’s classrooms (Ishikida 2005).

Methodology

Access to Fuji school was granted in large part due to the relationship established by my colleague, a leading Japanese sociology professor, who, for the prior 5 years, had been placing his graduate students in “difficult schools” as volunteers. As a result, he was known by principals and some teachers as a person who was interested in and cared about the education of children challenged by the system and/or their communities. He and I had met in 2002 when I was giving a talk at Osaka University pertaining to my research on the *Burakumin*, Japan’s outcasts. Hearing about my research on urban education in the U.S. and the U.K. (Gordon 2000; 2008) as well as with immigrants, he invited me to come to the University of Tokyo as a visiting professor to teach a graduate seminar with him on *Ethnographic Research Methods*. By this time, I had been in and out of Japan numerous times and completed research in areas as varied as changes in Japanese society’s attitudes towards teachers, the impact of economics on access to education, and challenges facing Japanese schooling (Gordon 2005a, b). I was known in the Japanese scholarly community of sociologists of education as a serious researcher and one of the few non-Japanese doing this type of work in what are considered “difficult communities.”

By the time I arrived in Japan to commence my teaching, the graduate students in the seminar had already spent several months in a variety of schools, many of them with small but significantly challenged immigrant populations. Given these connections, I was able to visit and conduct interviews at several other schools, including the

feeder elementary schools to Fuji and the two most likely senior high schools that Fuji students would attend if they passed the respective entrance exams. Since these were graduate students at the University of Tokyo, they represented some of the top young scholars in East Asia, not just of Japan but also China and South Korea. Some of the links into what could be considered “their communities” in greater Tokyo also engendered support by individuals who might be less inclined to be so forthright in their comments. It should be noted that access to Japanese schools for anyone for any purpose is extremely difficult (Bestor et al. 2003). My ability to conduct research in Japan over the years is a privilege that I do not take lightly. In large part it is due to the relationships cultivated and trust established around shared critical concerns that have enabled me to enter communities, and schools where few “outsiders” operate, be they Japanese Nationals or not.

While the site of the reform discussed here is that of a junior high school, the work extended far beyond the classroom walls into the lives of families and staff. The research took place on two parallel tracks almost simultaneously. The first track focused on formal interviews with the ten teachers and staff in Fuji School who were identified by the school as working predominantly with immigrant youth. These interviews were conducted in collaboration with my Japanese colleague from the University of Tokyo. All conversations took place at the school site, week after week, often continuing late into the night. The second track explored the unofficial aspects of the situation and took place mostly outside of the school at community events and in discussions in cafes, homes, and businesses. This was done at my own initiative based on the prompting of conversations with the cultural intermediaries who worked at the school as well as students and parents. Both tracks required extensive engagement as a participant observer.

All of the formal interviews were conducted in Japanese, tape recorded, and later transcribed by a professional Japanese translator to verify that my notes and interpretation of what I heard were valid. The informal discussions, of which there were about five per week for 5 months, were conducted in various languages: Japanese, English, Mandarin, and Spanish. These conversations were noted in field notes constructed either during the interview or soon thereafter. Insights based on both of these tracks were triangulated through weaving them into later interview questions and/or informal discussions to see how widely certain perceptions were held. In addition to class visits and informal talks with students and teachers, my colleague and I attended grueling 2- to 3-h afterschool staff meetings where the teachers, graduate students, and cultural intermediaries gathered for a formal discussion and critique of the curriculum, pedagogy, and student performance. It was here where you could see and feel the hierarchy so common in Japanese culture and better understand how what qualifies as quality education for immigrant youth could be fraught with contradictions and misunderstandings.

I also spent extensive time at the local prefectural library, reviewing historical documents, government surveys, Ministry of Education pronouncements and policies, as well as contemporary news articles about immigrants and local school policies or provisions. Much of this archival research was assisted by two colleagues who are social workers responsible for Newcomer youth and their families. One is a *Nikkei* herself though university-educated in Japan and the other is a Japanese national married

to a Brazilian man. I worked with these two individuals separately since they did not collaborate with each other or have much knowledge of the other's work in this area.

Even though the research "site" was 2 h from where I was living at the time, the school ties that enmesh many Japanese teachers also drew me in as I attended community functions, school performances, and local events whenever possible. By the end of the 5 months I had collected approximately 50 formal interviews with teachers, administrators, staff, students, and cultural intermediaries. Beyond this, I had simultaneously clocked hundreds of hours of less formal talks with community members, social workers, educational advocates and other significant stake holders in homes, cafes, work places, hotels, and trains.

As can be seen, the research operated on multiple levels. My colleague's interest lay mainly with a desire to understand how the educational reforms might improve the academic success of immigrant youth. While this was important for me as well, my lens quickly moved to issues that arose around and in between the reforms. Given my prior research in Japan (and elsewhere) exploring the role of community forces in shaping educational aspirations and achievement, as guided by Professors John Ogbu (Ogbu and Simons 1998) and George De Vos (1992), I was attuned to the off-the-cuff responses and side remarks, often in languages other than Japanese by both cultural intermediaries and students. These led to enquiries and conversations that explored how what might be publically rendered as a valiant effort in assisting immigrant youth to succeed in Japan might, in fact, create misunderstanding, unnecessary tension, confusion, resistance, and ultimately, distancing from schooling.

Challenges of Fuji Junior High School

Immigrant youth the world over face similar challenges when it comes to reorienting to a new society, including lack of familiarity with a new educational system, potential linguistic discrepancies, and adjustment to new ways of comportment (Sekiguchi 2002; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2010). But further challenges arise that vary depending on the host country. For Japan these include, but are not limited to, entering an educational system that was never designed to serve immigrants (Ota 2002; Shimizu 2000). In fact, Newcomer youth are not required to attend school. Compulsory education laws do not apply to them since they are not Japanese Nationals (Ninomiya 2002). However, the majority of Newcomer youth are in school at least until the end of junior high school (Gordon 2010).

Given that there is great parity among schools throughout Japan in terms of infrastructure, teacher competence, curriculum, and assessment, it is often difficult for teachers to see the need to attend to difficulties in learning that might arise from differences in children's background or home environment. Japanese teachers are trained to treat all children as if they were born and raised in Japan, speaking Japanese and knowing the fine nuances of this polite and hierarchically situated society (Okano and Tsuchiya 1999; Tsuneyoshi 2001). Any variations are to be rectified through private supplementary education or in the home with their mothers serving as educational guides. Most Japanese women do not work full-time outside jobs. This is in part a class issue but also a post-war cultural tradition. Japanese women are expected to invest their time and knowledge in their children, making mothers solely responsible

for the academic success of their children. For Newcomers, the expectations shift as most immigrants to Japan work at relatively high-paying industrial jobs with the sole purpose of making money to then return “home.” This means that most immigrant parents, women as well as men, work outside jobs, often more than one and often at odd hours (Shipper 2002). While this is not unusual for immigrants the world over, it does skew the expectations held by Japanese teachers as well as the assumed support that children receive. All of the Japanese teachers interviewed at Fuji were aghast at the apparent lack of attention Newcomer mothers pay to their children. As one stated:

It is a usual thing that in Japan a mother prepares meals for children and insures that they take a bath and have sufficient sleep. But parents of foreign students go to work even at night and their life is not stable. They have no time to be attentive to their children.

Parents’ educational expectations varied depending on the context in which they themselves had raised. These expectations, often in the form of cultural capital, are transferred to the host country and compared with what is available. While shocking to Japanese Nationals, many Chinese immigrant parents view the Japanese educational system as inferior to that in China, often resulting in a decision to send their children back to China to live with grandparents while attending school. Japanese teachers were perceived as lackadaisical, not demanding enough, as well as lacking in respect and the ability to control their classes. Japanese teachers at Fuji school were oblivious to these criticisms and assumed their method of working with immigrant youth logical since the children were “foreigners.” As noted by the Chinese cultural intermediary:

[Chinese] Parents think strictness is useful; we believe that physical punishment is helpful in guiding children’s actions. But in Japanese schools, students are not disciplined. They don’t have to do homework and they don’t even study during class. When a student is mischievous, he is not scolded but allowed to get away with it.

I ask if she believes this is true throughout Japan and not only in low-income schools with large Newcomer populations and she concedes it is: “If you compare the situation of Japanese schools with that of Chinese schools, you can say Japanese schools are terrible.”

For Southeast Asian refugees the situation is significantly different as most of their parents or grandparents arrived with little if any education due to war and relocation. Most had lived in refugee camps in Thailand prior to coming to Japan. South American *Nikkei* parents, in contrast, tend to be middle-class and educated. Their two greatest stumbling blocks that they face are linguistic and bewilderment with the Japanese educational systems. This was pointed out to me several times by South American *Nikkei* parents who did not understand the socialization function of Japanese schools with regard to hierarchy and cohort responsibility. The frustration can be heard in this comment: “We do not understanding the excessive time spent in Japanese schools on activities that have nothing to do with academics. In Brazil school is for studying, not clubs or sports.”

Nearly all parents of the Newcomer children in Fuji School did not speak Japanese before coming to Japan, even if they were ethnically Japanese. After two to three generations living in either China or South America, the ancestral language had been lost. All public education takes place in the Japanese language; it is exceeding rare to have any accommodation for another language. And even though Japan's schools have an unwritten obligation to pass all students on to the next grade level regardless of their prior success, this policy can prove devastating when no language assistance is provided for immigrant students. A child may float through the primary years but at the end of junior high school they face the dreaded national exam that will determine their future, not only whether they will go onto high school but also what type of high school (Rohlen 1983). Not attending high school or attending one with a questionable reputation, which then limits employment, pose significant problems not only for the individual but for Japanese society as a whole (Kondo 2005; Yasuda 2003).

Reform at Fuji School

In an attempt to respond to some of the social, linguistic and cultural challenges, Fuji Junior High School, under the leadership of a few very capable and assertive educators, devised a reform that has resulted in increased retention and decreased violence involving immigrant and refugee children. The reform effort is embodied in what are called "International Classes." The purpose of the "International Classes [*kokusai jyugyoo*]" is to create a space in which Newcomer students from the same ethnic background can gather, learn about their homelands, and celebrate their culture. There were three separate classes for what are perceived to be different immigrant groups: the South Americans, Chinese, and Southeast Asians. The impetus for the program stems from a perceived need to bridge the gap between home and school as noted by one of the intermediaries,

Several years ago some Vietnamese students began renouncing their identities and claiming that they hated Vietnam. Conflict with their parents ensued and, as the school investigated the situation, it became clear that teasing and bullying by Japanese youth towards immigrant youth had been taking place for some time unbeknownst to teachers.

While bullying (*ijime*) is a well-known phenomenon in Japan and happens usually when a child, for any reason, stands out as different from the rest, teachers seldom intervene as it is viewed as part of growing up and learning one's place in the hierarchy of Japanese society. But Newcomer parents were not willing to stand by and allow the abuse. Gradually, word got back to one of the graduate students working at the school who then informed their advisor, my colleague, of the situation and a movement for some type of reform ensued. One approach for dealing with the situation was the development and implementation of a curriculum *for the international students* that taught the history of their respective home countries, including the reasons for their parents' or grandparents' departure, the role of poverty, colonialism, and the devastation of war. Newcomer students would be required to use their elective class time to take the course while their Japanese peers took classes of their own choosing. This was not always well received by the international students as noted by this young man,

I want to be in the class of P.T. That is my favorite subject. Why should I be in the selective international class? I would rather be with my friends. This isn't fair. Why are we singled out?

The "International Classes" are not part of the regular curriculum nor are they seen as necessary for Japanese students to take. All of the instruction is in Japanese with little assistance by the support staff in the native language when comprehension is non-existent. The curriculum, thematically based, is the same for each of the three international groups but the content varies depending on the country of "origin." One week the focus might be on the geography of their respective home countries and another week on the historical context prior to WWII. As I move from class to class I am amazed at the frankness of the teachers about the "Manchurian Incident," the "rape of Nanjing," the Communist regime in Vietnam, and the role of the U.S. and French in Indochina. Clearly, the variation in language, culture, politics and religion *within* these three groups can produce some interesting and potentially contentious mismatches, especially for the Southeast Asians but also for Spanish-speaking Peruvians with Portuguese-speaking Brazilians (Takenaka 2003).

Below, the three classes are featured, beginning with short field notes of the main teachers for each of the classes followed by profiles of the respective cultural intermediaries who assisted in these classes. A reflection from a staff meeting in which these teachers come together with the cultural intermediaries and the other school volunteers is offered as an example of the hierarchical dynamics performed on a daily basis.

The Three International Classes

The South American class

The social studies teacher, Ms. Higashi (all names have been changed), is about fifty years of age, tall and perky, with short black hair and a round friendly face, usually dressed in a sweat suit. The image of female teachers in suits or dresses is not only outdated but discouraged in "difficult" schools for fear of sexual harassment (Komine 2000). Ms. Higashi's energy and enthusiasm are infectious but because of her rapid fire speech, her positive attitude only goes so far in assisting students' academic progress.

My interviews with Ms. Higashi focused on many aspects of education but it is what she has to say about the family life of Newcomers that struck me as fundamental to the mindset that guides her response to students:

If a Japanese student goes wrong his parents help him and tell him how to deal with the problem. But if a foreign student goes wrong his parents don't know how to deal with the problem in the Japanese way. They are at a loss what to do.

I am curious to know more about the "the Japanese way" and how students see themselves in relation to "the others." Apparently, she also has been

interested in the student view and recently asked her various classes how they think about each other. In a recent essay she assigned, she was rather shocked to learn not only of the degree of *ijime* (bullying) that occurs towards Newcomers but also how Japan's mantra of "all students are equal" has backfired in the face of these young people. She explains:

Japanese students don't understand the difficult backgrounds of foreign students. They think everyone is equal. This is what we teach them so they think even though they came from different countries they and we seem to be the same.

As charming as this might appear to some readers, this mentality does not create a positive environment for students who, in fact, face radically different home and learning challenges. Ms. Higashi confesses near the end of our interview that "We teachers also tend to think that every student is equal but actually we don't treat them with equality."

The Chinese Class

Mr. Matsumoto, about fifty five years of age and the only male among the group of instructors working with foreign students, is a real live wire. He walks around all day with a white gym towel thrown around his neck. He is very "out there," loud, in your face, and rambunctious. He begins a vigorous discussion about the Manchurian invasion, his arms swirling and head bobbing, speaking at a rapid pace and spying one student after another to keep their attention. Then he shoots out a question: "Do you think that the Chinese liked the Japanese coming into their country?" This they understand and all say "no."

On this day, class progresses with an old film from the 1940s showing scenes of famine and deprivation. The kids are in shock. This is not the China that they know either from their own memories or the images fed to them by their parents. Who are these Japanese and why are they killing us? Mr. Matsumoto explains that both countries were starving at the time, hardly a justification, just a reality. Near the end of the lecture, Mr. Matsumoto asks the students why their parents came to Japan. No one raises their hand. His question is a lead into next week's lesson: responses to WWII and life after the war. During the week, all of the students from each of the three groups are supposed to interview their parents about conditions before the war and how they felt about the war. It is hard for me to imagine how these 11- and 12-year-olds will approach this question, not to mention their parents, most of whom are only now in their thirties and in many cases are perceived, and viewed themselves, as Japanese when living in either China or South America prior to arriving in Japan.

In my discussion with Mr. Matsumoto about the reform and how this might help or hinder Newcomer youth's academic and/or social success, he shifts the discussion to their parents and their unstable lives. He shares the concerns expressed by Ms. Higashi

with regards to limitations on employment of Newcomers and offers some data from the school register to back his concerns:

Their economic situation has become unstable and parent relationships continue to deteriorate. Many couples here are separated. Twenty percent of our students are children with only one parent. More than forty percent of families receive public assistance. We have to find a way to help them understand why they are here and what their parents went through to bring them here.

While I clearly saw his rationale, how it played out in the classroom and later on the soccer field caused me pause.

The Southeast Asian Class

The best “teacher” is Mrs. Nishino, a Japanese woman of about forty years of age who is married to a Cambodian man and lives in the neighborhood danchi (apartment block) with her husband. She is, however, not a certified teacher but rather a community worker who splits her time between two schools and a host of organizations in order to make ends meet. She is the best of all the “teachers” in terms of being able to work in JSL (Japanese as a Second Language), speaking clearly and succinctly with passion and control; she understands the difficulty of learning another language. However, no matter how interesting and engaging, the complexity of the topics Mrs. Nishino presents to the students is overwhelming: the origins of the Vietnam War and the differences among Laotians, Vietnamese, and Cambodians as well as the experiences of the Thai refugee camps. New words are spouted off: saha, left wing, yuha, right wing. I am not sure what these groups are called in their own country but the response from the audience is one of discomfort and/or disapproval.

After one lecture, a graphic film of the “American War” (called the Vietnam War in the U.S.) followed. Charred bodies were dragged across the screen as children flee with one arm dangling, mothers clutching their babies. Mrs. Nishino describes the people in the photos as being wealthy Christian elites who were oppressing the rest of society, which is Buddhist and poor. I am bewildered by this rendition. The binary approach leaves my head spinning. Christians pitted against Buddhists? The monolithic nature of the analysis fails to explain the complexity within Vietnamese society at the time, the influence of China, the mindset of the U.S. or the French. But my main concern is not with historical accuracy but rather how this anti-Christian perspective will play out with the other international students, their peers, who are Christian themselves. This not only includes the South American *Nikkei* who are Catholic but also some Chinese and Korean youth, as well as some of the cultural intermediaries, who see Christianity as a social bond and their main conduit for exiting the refugee camps of Thailand

Cultural Intermediaries

Schools in this prefecture that have more than ten foreign students are given special funding to hire cultural intermediaries, persons who share the languages and cultural backgrounds of Newcomer students. These part-time, temporary staff members work alongside regular teachers who offer the various courses within the “International Classes” and are available on a limited basis for support with students. The cultural intermediaries vary in their own educational background, some with Master’s degrees and others with minimum education but experience as teachers of refugees. All are committed to providing a safer and more equitable learning situation for immigrant youth from their respective countries/cultures.

Since most cultural intermediaries are not Japanese Nationals and their work is done on a contract basis, they do not receive benefits or transportation costs, which can be significant in Japan. Usually they worked at various schools, community centers and/or hospitals across the Tokyo area, often taking long train rides of 1 to 2 h in between locations. While their presence is essential for the success of the reforms at Fuji, they often view themselves as impotent and voiceless. Fuji School has six such workers, representing the cultures of Peru, Brazil, China, Laos, and Cambodia. Given that Peruvians speak Spanish and Brazilians speak Portuguese, two cultural intermediaries were required in the South American class.

The South American Intermediary

Mrs. Endo has worked with Nikkei youth for the last 15 years. She has watched the procession of families enter and settle in the Kanagawa area. While she is Nikkei, her husband is not; he is Brazilian with no Japanese blood. This distinction is clear from the Japanese view, though not to someone on the outside who is familiar with the diversity within Brazilian culture.

It is this lack of awareness on the part of Japanese culture and in particular with the International Class teachers that concerns her. The portrayal of South America is stereotypical and almost cartoonish and in her words:

When children are asked to draw pictures of different countries, Brazil is usually depicted as a jungle with apes swinging from trees. Teacher don’t correct this image. I don’t think that they know that Brazil is a modern, vibrant country. I get upset when I hear Nikkei children being called names related to living in the jungle. I think the International classes should counter these attitudes not reinforce them.

What makes these perceptions particularly painful, as she shares with me, is that most of these children come from middle-class professional families but once in Japan are not able to sustain their standing due to housing and job discrimination.

The Chinese Intermediary

Mrs. E. is in a strange position because she is not Chinese but a returnee and has been here 27 years but spent the first 30 years in China. She is a *zanryujido*, a Japanese

woman by ethnicity but born and raised in China. Aware of her difference she stays apart from the Japanese teachers. Her elegance and grace stand in sharp contrast to those of the regular teachers throughout the school who seem to think that when working with immigrant youth casual dress is preferable. Mrs. E. and I begin to address each other in Mandarin and I can see that she sees me as an ally. It soon becomes obvious that her feelings towards both Chinese and Japanese are ambivalent and can be felt and interpreted as coldness and aloofness if you do not know her.

Mrs. E has a different take on the International class and the family origins of the *zanryukoji*. She explains:

Mostly they belonged to a lower class. They came from northern part of China. It is north of Beijing and very cold. There are many farm villages. During the war, the Japanese army occupied only those areas and they had children there, so that's why there were many Japanese children left in China in northeast area.

She understands not only the ignorance of the students regarding their history but empathizes with the parents' reluctance to share the stories, the atrocities, and the shame that they may feel having been left behind to struggle under incredible circumstances for decades after war. She asks me over dinner one night:

How can parents who are now in Japan and are of Japanese descent possibly explain that Japanese people were wrong? How can they tell their children that it was the Japanese who invaded China and killed your grandfather or such and such persons? That's why adults can't tell children the facts. These children don't know about what happened during the war and I am not sure that it is necessary for them to know given that they are now in Japan living with Japanese.

As a result, the stories are hidden, the past is passed, the humiliation complete. When asked if the international classes meet the expectations of these parents who were educated in China, she clarifies:

Most students in this middle school are grandchildren of those people. They have a feeling of coming back to Japan. They make a resolution not to go back to China but once here, the reality is not what they expected. Education in China is viewed as stronger than here.

The Southeast Asian Intermediary

Mrs. B. is a short woman who tends to dress in native Laotian garb that she has made herself. She comes from a long line of teachers, most of whom were persecuted by the Communists prior to her flight to Thailand where she became a teacher in one of the refugee camps. Due to her inability to pass as Japanese, even on the margins, in contrast to the other two groups, she experiences severe discrimination and, hence, poverty. One afternoon she invited me to her home in a rough area of town where over roasted yams and tea she shares

with me her concerns about the International classes. She is an open and frank woman having survived much on her own; in her words:

I do not agree with the teachers who tell stories about the American War. They were not there. They do not understand what we went through. I am a Christian today because some missionaries came into the camps and gave us food. We would have died otherwise. They pleaded for our release and ultimately we were let out and sent all over the world.

She continues to tell me that most, if not all, of the refugees in her camp had hoped to have been sent to the U.S. but instead the group was divided with some coming to Japan. As a result, she claims:

Many young refugee people see the U.S. in a positive light. This is not taught in the International Class. In reality, we did not want to come to Japan. It is not known as a welcoming place. Many of the young people here at this school have family members who went to the States and are now in college or own their own business. Meanwhile, their parents have to work in Japanese factories and the children will do not do well in school. The pictures on the screen do not match the images in their heads or the stories passed on by their parents.

Staff Meeting

A major part of the reform effort was a weekly staff meeting that included the cultural intermediaries, the teachers of the international classes, and any volunteers from the university or the community. During these meetings, the tension between the cultural intermediaries and the teachers was palpable. The former were noticeably passive and talked only when called upon. This was not the personality of the women as I knew them. The hierarchy and protocol of this group was painful to experience. Here are excerpts from my field notes of a meeting early in the process:

In the center of a long table is a heap of food: bags of raisins, an assortment of wrapped candy and biscuits, but no one touches it until the male teacher, Mr. K, arrives late and simultaneously sits down and reaches for a handful of food. The “lesser” women of the group now get up to make and pour the tea, a routine that continues throughout the two hours. I try to do it once, as I was uncomfortable being waited on, but was quickly rebuked and sent back to my seat where I ached for an excuse to rise and stretch.

These meetings are tedious to say the least. Sitting around the table about twelve of us listen to Ms. X, who was the instigator of the reforms when a graduate student of my colleague and is now a professor at a private university. For about half an hour she discusses her rendition of what has occurred that day; then everyone else is expected to give a brief report from their perspective. It is painful to watch the hesitancy on the part of the part-time resource teachers. Their words

in front of the group are soft and tempered. I come to realize that this is a front masking their fear of job loss and their anger at what they see as problems with the curriculum, the teachers, and the students.

Teachers keep the notebooks that the students write in. I assume this is so that they can reread the material and ask questions of the students or just get to know the students better. As the teachers share their stories and pass around drawings by their students, I am surprised to hear laughter. The drawings show people crawling up a wall, scrambling up a ladder, orange steps on white construction paper that lead nowhere, flowers with stems and leaves but no blooms, red roads and black railway tracks with question marks as road signs, boats off the shore of South America, waiting. I feel discomfort not in the children's depictions of their visions of their families, their lives back home, their futures, but rather in the apparent lack of concern about these images. I even wonder if these adults should be privy to the stories of other children not in their immediate "group."

Discussion

Clearly there are lessons to be extrapolated from this experience to apply to other contexts (nations) where teachers are working with children from a range of backgrounds, particularly if the "host" country perceives itself as homogenous. Accommodating differences in a system where the goal is to create a common experience for all children is a challenge. As noted in Kipnis (2011) work on China, innovative programs that might appear to move towards greater progressive goals are possible only when changes in mindsets have occurred that allow for such alterations. Otherwise, the programs last only as long as the person committed to the task is present. In the case of Fuji School, cultural intermediaries representing the home countries of the children were used to bridge the home/school dichotomy but they were not actually heard, even as there were attempts to create spaces and times for this to occur. Their experiences of their home countries diverged greatly from the ones portrayed by the Japanese teachers who were attempting to teach "honest history." This is not the fault of the teachers; their attempt was sincere and more far-reaching than anything I had seen institutionalized in any other classroom in Japan over the last 15 years. However, they too were educated under a Japanese educational system that revises and hides its imperialist history, leaving young people without a context within which teachers can expand and illuminate.

The teachers at Fuji had never been educated or trained to work with children who bring with them special needs. Therefore, when foreign children come into their classes teachers tend to be somewhat paralyzed by the process of accepting full responsibility for the children under their care. Beyond the issue of working with low-income youth in a school with a large number of immigrant youth, some teachers also felt stigmatized by their fellow colleagues, some of whom were viewed as renegades. One had been dismissed from his prior school due to his aggressive and risky behavior. While reform often requires people who are willing to take risks, it also requires sensitivity to the context in which one is operating, an ability to negotiate and compromise or even to

blend in if a transition is to be smooth and successful, especially in a country like Japan where conformity is valued. As a result, teachers at Fuji were guaranteed that they would not be relegated to teaching classes only for foreign youth, but would also be able to teach regular classes in their area of specialty, hence retaining a professional identity that did not marginalize them further.

However, the way that the reform was set up inevitably segregated not only the Newcomer students from their peers but also the teachers from their colleagues. In Japan, teachers share a common room where they prepare for classes, take breaks, and grade papers. They do not have their own classroom or their own private space. Social norms are reinforced by close proximity and a work schedule that demands that teachers stay at school often late into the evening as well as on weekends. As noted above, teachers at Fuji who worked with Newcomer youth were expected to attend staff meetings after school that lasted for hours. They also had to deal with the disciplinary and family issues of Newcomer youth.

Pedagogically, they operated outside the national curriculum in “International Classes” where the content focused on the background of students’ families. While this might seem like culturally relevant pedagogy, it was so deviant from what is taught in Japan that it created a dissonance that was palpable not only among teachers but also between teachers and cultural intermediaries, the latter who felt the historical rendition of the causes of immigration often incorrect or biased. Since all classes were taught in the Japanese language, the role of the cultural intermediaries as translators was essential in understanding course material. However, their interpretation of what happened in the lives of their respective “groups,” as related to me, called into question the value of potentially unleashing an historical past that brought into view the horrors of Imperial Japan, none of which are discussed in junior high school textbooks. Rather than enhancing understanding across cultures, the “International Classes” offered during the elective period isolated the Newcomer youth from their Japanese peers and created a heightened sense of difference in a country where difference is, at best, discouraged.

Caught between a desire to do their jobs well and a desire to rectify what was being told, the cultural intermediaries were simultaneously empowered by their unique employment opportunity at this school and disempowered by being spokespersons for an historical reality they knew to be far more nuanced than what they were asked to explain. Staff meetings brought this more clearly out into the open as it was the one time in which all of the cultural intermediaries, teachers, and volunteers were brought together to supposedly critique the past week and plan for the next. Embarrassment was obvious as each cultural intermediary was asked to discuss the “problems” of the children in their respective group and how they could be “resolved.” No one wanted to admit how the reforms themselves, whether the pedagogy or a comment from a misinformed teacher or the content of the “International Classes” itself, could have been the source of an altercation or a difficult confrontation.

I have always believed in teaching the social, political, economic, and cultural context of schooling, especially to marginalized youth, not only so that they can understand the context of their own oppression, but also the success of their people. I have supported minority-culture based programs with the view that the creation of a safe space allows people to shed their masks, necessary for survival in the outside world, and relax together, sharing perhaps a common language and common experience. I have written on these issues extensively, as well as critiqued the problems

inherent in them; but it was not until I saw this pedagogical practice played out within the radically different context of Japan that I was able to see just how dangerous such assumptions can be if students and teachers are not prepared and supported (Gordon 2006). Within the context of Fuji Junior High School, education that I would have considered liberatory became confining, divisive, and damaging, not only to the students involved but also to other students who had been allies and equals. As these youth came to know the history of their parents' and grandparents' oppression, they began to see their friends as murderers, their heroes as traitors, and their teachers as betrayers. A curriculum that can potentially pit one group against another can never succeed in bringing about cohesion, particularly in a society where difference is suspect.

Conclusion

The research presented in this article explores a reform effort viewed as radical within the Japanese context that took place in a metropolitan school known for having one of the largest number of immigrant students in Japan, most of whom hail from Latin America, Southeast Asia, and China. While many of these "Newcomers" are of Japanese ancestry, absence from the homeland for two to four generations has left them without the cultural and linguistic skills to navigate the nuances of Japanese society. As a result, schools, which have never had to respond to the needs of immigrant youth, find themselves at a loss as to how to integrate young people whose parents have been drawn back from the Japanese diaspora through government policies designed to assuage the labor shortage of the 1980s and 1990s.

The situation presented here challenges the dominant perception that transnationalism is not a part of Japanese discourse. Japan has a long history of migration and immigration and yet seldom is it discussed. The reticence is not unique to Newcomers; it also lingers with other marginalized populations who have been in Japan for generations such as the *Zainichi* or *Burakumin* (Ishikida 2005). The reform implemented at Fuji School attempted to highlight the complexity not only of the lives of contemporary Newcomer youth but also the teaching of historical material which would provide a broader context for their understanding of their current situation. While the progressive reform at Fuji School opened up a space for candid discourse and interaction, it also created a degree of confusion and conflict in a context already fraught with instability. Precariously perched in the outskirts of Tokyo, this community and the schools the children attend are viewed as less than desirable, even when the only thing different about them is that 10 % of the students are the children of immigrants. Granted, the community is populated with lower-income families but in Japan it takes a trained eye to see the variation in social classes as most Japanese view themselves, and make every effort to pass, as middle-class. However small the distinction, few teachers are interested or willing to teach in these schools and with these children due to the stigma attached to their lower status and perceived difficulties (Komine 2000). Over the course of 5 months of ethnographic field work in the community in which this school is located, the author gleaned insights into this fragile and precarious situation through the eyes of social workers, translators, government workers, teachers, staff, students, parents, and community liaison volunteers, all of

whom shared their frustrations and challenges with the education of immigrant youth within the context and constraints of Japanese schools.

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