

Educational Supports for Immigrant Children:

Focusing on Programs by Voluntary Sectors

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Abstract

This paper is about the support programs for immigrant children in Japan, especially those offered by voluntary sectors. Public schools in Japan do not provide sufficient support regarding the immigrant children. Thus, many voluntary sectors help these immigrant children to enter or to keep up in the Japanese schools. This paper introduces one of the volunteer programs in Japan, which is called “the Bridge School Program [Niji no Kakehashi Kyoshitsu].” This program had been promoted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) from 2009 to 2014. The aim of this program is to facilitate the immigrant children to go to a public schools. In addition, it also promotes communication between immigrant residents and the Japanese local residents. This program offers Japanese language trainings, school study supports and also provides a place where the immigrant children could feel relieved. The program also puts importance to support the children’s parents. They help the parents regarding various issues they face, and try to make relationship with the Japanese local residents. Up to March 2015, 4,333 children have entered to public schools, through the support of this program. Besides the support to the immigrant students, this program also creates a volunteer network. However, this program ended in March 2015, leaving a problem to be solved because from the next year, the grant

will be provided to each local government, which will possibly lead to expand the funding gap between each local government.

Keywords: immigrant children, educational support, voluntary sector, out-of-school-children

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to introduce to the international audience, the support programs for immigrant children in Japan, especially those offered by voluntary sectors. Since the children who have different languages and cultures from Japanese tend to have difficulties in studying at Japanese public schools, it is essential for them to receive proper support. Though schools try to arrange the system for accepting them, it is difficult to provide sufficient assistance in the public school sector. Thus, many voluntary sectors such as nonprofit organizations have started to offer various programs in order to support immigrant children who have dropped out of school or to prevent their dropping out.

In this paper, “immigrant children” means children whose parent or parents have come to Japan recently (so-called “newcomers”). It contains both children who come to Japan in their childhood and children who were born and have grown up in Japan. The latter category of foreign children is increasing. Some of these children have acquired a Japanese nationality or have dual nationality.

According to the statistics of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2014, the number of children who have foreign nationality in Japanese public schools (including elementary school, junior and senior high school and other schools) amounted to 73,289 (MEXT 2014a). And 29,198 children have difficulty in Japanese language skills and need supplementary Japanese lessons. In

addition, the number of children who have Japanese nationality and have difficulty in Japanese language is 7,897. The total population increased from 35,560 to 3,885 compared to 2012. These numbers are based on the statistics of children who belong to public schools, so probably the actual population is larger.

Background

Since the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (Shutsunyuukoku kanri oyobi nanmin nintei hou) was amended in 1991, a large number of Japanese-descendants (Nikkeijin) have come to Japan as un-skilled laborers, and nowadays, many foreign laborers come to Japan from various Asian countries, such as China, the Philippines and Nepal. According to the Ministry of Justice (2014), the population of foreign residents has grown to 2,359,461 as of June in 2014. Besides increases in the foreign population, there is a trend for them to settle in Japan. This puts pressure on localities to accept them as “residents” and the existing system in localities, such as the educational system have to be adjusted.

MEXT shows that the number of elementary and junior-high school students who require Japanese language instruction is 33,184 (May 1, 2014.) Schools which have had many such students have set up special classes in which Japanese as a second language (JSL), supplementary lessons are given and multicultural teachers help them as interpreters. At the same time, the foreign population tends to be scattered, with the exception of certain well-known areas of concentration, so 75.5% of schools which immigrant students belong to have less than 5 immigrant students per school (the Ministry of Education, 2014). This data suggests that many schools don’t have expertise or incentive to deal with immigrant students.

Previous Studies

Nonprofit organizations have emerged in areas in which the school or any other

public sector has not be able to sufficiently provide the assistance necessary, in other words, where there is a need but no one to address it. The nonprofit organizations have their share of challenges, however.

Kojima(2011) researched four nonprofit organizations which help immigrant children over school age to enter senior high school. According to Kojima, flexibility, which is the main characteristic of nonprofit organizations is indispensable because children have various needs and the treatment of local governments and the system of entrance exam differ from region to region. On the other hand, solving regional differences is beyond the scope of nonprofit organizations, so he insists that we should not leave this problem up to volunteers(Kojima, 2011, pp.28-30).

On the contents of support itself to the population in question, it is generally maintained that the nonprofit organizations lack the financial and human basis which it certainly requires. Wakabayashi(2013) says that public schools must set proper educational supports for immigrant children, and that counseling on their future course and career education are also needed. Miyajima and Suzuki(2000) insist that linguistic support should be planned considering the difference between context-embedded language (Shakaiseikatsu gengo) and context-reduced language (Gakushuu shikou gengo), which were advocated by Jim Cummins. The former is like everyday language and comparatively easy to master. The latter is more difficult because it needs abstract thought, that is to say, we cannot surmise the meaning through the situation, gesture or some diagram. It is the latter that is used in school study. They say that schools generally have difficulties in dealing with the problem about context-reduced language, so support systems provided by nonprofit organizations, which have expertise, are indispensable for the present.

Problems of nonprofit organizations are mainly financial vulnerability, shortage of

staff and difficulties regarding cooperation with local governments and schools (Miyajima and Suzuki, 2000).

Support Programs by Voluntary Sectors

Many voluntary sectors (such as nonprofit organizations) make up for the lack of support systems in schools. The characteristics of them are flexibility and expertise. And also, they can find “hidden problems” by using local networks. It means that in Japan, school attendance is compulsory, but this rule is not applied to children who have another country’s nationality. So, even if the children drop out of the school system, schools tend to be less responsive than if the child had a Japanese nationality. Voluntary sectors try to find these “out-of-school-children” by working with the local government, local residents, and schools.

Figure1: Japanese school systems

| Public schools | | | Year | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|---|------------------|-----------------------------|
| Graduate school | | | 2 | Higher education | |
| University*2 | | | 4 | | |
| School for Special Needs Education | Senior high school*1 | | | 3 | Secondary School Education |
| | Junior high school | The Night Junior High School | Test of Lower Secondary School Graduation Certificate | 3 | |
| | Elementary school | | | 6 | Elementary school Education |
| | Kindergarten | | | 3 | Pre School Education |

Compulsory Education

(*1) Includes schools that offer part-time or correspondence courses.

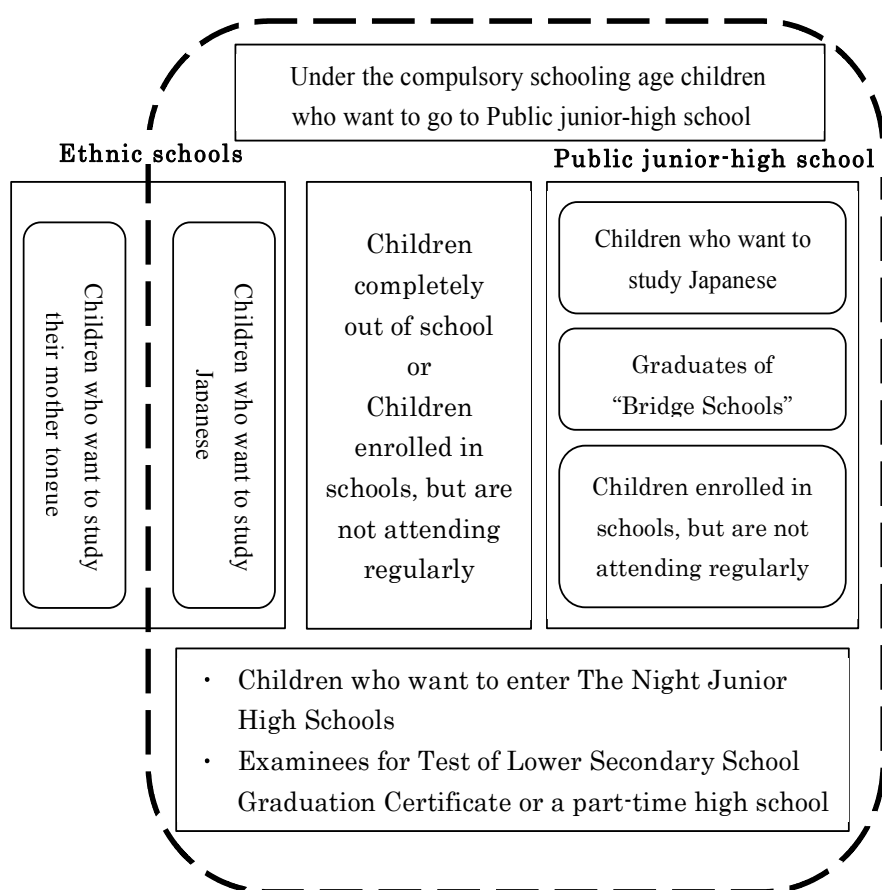
(*2) Includes Junior College [2years], Professional Training College [4years].

Source: MEXT (2015)

In light of this situation, since 2009, the Ministry of Education has promoted

support activities for immigrant children by voluntary sectors. This program aimed to facilitate out-of-school-children’s transfer to Japanese public schools. This program is called the “Support Program to Facilitate School Education for Foreign Children in Japan” (commonly called the “Bridge School Program [Niji no Kakehashi Kyoshitsu]”). The main target is out-of-school-children, but it covers a wider range of children who have some difficulty in learning in Japanese schools. An outline of targeted children is as follows (Figure2, circled by dotted line).

Figure2: Targeted children at the bridge schools



Source: Miyajima (2014, p.93)

Unfortunately direct governmental funding for this program finished at the end of February 2015, but each support activity itself continues to this day. Therefore,

introducing the contents of this program will help us understand what kind of educational supports are given in Japan to the target population. It attaches importance not only to offering opportunities to study, but also to making relationship with local residents.

Main contents are ①conduct classes on Japanese language and other subjects, ②training of their mother tongue, and ③promotion of acceptance into public schools and exchanges with the local society. This program is entrusted to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). IOM invites voluntary sectors which agree to this concept, and entrust the practical programs to them. To be exact, the Bridge Schools are not limited to voluntary sectors. Some public sectors, such as municipalities, boards of education and educational foundations took charge of this program and set the classes up using public facilities or schoolrooms.

Figure3: List of participants in the Bridge School

| Year | Public sector (the number) | Private sector (the number) |
|------|---|--|
| 2009 | municipalities(5) board of education(1) educational foundation(6) | nonprofit organization(13) incorporated foundation(3) social welfare juridical person(1) business(3) |
| 2010 | municipalities(1) board of education(3) educational foundation(7) | nonprofit organization(21) incorporated foundation(2) social welfare juridical person(1) business(5) religious corporation(1) |
| 2011 | municipalities(3) educational foundation(6) | nonprofit organization(17) incorporated foundation(2) social welfare juridical person(1) business(3) religious corporation(2) corporate juridical person(1) |
| 2012 | municipalities(1) board of education(2) educational foundation(4) | nonprofit organization(12) incorporated foundation(1) corporate juridical person(1) |
| 2013 | municipalities(1) board of education(2) educational foundation(3) | nonprofit organization(11) incorporated foundation(1) religious corporation(1) |
| 2014 | municipalities(1) board of education(2) educational foundation(4) | nonprofit organization(10) incorporated foundation(1) religious corporation(2) |

Source: International Organization for Migration (2015b)

Japanese Language Instruction and Study Support

“Bridge Schools” offers the children Japanese language instruction and study supports. If teachers are multilingual, they can help the children with study in their mother tongue. But because children come from various countries, in fact teachers manage to teach in Japanese and English, using some aides such as pictures or body language.

Giving the children a place to study is very important, because many of the immigrant children lack a desirable learning environment at their home because of

poverty. By offering them a place to study, the aim is to get the children into the habit of studying. In the class one of the nonprofit organizations entrusted with this program, teachers always ask their students if they have already finished their school homework at the beginning of the class. And if they haven't, teachers tell them to do it firstly. It can be said that teachers put an emphasis on study by themselves.

And moreover, such a place to study can be a place where the children feel at ease.

According to the staff of the nonprofit organization mentioned above, most of the immigrant children are under stress at school or at home, so the place where they are allowed to speak their mother tongue, and have the opportunity to meet other immigrant children refreshes them (interview, Dec. 29th, 2014). That contributes to their mental health and establishment of identity.

Figure 4: lessons



Support Programs Involving Parents

The members of the support programs regard connection with the parents as important. For example, according to the staff of the nonprofit organization mentioned above, they explain Japanese school system, share information about the child and advise on daily life. They also help out with dealing with complicated procedures for entering school. The purpose of this is to facilitate the transfer of the children from such out-of-school facilities to public schools, but in addition, another aim is to prevent the parents from being isolated. Foreign residents have difficulty building a relationship with Japanese neighbors, so nonprofit organization staffs try to become a person who they can

rely on (interview, Dec. 29th, 2014).

Events held in local society play an important role in making relationship between foreign residents and local residents. So nonprofit organization staff take an active part in local events, such as traditional festivals, sports festivals and school events with the children and their parents. Through these events, foreign residents can have an opportunity to meet

Figure 5: A handcraft class



Note: Not only main subjects but other ones, such as music, handcraft

local residents and become aware of themselves as members of the community. On the other hand, this aims to make local residents acknowledge foreign residents and accept them.

The Future of “Bridge Schools”

Unfortunately, the Bridge School Program finished in the end of February in 2015 because it originally started with a time limit. IOM published the final report on this program in February in 2015. According to this report, IOM recognized that the program helped the transition of many immigrant children to Japanese public schools or other formal schools, and moreover, it contributed to the development of human resources, skill and local networks to assist immigrant children.

However, the end of the Bridge School left problems to be solved because the alternative aid is to be given to local governments. It means the support systems for immigrant children depends on the initiative of each local governments which will possibly expand the gap between regions.

The condition of learning for immigrant children is still insufficient, so the

organizations which conducted the Bridge Schools program will continue their support activities. Those attempts to connect foreign residents with schools and local community are based on the idea that regards them as people who live together with Japanese as residents. With this concept, nonprofit organizations continue to be a bridge between immigrant residents and Japanese schools, society and residents.

Notes

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