

Incorporating Foreign Students in Japanese Public Schools

The Case Study of Two Elementary Schools in Gunma

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Abstract

Since the late 1970s, there has been a gradual increase in the number of foreigners entering Japan. This increase in the foreign population has resulted in the formation of what are called the "*gaikokujin shuju chiiki*" [areas in which foreigners are concentrated] in Japan. Gunma prefecture is well known as one of the "*gaikokujin shuju chiiki*" and the local public elementary schools have taken initiatives to promote the incorporation of foreign students.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce two elementary schools in Gunma and to discuss some of the measures that the schools are taking to incorporate foreign students. These districts are generally considered to be among the pioneering areas in foreign student education in Japan, and as such, they provide models for other Japanese schools.

Keywords: Gunma Prefecture, Migration policy, Foreign student education, Bilingual teacher system

Background

The foreign population in Japan is very small. As of December 2014, there are only around two million registered foreigners in total, which makes up no more than two

percent of the entire Japanese population (Ministry of Justice, 2015). This, among other factors, has drawn the attention of Japanese education policy makers and scholars away from foreign students in their education system.

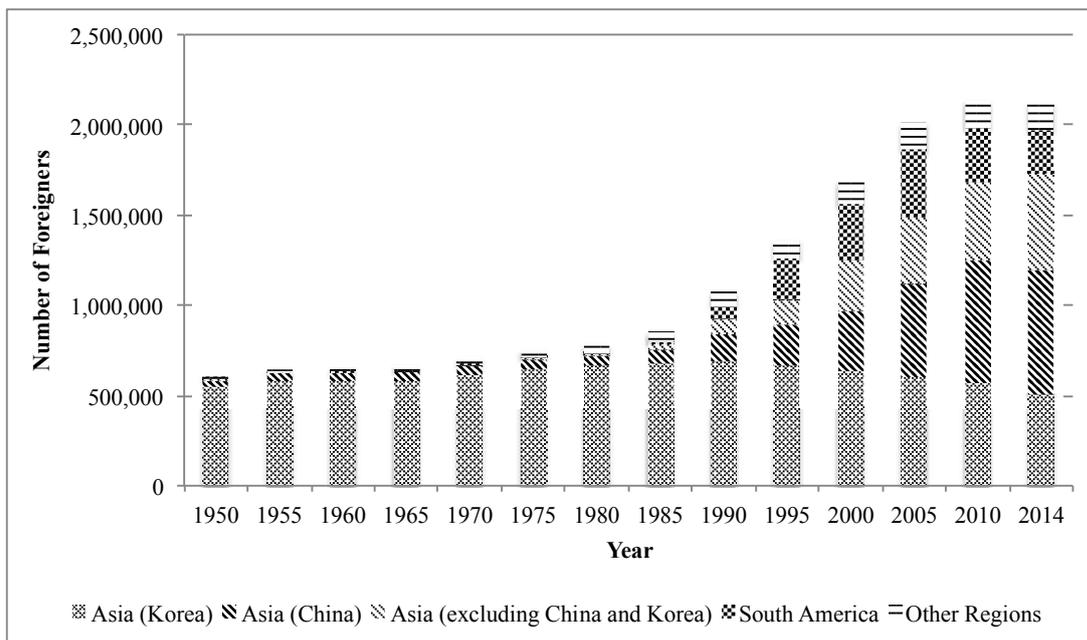
However, there are some districts in Japan called "*gaikokujin shuju chiiki*" [areas in which foreigners are concentrated] that have a considerable foreign population. Faced with pressing needs, these local municipalities are known to be taking progressive measures to ensure the establishment of foreigners as residents (Kashiwazaki, 2014; Pak, 2000). In these districts, most foreign children in their school ages attend local Japanese public schools. Hence, it is of great importance to study how the Japanese public schools are responding to the entry of foreign children, which has become a research genre in the Japanese academia⁽¹⁾.

After reviewing the migration policy reform that led to the increase of foreign population in Japan, this paper will focus on Gunma prefecture that has become one of the most famous *gaikokujin shuju chiiki* in Japan. This paper will introduce practices from the two schools in Gunma that are especially known for the high concentration of foreign students.

Japanese Migration Policy Reform and Gunma Prefecture

Until the early 1970s, the foreign population in Japan mainly consisted of ethnic Koreans and Chinese (often called "oldcomers") that have resided in Japan since before World War 2. From around the late 1970s to the early 1980s, however, Japan started experiencing a gradual rise in the number of incoming foreigners. These foreigners that came to Japan after the late 1970s are usually referred to as newcomers and are distinguished from oldcomers (Tsuneyoshi, 2011, pp.129-138).

Figure 1: Number of Registered Foreigners in Japan by Region of Nationality⁽²⁾⁽³⁾



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2010), Ministry of Justice (2011), Ministry of Justice (2015)

Figure 1 is an illustration of the number of registered foreigners by region of nationality from 1950 to 2014. In the 1970s and 1980s, the incoming newcomer population mainly originated from the neighboring Asian countries. Furthermore, from the 1990s, newcomers from South American countries began to rapidly increase.

One factor behind the sudden rise of South Americans was the revision of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Law of 1990. The Japanese government made it possible for “*Nikkei-jin*” [people of Japanese descent] to work as unskilled labor legally under a special permit⁽⁴⁾ (Higuchi 2005, pp.4-12). The majority of the *Nikkei-jin* that came to Japan with the permit were children and grandchildren (second and third generation) of the Japanese who have emigrated to Brazil and Peru (Kajita, 2005, pp.120-126).

Gunma prefecture became one of the most popular destinations for these people due

to the labor demand in the manufacturing (especially electronics and automotive) industry (Sakai & Yumoto, 2001, pp.49-98). A lot of people came with their family members (including children) to work in local manufacturing plants. Hence, there has been an influx of foreign students in the local education system, and schools have made efforts in adjusting to the diversifying student body (Onai et al., 2001, pp.197-232).

Following sections will focus on the practices at the two public elementary schools in Gunma that are located in Oizumi town and Ota city (Figure 2), both of which are well known for their advanced educational initiatives on foreign students.

Figure 2: Map of Gunma Prefecture⁽⁵⁾



Oizumi Municipal Nishi Elementary School

Oizumi Municipal Nishi Elementary School is in a neighborhood with a lot of Brazilian ethnic businesses with shop signs in Portuguese. Figure 3 is a picture of an ethnic supermarket that sells commodities imported from Brazil. Such ethnic businesses have emerged in Ota city as a result of the inflow of *Nikkei-jin* from Brazil.

Figure 3: Brazilian Supermarket near Nishi Elementary School



Source: Personal picture

Out of the 576 students enrolled in Nishi Elementary School, 128 students (approximately 20 percent) were foreign nationals in the beginning of the school year in April 2014⁽⁶⁾ (Oizumi Municipal Nishi Elementary School, 2014a). The majority of the foreign students are Brazilians and Peruvians but the overall student body is represented by more than 10 nationalities (Oizumi Municipal Nishi Elementary School, 2014b).

The school provides Japanese as a second language education (JSL Education) and hires fulltime JSL teachers as well as Japanese teaching assistants with a budget

obtained from the local government (interview with the principal, January 30, 2015). This JSL instruction for foreign students is a popular method adopted by schools that are located in areas in which there is a concentration of returnees and foreigners (Tsuneyoshi, 2011, p.143).

In Nishi Elementary School, foreign students that find difficulties catching up to the Japanese students are sent to “pull-out” classes for specialized lessons with the JSL teachers for some part of the day. This “pull-out” method is used for Japanese and math. The School also uses “push-in” methods where JSL teachers and Japanese teaching assistants help students take regular classes by being in the classroom (Oizumi Municipal Nishi Elementary School, 2014b). Japanese teaching assistants at Nishi Elementary School are capable of speaking either Portuguese or Spanish, enabling them to translate for the Brazilian and Peruvian students (Oizumi Municipal Nishi Elementary School, 2014b).

Nishi Elementary School is distinct from most other Japanese elementary schools in that it already has 20 years of experience in foreign student education. The course curricula and materials are well prepared by teachers themselves. Figure 4 is a Japanese picture-word card used in JSL classrooms that teachers at Nishi Elementary School created to facilitate the Japanese learning process of foreign students .

Figure 4: Japanese picture-word cards used in JSL classrooms



Source: Personal picture

In addition to assisting foreign students catching up academically, teachers at Nishi Elementary School support the physical development of foreign students. Some foreign pupils find difficulty getting used to *kyushoku* [school lunch that are provided to students everyday]. In order to encourage these students to be on a healthy diet, teachers have created cards and stickers with food (mostly vegetables) characters (see Figure 5) to reward the students when they finish off their meals (Oizumi Nishi Elementary School 2014c; interview with the principal, January 30, 2015).

Figure 5: Cards and stickers to encourage healthy eating at school



Source: Personal picture

Other challenges experienced by teachers at Nishi Elementary School include difficulty in communicating with parents of foreign students who have no prior knowledge of the Japanese educational system. These parents usually are not fluent in Japanese, compounding the problem. Although the school has been taking deliberate measures to ensure sound communication, there seems to be ongoing miscommunication arising from cultural barriers (interview with the principal, January 30, 2015).

Ota Municipal Hosen Elementary School

Ota Municipal Hosen Elementary School is located 10 km northwest of Oizumi Nishi Elementary School (Figure 2). In Hosen Elementary School, there are approximately 50 students who have their roots in foreign countries (Ota Municipal Hosen Elementary School, 2014). “Roots” is preferred as an expression because there are some students who are Japanese nationals that were born to a foreign father/mother and a Japanese mother/father (interview with a teacher, January 30, 2015).

One characteristic of Hosen Elementary School is the official presence of “Bilingual teachers”. Bilingual teachers are not merely teachers who are bilingual. The roles of these teachers are more institutionalized. These teachers are officially called “bilingual teachers” under “the bilingual teacher system” that requires these teachers to hold teaching licenses from either Japan or a foreign country and be fluent in Japanese and Portuguese or Spanish (Ikenaga & Suenaga, 2009, p.19).

The Bilingual teacher system started in 2004 when the neo-liberal government under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi designated some municipal bodies as “*kozo kaikaku tokku*” [special zone for structural reform]. The government enabled local bodies to deregulate according to their local characteristics to stimulate the economy as well as to make them examples for further regulatory reform across Japan (Cabinet Secretariat Office for the Promotion of Special Zones for the Structure Reform, 2003).

Under this scheme, Ota city was designated as a “*teijyuka ni muketa gaikokujin jido seito no kyoiku tokku*” [special education zone for the permanent establishment of foreign students] (Ikegami & Suenaga, 2009, p.18). This enabled Ota city to make many deregulations for foreign students including hiring teachers without Japanese teacher’s license at its public schools (Ikegami & Suenaga, 2009, pp.18-20). To add, Ota city has divided its school districts into eight areas and have designated one to two schools in each area to set up classes dedicated to foreign students education (City of Ota, n.d.).

Since Hosen Elementary School is one of the selected schools to set up these classes, the school runs afterschool lessons in “*kokusai kyositsu*” [International classrooms] for foreign students. Hosen Elementary School has two special classrooms for the sole purpose of these after-school lessons.

The walls of *kokusai kyositsu* are covered with words and pictures of the things that the students should know in Japan, such as *Kanji* [Chinese] characters,

chronological timetable of events in Japanese history (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Wall decorations of *kokusai kyositsu* [International classrooms]



Source: Personal picture

One of the interesting findings was the importance of non-academic school subjects such as music and physical education. Teachers emphasized that a lot of foreign students found difficulty in catching up to the Japanese students in these non-academic subjects, which may make them feel discouraged. For example, in Japanese music education, students are required to play a flute-like instrument called the “recorder”. Some teachers at Hosen Elementary School have developed recorder training materials for foreign students so that they do not fall behind in classes (interview with a teacher, January 30, 2015).

Though many Japanese elementary schools in districts where there is a concentration of foreigners assist children in catching up by using push-in or push-out methods, the two schools introduced above seem to stand out in their long history of

incorporating newcomers and in their development of extensive support materials ranging from history to lunch eating.

Conclusion

This working paper focused on two public elementary schools in Gunma. At both elementary schools, teachers themselves have dealt with the necessities of foreign students by utilizing their own experiences and resources. Also, the local municipalities have developed initiatives to help the incorporation of foreign students in their school system by taking advantage of the policy change at the national level. These two schools provide cases in which the practice of teachers and effort by the local governments are facilitating foreign students incorporation.

It may be important to note here that the elementary schools in Gunma prefecture are special among Japanese elementary schools with their experience in foreign student education since they are located in areas in which there have been a long history of concentration of foreigners. In contrast, most Japanese elementary schools do not have adequate experience to manage ethnic and linguistic diversity in their classrooms.

It is also true, however, that as Japanese society globalizes, more and more schools will face issues similar to what the two schools introduced in this working paper have been encountering. Thus, these schools continue to inspire educators, policymakers and scholars in a diversifying Japan.

Notes

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(1) According to the analysis by Yamada (2008), members of the Intercultural Education Society of Japan which is a leading academic association in the field of foreigner education, has shifted their research interests from *kikokushijo kyoiku* [Education of Japanese returnees] to *zainichi gaikokujin kyoiku* [Education of foreigners in Japan] over the last 25 years.

(2) Nationality and world region in figure 2 is defined by the Ministry of Justice. In “Asia (Korea)” category, both South and North Koreans are included. In the “Asia (China)” category, both China and Taiwan are included. In the “Other Regions” category, “North America”, “Europe”, “Africa”, “Oceania” and people with “No Nationality” are included.

(3) For each year, statistics is taken from the statistics of December.

(4) There is a debate on whether the increase of *Nikkei-jin* was actually intended by the policy makers or an unintended consequence (Kajita, 2005, pp.114-129).

(5) Gunma prefecture is approximately 70 km north of Tokyo.

(6) The numbers of foreign nationals have increased up to 141 by the end of the school year (interview with the principal, January 30, 2015).

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