

論 文

Stories of deficiency, disparity and disconnect:

Challenges of supporting language minority students in Japan

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This study examines the experiences and perceptions of governmental and non-governmental affiliated support agencies that provide Japanese language support to ethnic minority school children (*hereinafter referred to as "EMC"*) between the ages of 6 and 12 enrolled in public elementary schools in a city located in the Kansai region of Japan (*hereinafter referred to as "City M"*). One-on-one interviews lasting 40 to 60 minutes were conducted with a total of 11 participants, consisting of language learning support volunteers from both governmental and non-government-affiliated support organizations in the local area. Adopting a grounded theory approach, this study generates theories emerging from the collected data to interpret the personal voices, observations, and perspectives of a few of the local actors supporting the education of ethnic minorities in City M. This study aims to understand and explain the reasons behind the challenges of deficiency, disparity, and disconnect in providing Japanese language support. The researcher hopes to provide insight into the obstacles that need to be overcome in order to provide adequate, sufficient, and sustainable educational support for children from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds within the mainstream Japanese education system.

Keywords: ethnic minority school children, Japanese language support, non-governmental organizations, grassroots, deficiency, disparity, disconnect

Abbreviations

BOE – Board of Education

NGO – Non-governmental Organization

EMC – Ethnic Minority School Children

JSL – Japanese as a Second Language

MEXT – Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. MEXT was established in 2001; until that time the government ministry of charge of education was the Ministry of Education.

Introduction

A growing diversity in Japan

Japan has been one of the few advanced industrialized nations in the world not to openly invite migrant workers in large numbers into the country, with one reason being to preserve ethnic homogeneity and social harmony. Over the past two decades, however, the country's declining population and shortages of unskilled labour have led Japan to open its doors to migrant workers as a measure aimed at addressing the country's labour shortage. The Japanese government has been revising its immigration laws since the 1990s and has been loosening immigration restrictions to allow more foreign migrants to enter the country. The rising number of foreign nationals in Japan has brought an increase in ethnic diversity to Japanese society, and as a result, a steadily growing number of ethnically diverse children have enrolled in Japanese public schools. Transnational tendencies, international marriage, and overall globalization of the country, resulting in the creation of a more diverse ethnic population, create many challenges for multicultural families in Japan. One of the biggest challenges is the education of their children (Tsuneyoshi, 2001; Gordon et al., 2010; Zhou & Bankston, 2016). In the past 25 years, research on ethnic minority children and Japanese language and learning support has been conducted in the Kansai area, especially in prefectures where there are denser populations (Ishikida, 2005; Shimizu & Bradley, 2014).

According to recent statistics, the number of ethnic minority children in City M, however, seems to fluctuate and be relatively small in comparison with other Kansai cities.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the situation of Japanese language and learning support provision and practice for the two above-described categories of ethnic minority children in City M. While City M is known for its steadily growing international population as a result of the increase of migrant workers, overseas businesspersons, and academics, its foreign communities vary considerably in nature, which makes for some challenges in providing sufficient support to children who are enrolled in schools that lack sufficient language support programs. In this research project, the researcher examined the personal experiences and perspectives of various stakeholders in City M, including parents of ethnic minority children, public elementary school teachers, Japanese language support volunteers, local educational organizations, and government- and non-government-affiliated language support agencies.

Another aim of this study is to encourage dialogue among educational institutions, municipal organizations, and other local actors responsible for ethnic minority children's education, in order to raise awareness of current issues regarding the provision and practice of language learning support. It is hoped that this will encourage active efforts towards the training and education of

pre-service and in-service teachers at public schools and effective and equal distribution, dissemination, and administration of educational resources in order to better meet the diverse educational needs of this new and diverse generation of ethnic minority children.

Categories of Ethnic Minority Child focused upon in this study

The following two categories of ethnic minority children have come to be the main focus in this study.

1. The first category are children referred to in Japanese as *gaikokujin jidō seito* (foreign school children) or *nyūkama no kodomo* (newcomer children), commonly translated into English as “foreign children.” These are children who were born in a foreign country and have migrated with their parents to Japan. Japanese is their second language, with their first language being the mother tongue of their parent(s).
2. The second category are children who are commonly referred to in Japanese as *gaikoku ni roots o motsu jidō seito* or *gaikoku ni tsunagaru kodomo*, translated into English as “school children with foreign roots.” Two other terms commonly used are *idō suru kodomo* and *kikoku tonichi jidō seito*, translated as “school children crossing borders.” These terms describe a specific group of children who have been born and/or predominantly raised in Japan, or have lived and been raised in both a

foreign country and Japan for a significant amount of time, but who identify with a language and culture other than Japanese and therefore may require Japanese language support.

Literature Review

Terminology used to understand ethnicity and identity in Japan

Murphy-Shigematsu (2006) divides ethnic minority children in Japan into various categories, including: (1) children who hold more than one passport with dual or multiple nationalities, (2) children who were born in Japan but legally are a national of another country or were born in a country other than Japan, and (3) *nikkeijin* (non-Japanese of Japanese descent) of South America (p. 136). The Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act was revised in 1990 to allow younger generation *nikkeijin* to take unskilled work legally in Japan. This resulted in a visible increase in the number of South Americans and other identifiable types of foreign nationals, such as foreign spouses of Japanese and children of international marriages. Children who are of mixed ethnic or national background, more particularly Eurasian children, even if they are Japanese nationals, are popularly marked out by the terms *hāfu* (half) or *dāburu* (double). Widely-used and not necessarily pejorative, these appellations are a reminder that there is one kind of Japanese and an “other” kind (Maher, 1999, p. 125). Okano (2006) explains that terminology has emerged in titling ethnic differences based on government policies,

with the term “foreign nationals” in Japan referring mainly to Korean nationals. It was only from the 1980s that foreigners who were not Korean nationals began to be taken notice of. Given that the multicultural education policies were initiated for the education of Korean residents, the government was obliged to acknowledge in the policies Korean residents’ desire that their identity be recognized as distinct from that of new immigrants.

The use of these limited terms to represent ethnic identity in Japan are problematic, as they exclude Japanese citizens of non-Japanese descent: those who have taken up Japanese citizenship, and children of Koreans and/or foreigners who are granted Japanese citizenship at birth. Once a foreign national takes up Japanese citizenship, he or she simply disappears into the Japanese citizen category at that point, and his or her ethnic background ceases to exist in the official discourse. While officially they have ceased to be foreign nationals, their ethnic identity and sense of marginalization may continue to exist. The terminology excludes indigenous peoples (Okinawans and Ainu). There are no official documents detailing the ethnic composition of the Japanese population nationwide, in contrast to, for example, a country like Australia, which collects such information in each national census. A few local government policies have started to recognize the diverse ethnic ancestry of Japanese citizens in the student population, and recommend that the same policies be applied to Japanese nationals of non-Japanese descent. Daily

interactions with Korean nationals of Japan suggest that the understanding of citizenship among Japanese youth has begun to be more inclusive (Okano, 2006).

Schooling diversity in Japan: Challenges of identity, language, and interculturality

Elementary school age children make up more than half of the ethnic minority children population in Japan (see Table 2 above). According to the General School Survey conducted by MEXT, out of a total of 80,119 school-age students recorded as being of foreign nationality, approximately 49,000 are enrolled at public elementary schools. There has recently been a growing number of public schools where school-aged children who hold Japanese passports require additional Japanese language support. Though not as large in number as newcomer children, the increasing number of Japanese nationals who were found in the 2016 survey to require additional Japanese language assistance suggests that there is a growing population of culturally and linguistically diverse children in Japan. The 2016 survey found that out of 3,611 elementary schools, more than 2,500 had students enrolled who required Japanese language learning support. It has proven to be a difficult struggle to devise methods to accommodate ethnic minority children in a country where a young person’s life prospects are based on his or her success in a highly structured educational system that relies on literacy in a highly stratified and complex language (Gordon, 2006; Shimizu & Shimizu, 2006).

Ogbu (1994) argues that voluntary

minorities can be characterized by what he explains as “primary and secondary cultural differences.” He defines “primary cultural differences” as characteristics which existed before two different cultural groups came into contact, such as before immigrant minorities came into schools. “Primary cultural differences” may initially cause problems in interpersonal and intergroup relations as well as difficulties in academic work, for several reasons. One is that children from different cultural backgrounds may begin school with different cultural assumptions about the world and human relations. Cherng (2014) states, “Having social and limited relationships, particularly within the school context, may prevent minority immigrant youth from learning the norms and expectations of the mainstream” (p. ii). Another reason is that the minorities may come to school lacking certain concepts necessary to learn math and science, for instance because their own culture does not have or use such concepts. Still another problem is that the children may be non-English-speaking. Finally, there may be differences in teaching and learning styles.

“Secondary cultural differences,” on the other hand, are said to underlie many of the cultural problems that are appear on the surface, such as conflicts in interpersonal/intergroup relations due to cultural misunderstandings, conceptual problems due to absence of certain concepts in ethnic-group cultures, lack of fluency in the mainstream or majority language of the country, and conflicts in teaching and learning style (Nishikawa &

Aoki, 2018). Some students may master Japanese in a few years at the primary school level, whereas other, often older, students may take many more years of practice. These differences in the acquisition of Japanese language proficiency can be explained not only by the foreign students’ abilities, but by variations in teachers’ teaching methods and their ability to teach ethnic minority children (McCarthy, 2020). Japan’s approach to linguistic minority students is what Ruiz (1984, 2010) calls the default setting of “language as problem” (cited by Hult and Hornberger, 2016), with the consensus response of educational authorities oriented toward linguistic assimilation.

Quality and Quantity of ‘Japanese as a Second Language’ (JSL) programs and support services at public Japanese elementary schools

Gottlieb (2012) argues that the quality of JSL education provided in public schools is low or even non-existent. Without a recognized tradition of multilingualism and without the teaching resources needed in terms of staff and materials, much remains to be done. There is a lack of specialist Japanese-language teachers in schools, few to zero teacher training courses for JSL teachers offered at universities, lack of government-endorsed scales for measuring the Japanese-language teachers in schools, lack of government-endorsed scales for measuring the Japanese-language proficiency of JSL students, and no overarching language educational policy that takes into account the needs

of both JSL and native Japanese students. It is up to each local Board of Education to decide what to offer its non-Japanese students in the way of language support, and the schools that make substantial provision for such students often have to rely on a considerable degree of support from grassroots organizations. According to a 2016 survey conducted by MEXT, the number of non-Japanese children at public schools who are lacking in Japanese language skills and need extra language support hit a record of 34,335. The number, up 17.6 percent from the previous biennial survey conducted in 2014, accounted for 42.9 percent of the 80,119 non-Japanese children at public elementary schools, high schools, and other public facilities across Japan. Among the children with difficulties in the Japanese language were those holding Japanese citizenship but who were having difficulty speaking the language, because either one or both parents are non-Japanese or they had lived overseas and recently moved back to Japan (Yoshida, 2017).

While support and services are more accessible in public schools in prefectures such as Aichi, Shizuoka and Tokyo that have a large number of EMC with Japanese language needs, in many other areas, such as City M, the majority of public schools have only a few ethnic minority children enrolled in their schools who need Japanese language support, and therefore services and support are difficult to access. These public schools have no choice but to rely on the assistance from the local

community, such as volunteer Japanese language support teachers, to assist these children.

Role of the volunteer Japanese language support teacher

Volunteer Japanese language support teachers are volunteers who are registered with the City M Board of Education or municipal international exchange foundations and are dispatched to public schools (elementary, junior, and senior high schools) to provide Japanese language support to students who are categorized as in need of Japanese language support. Volunteers who work at public schools usually meet with the student(s) once or twice a week for one hour on average at the school (either in a classroom or a designated space within the school grounds) after school hours. Volunteers also sometimes meet with students at another venue outside school, such as a local citizens' community center, a university classroom, or a public rental space, after school hours or on weekends.

Language and learning support groups in City M

The organizations listed below are some of the local groups who provide support for ethnic minority school children requiring help with Japanese language and their studies at elementary school. Research participants for this particular study were from the following volunteer organizations:

1. "*Takenokono-kai*": A non-governmental organization, funded

- by the municipality and organized by a volunteers
2. “*Kokoka Kids*”: Organized by the City M International Exchange Association, funded in part by the municipality
 3. “*Himawari Kyōshitsu*”: A grassroots organization located in the prefecture of City M, organized by volunteer language support teachers, funded in part by private funding
 4. “*KPIC language and learning support group for children*”: Organized and funded by Prefecture M
 5. “*Tsunagaru-kaï*”: Organized by a student group at a public educational university in City M

The frequency of these groups’ activities range considerably (for example, from twice a year, to once a month, to once or twice a week) depending on the number of volunteer teachers available, the number of students participating, and the resources available, such as accessibility to space, teaching materials, and other incurred costs. Learning support services and programs offered by governmental agencies for ethnic minority children who require additional Japanese language and learning support have been viewed as insufficient and are in need of review. Similar to the situation in other regions across Japan, many ethnic minority families in need of additional language and learning support in City M tend to rely on support from grass-roots organizations, which often lack resources such as teachers, training,

educational materials, space, and funding (Hamada, 2018; Mori, 2018; Uchida & Nakayama, 2016). The prefecture of City M has made efforts to encourage interested individuals in the local community to become involved through a project called *Gaikoku ni roots o motsu kodomo to hogosha no basho tsukuri shien jigyo* (“Support project for creating places for children and parents with foreign roots”), in which the prefecture offers support and funding for non-governmental groups to rent space to create learning support classrooms and run learning support groups. However, despite the efforts of the prefecture and city, the number of citizens who apply for the project each year is low according to governmental officials.

With the development of Japanese language and learning support services across Japan, governmental agencies are having a hard time figuring out how to develop and improve programs and services for ethnic minority children in need of additional Japanese language instruction and learning support, while Japanese teachers at public schools and learning support volunteers face new challenges in trying to meet the needs of this diverse group of ethnic minority children. While the vast majority of teachers wish the best for all of their students, few teachers in Japan are educated or trained to work with newcomers and the special needs that they bring (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999; Sato & McLaughlin, 1992; Shimahara & Sakai, 1995, as cited in Gordon, 2006, Gordon et al., 2010). Teachers also tend to have little exposure to or experience

with ethnic minority children, and therefore often hold stereotypes that are difficult to break through. Contemporary Japan is finding that that more and more children are not fitting into the desired traditional mold of the conforming student.

Methodology

This is an exploratory study that seeks to examine the experiences and perceptions of the provision and practice of Japanese language support for ethnic minority school children between 6 and 12 years of age currently enrolled in public elementary schools in City M, located the Kansai region. The research design for this study follows a qualitative approach, being exploratory, descriptive, and predictive in nature. This study adopts qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. The researcher preferred to gather empirical data rather than statistics or measurements, in order to examine phenomena that impact the lives of individuals and groups in a particular cultural and social context. The researcher placed a considerable amount of value on the understanding of the individual voices and experiences of her interview participants, who were ethnic minority families, public school educators, international exchange associations, and volunteer support groups.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather focused, qualitative textual data, having the flexibility of an open-ended interview and the focus of a structured ethnographic survey (Balkissoon,

2018). The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Collected data was coded and analyzed thematically with the use of NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

Thematic Analysis

The researcher conducted thematic analysis, in which data from the interviews were examined to extract core themes that could be recognized both between and within interview transcripts (Bryman, 2011, p. 12). The identification of themes was done through coding each transcript, in which process pieces of data were categorized into component parts and given specific labels. The researcher then searched for similarities and recurrences in the different sequences of text in the data and looked for links between different codes. The researcher made sense of the data through coding the interview transcripts and examining and determining relationships in the data. The researcher also tried to make sense of the information with reference to various government-created documents, and past and current literature on the research subject. The collected data was classified and organized into first identifiers and then concepts. Concepts were then divided into categories, with further reduction down to core categories,

Research Participants

The researcher analyzed data collected from a group of participants representing the volunteer Japanese language support teacher. The personal backgrounds, career histories, expertise,

knowhow, and academic qualifications of the participants discussed in this research paper vary broadly in age, years of working/living abroad, JSL teacher training, and specialized knowledge for working with EMC. For example, some of the participants were retired Japanese language teachers who taught at public schools for 20-30 years. Some of them are qualified JSL educators with current teaching licenses who volunteer at Japanese language support classrooms in their free time. Some are people who, although they do not have a teacher's license, had many years of experience living abroad and are bilingual or multilingual.

Research Ethics

Letters of Consent granting

permission to use the collected data from the interviews were signed by all participants, and an ethics review was submitted and approved (on October 26, 2017) by the Research Ethics Committee the Graduate School of Human Sciences, Osaka University, who supported this research. The names of all interview participants and their relationships and affiliations with all organizations have been kept strictly confidential, and anonymity is maintained by using pseudonyms throughout this paper. The experiences, thoughts, and opinions shared by the interviewees were coded for similarities and contrasts and analyzed for current trends and challenges faced by the local actors who support ethnic minority school children and their education.

Table 1
List of Participants Who Are Volunteer Japanese Language Teachers

Participant	Role(s)	Interviewee category	Activity(ies)
10	Representative of Japanese language support group for EMC in Prefecture M	NGO	Involved in two learning support projects for EMC in City M
12	Japanese teacher at Japanese language school Volunteer Japanese teacher	NGO	Supports EMC at public schools in City M and volunteers in other learning support classrooms in the Kansai region Coordinates a support group for volunteer Japanese support teachers in City M
13	Volunteer Japanese teacher	NGO	Supports EMC at public schools in City M
14	Coordinator of learning support classroom in City M	NGO	Coordinates a learning support classroom for EMC at public schools in City M

16	Volunteer Japanese teacher	NGO	Supports EMC at public schools in City M
19	Representative of Japanese language support groups for EMC in Prefecture M	NGO	Runs learning support classrooms twice a week for EMC Supports EMC families and holds events, seminars and workshops for EMC community and Japanese support teachers in Prefecture M
20	Japanese teacher Volunteer Japanese teacher	NGO	Supports EMC at public schools in City M
24	Volunteer Japanese teacher	NGO	Supports EMC at public schools in City M
25	Volunteer Japanese teacher	NGO	Supports EMC at public schools in City M
26	Volunteer Japanese teacher (City Board of Education)	NGO	Supports EMC at public schools in City M
41	Volunteer Japanese teacher	NGO	Supports EMC at public schools in City M

Indicators and concepts

From my interviews with volunteer Japanese language teachers and language support staff, I found common threads in their conversations. The common threads

are noted below as indicators. I compiled the indicators and from their content examined their interconnecting meanings and developed concepts representing their meanings.

Table 2
List of Indicators and Developed Concepts

Identifiers	Indicators	Concepts
10, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20, 24, 25, 26, 41	Lack of awareness and apathetic attitudes about ethnic minority children and their learning needs	Ignorance and apathy about EMC and learning needs
13, 14, 16, 19, 20, 24, 25, 26, 41	Don't know how to interact or work with EMC in the classroom Don't know how to support EMC in the classroom	Lack of intercultural awareness and understanding
12, 13, 14, 16, 20, 24, 25, 26, 41	Not feeling acknowledged nor supported by the school and BOE Discontent with being labeled a "volunteer" Stigma felt by the name "volunteer"	Lack of understanding about the role of support volunteer teacher

	Feel that they are not understood Feel undervalued for jobs they actually do Don't feel supported by the school in doing their jobs	
13, 16, 20, 24, 25, 26, 41	Have no real voice in deciding how child should be taught or better supported Opinions not heard by the school or BOE	Feelings of disempowerment Feelings of frustration about role
13, 16, 20, 24, 25, 26, 41	Acting as a child counsellor for EMC	Upspoken duties and roles of learning support volunteer teachers
13, 16, 20, 24, 25, 26, 41	Being a main source of reassurance, trust, and friendship to EMC	
13, 16, 20, 24, 25, 26, 41	Helping EMC process their anxieties and worries about learning at school	
13, 16, 20, 24, 25, 26, 41	Teaching much more than just Japanese	
20, 24, 26, 41	Needing to be creative and use flexible approaches supporting EMC in their learning	
13, 16, 20, 24, 25, 26, 41	Parents are unaware of their child's learning needs and don't know how to help child at home	Lack of communication ability between school, homeroom teacher and parent
13, 16, 20, 24, 25, 26, 41	Parents feel uncomfortable to talk with homeroom teacher or school staff about their worries regarding their child's learning	
26, 41	School information is not being directly communicated to parents	
13, 20	Worries about their own abilities and skills in best supporting EMC in their learning	Requests for more training and professional opportunities and training
13, 16, 20, 24, 25, 26, 41	Desire for training and support in developing skills	
13, 16, 20, 24, 25, 26, 41	Feel that the training provided is insufficient and not entirely applicable to what they do	
13, 16, 20, 24, 25, 26, 41	Few children coming to NGO support classrooms The location of NGO support classrooms inconvenient A lack of resources and support to create NGO support classrooms and/or keep them open and running Low visibility/lack of access to information about NGO support classrooms	Concerns about creating and maintaining learning support classrooms

Generating categories

In the following, I will provide a processual narration for the first phase of coding for each of the categories:

1. Roles and responsibilities
2. Disconnect
3. Training and support for volunteer language support teachers
4. Visibility, transparency, and sustainability of grassroots language support classrooms

In doing so I will examine and analyze some of the main concepts that emerged from the initial indicators found in the interview data for this group of participants.

Roles and responsibilities

Volunteer teachers working with ethnic minority school children do much more than just teaching languages.

Participant #41 is a registered volunteer Japanese support teacher with the city Board of Education and a volunteer translator for public schools and the city. When this participant first started to volunteer as a support teacher three years ago, supporting school children who could not understand Japanese well and helping them with their language studies were the major duties. When asked about what they felt were the major roles of a support teacher, Participant #41 explained:

“One of our biggest roles as a support teacher is to encourage our students to be able to talk about themselves. I don’t think that the role of the

Japanese language support teacher is to always correct the students’ mistakes that they make when speaking Japanese and to point out what they are saying wrong—I don’t think that is right. I think that it is really important to make them talk about themselves, because some of them don’t have the confidence to speak Japanese or talk with other students in fear that they will make mistakes and will be made fun of. I let my students talk to me about anything freely. I feel that it is part of my job to help them relieve their stress.” (Participant #41)

Participant #41 goes on to explain what the role of the volunteer support teacher entails, and that the role is misunderstood:

“...language support for these children is not just support in the Japanese language. They need various types of support other than academic, such as psychological support, as well as support with particular problems. Recently, I really don’t know what we volunteer support teachers are expected to do in terms of roles and responsibilities. Despite these students requiring various types of support, our job is labeled as a mere “volunteer,” and I don’t think that this type of work should be something that just “volunteers” are responsible for.”

Other participants, like #41, voiced their frustrations that so much of what they do as a Japanese language support volunteer is not mentioned in the official

job description, but is obviously required of them when they work with these children.

Participant #41 argues that skills in intercultural understanding are crucial in the role of volunteer language support teacher:

“If the support volunteer doesn’t have competence or skills in intercultural understanding, it is very difficult to really understand and know how to work together with or support these children.” (Participant #41)

When Participant #26 started out as a volunteer Japanese teacher, they felt that they didn’t have enough expertise other than being a native Japanese speaker, and that they required additional skills in support and instruction. This participant took a course in teaching Japanese as a foreign language and also took the JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test) in order to experience taking a test of Japanese as a foreign language and to get ideas on what and how to teach Japanese to foreigners. The participant had also studied linguistics in their undergraduate years at university, and so they felt that they could refer to the knowledge they had learned about languages when supporting ethnic minority students. This participant mainly provides support with helping students with reading and writing.

“I receive directions from the city Board of Education to go to certain schools in the city to offer support,

and the students that I am responsible for supporting are from various backgrounds and have different levels of Japanese ability. I try to support their Japanese language learning in a way that does not discourage them from learning Japanese, but so they become interested and enjoy learning.” (Participant #26)

Many support volunteer teachers mentioned the need for expertise in not only knowing how to teach Japanese language, but in understanding how to teach Japanese as a foreign language to young children with various ethnic roots and backgrounds in particular.

Disconnect

The category labelled “Disconnect” emerged from the many comments which described the lack of awareness of, knowledge about, and support for ethnic minority children, their parents, and learning in general. Other comments expressing miscommunication, apathy, and ignorance towards to the roles of the support volunteer teachers were also strongly voiced by the participants in the interviews.

Lack of awareness about roles of volunteer support teachers

In talking about the labelling of their positions as “volunteer,” many volunteer support teachers questioned the actual stance of the board of education and organizations who are dispatching volunteers, in particular these organizations’ perceptions about the actual roles, responsibilities, and type of duties of the

volunteers.

“The name of this job has been labelled as ‘volunteer,’ but the content of this role should not be seen in a light-hearted way or as an optional service that is something easy to do. This learning support role should be perceived as a required type of education that is provided to the child. It is a vital for these children to receive this type of support.” (Participant #26)

The name ‘volunteer’ doesn’t seem to justify the role, duties, and high level of responsibility that we actually have in what we do. (Participants #13, #24, #25, #41)

They (Board of Education) don’t think that our job is so important. The name of the role seems frivolous with little meaning. The words ‘supporter’ and ‘volunteer’ have different meanings and connotations. The BOE’s perception and the volunteers’ perception of the range and the scale of this role are very different. (Participants #16, #24, #26, #41)

The overall tone of the comments from all the volunteers was that they feel that what they do at the schools, their duties, and their responsibilities are greatly misunderstood by the school, parents, and the community in general. They feel undervalued in what they actually do. There is a discrepancy between what they are not allowed to do by the BOE and the school, the actual

expectations of both the school and parents, and what they actually need to do in order for the children to benefit from the support.

We sometimes work with students in a space that is not even a classroom, more like a storage room-like closet.... I am not allowed to use a proper room to help the student. The school should offer volunteers more access to school resources. (Participants #12, #26)

“...while some schools allow volunteer teachers access to the textbooks, other schools won’t even give us photocopies of the unit in the textbooks.” (Participant #10)

...the schools won’t allow us to borrow the textbooks when working with the students, so I have to either borrow from another source or buy the textbooks and pay the photocopying costs on my own.... (Participants #13, #20)

I wonder why they (the school) think we are at the schools... Do they realize that we are here to help their students? (Participants #24, #25)

The attitudes of the schools as described above may be due to the lack of available resources at the school, such as room availability and spare copies of textbooks to lend out. However, it is questionable whether or not the school is aware of the role of the volunteers, their purpose, their duties, and what resources that need to be available to them in

order for them to do the job that the schools themselves have asked the BOE for assistance with.

Schools' lack of understanding about learning support

According to the *Gaikokujin jidō seito ukeire no tebiki* [Guide for acceptance of foreign children students] (MEXT, 2019b, revised version), it is the responsibility of the leadership team of the school (which usually consists of the principal, vice-principal, and head teacher) to implement and ensure a smooth and solid system of Japanese language support at their school. While some schools are making increased efforts to develop their Japanese learning support services and educating their staff about intercultural awareness and understanding, some public schools are still slow to introduce or create systems to accommodate the increased number of ethnic minority students.

“Schools have their own particular and different positions on learning support. Some think that providing ‘support’ is solely for providing enough support in the Japanese language only up to the point where the student can understand a basic level of Japanese for their studies. Some schools do not believe that the support is needed on an ongoing basis for the students’ overall learning both in language and in their other subjects...” (Participant #41)

EMC parents' lack of awareness about their children's learning

Participant #19 explains that some EMC parents lack awareness when it comes to understanding the learning needs of their children.

When it comes to choosing between study or extra-curricular activities, some parents tend to prioritize the extra-curricular over academic studies. As a result, the academic performance of the child suffers and they don't improve. EMC parents cannot even imagine what their children are experiencing (how they suffer or get frustrated) in the classrooms and therefore do not understand the importance of and urgent need for these support classes. (Participant #19)

Participants who volunteer at Japanese language support classes mention that there are obvious differences in improvement between children who come to the support classrooms every week and those who only come irregularly. Some EMC parents may not have enough awareness about what is needed for their children's learning and it is very challenging to increase their awareness about the situation of their child and their learning at school.

Regarding the reasons behind parents' apparent lack of awareness about their children's learning needs, another factor could be that schools are not doing enough to support the parents. I strongly feel that if these parents do not receive advice about how to help

their children with their studies at home, they may feel at a loss as to what they can do to help their children develop academically. Many parents of ethnic minority children are not fluent enough in Japanese to communicate with the school on a daily basis, nor do they have the confidence to speak with the homeroom teacher or understand all the daily notifications distributed to students and parents (Noyama, 2007; Uchida & Nakayama, 2016; Tokunaga, 2019). I also found that there are some parents who work irregular hours (late-night shifts), and therefore may not have the time to help their children with their studies at home in the daytime.

Participant #6 talks about the different expectations and responsibilities of mothers concerning their children's education:

“It is traditionally common in a mainstream Japanese family for the mother to help their children with their studies, and for the mother to be the parent responsible for their child's education. However, in the case of a family from overseas, where the mother is foreign and doesn't understand Japanese very well, she is unable to help her child with their homework at the same level as a Japanese parent, and it is a very challenging task for them. The schools are placing an overly high expectation on the foreign parents.” (Participant #6)

While it may be the usual norm in Japan for the mother to be responsible for the education of the child — helping

the child with daily homework, attending parent-teacher conferences, regular communication with the homeroom teacher, etc. — expectations, responsibilities, and roles differ depending on the country and culture the family comes from. In the case of the ethnic minority family, there may be misunderstandings between the school and the parents in regard to expectations and roles of the school and parents.

Training and support

The majority of the participants covered in this section strongly expressed their desire for more training in providing Japanese language support to EMC and creation of a network in which fellow teachers can exchange information, support one another, and share experiences and knowhow.

I would like to receive training to learn the skills that we actually need in order support the children in their learning (intercultural understanding, support, etc.). (Participants #13, #16, #20, #24, #26, #41)

“Teachers should be made to go through some sort of training where they are taught about the situation of ethnic minority children and their families, and receive some sort of training in intercultural communication skills.” (Participant 26)

“The Board of Education provides one training session for Japanese language support every three months. The content of the training is about the

Japanese language support system, but topics such as 'how to support' or content such as developing skills as a language supporter are not covered. These training sessions are not just for support volunteers, but also for general school staff and teachers, so the content is not so specialized for support volunteers, and I feel that the content doesn't really match what the volunteers need in terms of training." (Participant 41)

Support group for volunteer support teachers

Participant #12 created a private support group for volunteer Japanese support teachers. The group holds meetings 2-3 times a year to exchange information, do professional development activities, invite guest lectures to share their expertise and knowledge, and support one another.

Many of the volunteer teachers mentioned the lack of support from the board of education and schools in terms of providing training for them in developing their language support skills, such as a network or support group fellow support teachers could use to exchange information and learn from one another. As far I am aware, there is no such support group for these volunteer teachers to access other than the support group that Participant #12 created and maintains.

Lack of awareness of EMC learning needs and of a learning support system

Effective communication between the school community, learning support staff,

and parents is recognized as one of the fundamental and most important roles of the school's leadership team (head teacher, vice-principal, principal) and homeroom teacher (MEXT, 2019b). However, some of the participants that were interviewed feel a disparity between schools that provide sufficient language support and schools that don't, in terms of attitudes toward language learning support for EMC and actual priority and importance placed on the implementation of language support.

Themes such as frustration, disempowerment, and schools' lack of integrity are expressed in the words of these language support volunteers when speaking about the schools' leadership teams, the BOE, and the current learning support system.

"There is just not enough time for providing learning support at the school. It is only provided one or two hours a week, and it is just not enough, we cannot provide sufficient support with this limited time." (Participant 26)

"It is really the homeroom teacher who is the key person for ensuring that the student is receiving sufficient learning support. However, the homeroom teachers are just too busy, don't have any expertise or knowhow about Japanese learning support, and do not make it a priority in their jobs at school. I think the biggest cause for this is that each school does not make an active effort to establish some sort of Japanese learning support system...."

Ethnic minority children should be perceived as our society's precious future. However, the Japanese government doesn't have this perspective." (Participant 26)

It is usually the school principal who is responsible and makes the final judgement of who does and who doesn't receive language support at school. According to MEXT, the principals are the ones who make the final decision. Participants expressed doubt as to whether principals possess the right knowledge and expertise in order to decide and make informed decisions.

Procedurally, it is the school that requests the support from the BOE and then the BOE responds to it. If the school themselves cannot correctly determine which children require Japanese language support at their schools, the system that is intended to support the child fails them. The child loses by not receiving learning support, through no fault of their own. There are many cases where EMC do not receive the support they need due to the homeroom teacher or principal not recognizing their needs. In these cases, no request is made to the BOE for Japanese language support and the child is left undetected and unsupported.

The participants below expressed their concern about the system in place for EMC and the limited amount of time children are eligible for learning support.

"The learning levels and needs of these students are all different. I don't think that it is effective for a child to receive

only three months of the basic Japanese learning support and then be put in a classroom with mainstream Japanese students. I think that the volunteer learning support teacher should be allowed to work with the child from the beginning of the support to the end of the learning support, and not just halfway through the support. That way we could measure and assess the rate of their improvement and better understand what they do and don't understand... The BOE needs to improve the learning support system so that they can meet the individual learning needs of each and every child. They need to develop a system which improves the learning ability of the child." (Participant #12)

Participant #41 comments that each school is different in their procedures about the write-up and follow-up of the reports that the volunteer teachers are asked write each time they meet with a student. While there are some schools where the head teacher or homeroom teacher respond in a timely manner and provide feedback to the volunteer teachers, there are some schools that don't provide any feedback or follow up:

"There is one school I work at where I do not receive any contact or feedback from the homeroom teachers about my report regarding the student. The school seems to rely too heavily on the volunteer teacher to support the child in their learning." (Participant #41)

Volunteer support teachers seem to question the schools' commitment to their ethnic minority students in terms of advocacy for their learning and social well-being.

A more positive example was provided by Participant #19, a retired elementary school Japanese language teacher who runs two language support classes a week in different locations. This volunteer language support teacher maintains connections with the heads of schools at various public schools by personally attending monthly meetings with principals, and delivers flyers personally to directly communicate with schools about their learning classrooms. Participant #19 is good example of a model system where there is a key person responsible to act as the coordinator and a "go-between" to connect the public school, the municipality, international organizations, and the EMC community.

Participant #19 seemed quite confident about the language support classes that they and their volunteers are running. There were many teacher volunteers with a variety of expertise and knowledge: from in-service and retired school teachers to nurses and counsellors. Though the learning support classroom is not in the center of a main city, children and their families attend the classes on a regular basis.

"There is no public school in my region that does not know about my language support classes. I go to the monthly meetings for public school principals, announce and advertise my

classes, and personally deliver my flyer to schools and affiliated associations and public centers." (Participant #19)

Visibility, transparency, and sustainability of grassroots language support classrooms

The participants expressed concerns about the disparity among schools in terms of the implementation and practice of learning support. While some schools seem to invest in the idea of inclusive education and provide support to the homeroom teacher and sufficient resources to both the child and the language support teachers, some schools still show no interest or concern about such investment or provisions.

"Depending on the school, the level of awareness and interest in Japanese language support varies. Motivation and enthusiasm towards implementing a Japanese language support system at their school also varies. It is up to the school management at each school (principals and vice-principals) to decide the level of language support provided at the school, and how much to budget for Japanese language support." (Participant #19)

Japanese language support volunteers should not be the individuals solely relied upon to provide this type of learning support; there needs to be a proper system created in which people with specialized expertise and knowhow are responsible for doing this job. (Participants #13, #20, #24, #25, #26, #41)

“I hope that in the future, Japanese language support will not only involve older and retired people who just provide language support, but people who are of a younger generation and are envisioning how Japan will be in the next 20 to 30 years. I hope that there will be a system where future school teachers will be properly educated and trained to be able to both teach and support these students at school.” (Participant #41)

“In order to provide Japanese learning support that is effective, school teachers need to be supported, volunteers need to be supported, and the parents of EMC need to be supported. Ethnic minority children should be perceived as our society’s precious future; however the Japanese government doesn’t have this perspective.” (Participant #26)

Providing the right “support” for teachers, volunteers, and parents all ties together when it comes to establishing and maintaining an effective and sustainable support system for EMC. If this support is not provided to all the actors in this system, the quality of support will not be high. This overlapping theme of support and connections is important to consider in developing theories for this research. Strong interest in and commitment to establishing systems and procedures for providing support across the board are required.

Challenges in establishing Japanese language support classrooms for EMC

The establishment and maintenance of Japanese language support classes run by NGOs for ethnic minority children has proven to be an ongoing challenge for some of the volunteers who were interviewed. Accessibility, operating costs, human resources, and low visibility are just some of the challenges NGOs face in establishing learning support classrooms. While some grassroots organizations receive funding from grants provided by corporations, private organizations, and universities, other groups may not be aware of their eligibility to apply for such private grants, or even aware that such funding exists. Some volunteer groups may be reluctant to apply for private grants due to lack of networking and information exchange between grassroots organizations.

Participant #14 runs a language support classroom for EMC (in elementary, junior, and senior high school) once a month in City M. Originally a learning support classroom created for children with ties to the Philippines, due to the recent low numbers of children coming to the monthly class, the organizers have now opened the class to EMC from all nationalities and backgrounds. This participant shares their worries about whether or not the language support class could be continued to be run for the next few years to come. The participant also expresses doubt and frustration about information about the support classroom not reaching the right channels to reach those individuals who

need it.

“The number of children who come each month has dwindled each year.... I feel sorry when so many volunteer learning supporters show up, but only one child does.... I try to make sure the flyers advertising this class are distributed to public schools in the area but.... (deep sigh)” (Participant #14)

Though the learning support classroom is advertised on the internet, through SNS, and at a few international organizations around the city, including the Board of Education, the participant was not sure if, when, or how information about the learning support class is actually reaching public schools and other affiliated organizations.

Dwindling numbers

Despite the number of EMC who are suspected of requiring some type of Japanese language support in the general region where Participant #14's class is held, the number of children who are coming to the class has fallen dramatically throughout the years.

“The number of children who come each month is not constant; sometimes we have many, sometimes we have only a few. There are some times when no children show up. However, I know that I just have to be patient and keep running this class.” (Participant #14)

NGO members like Participant #14

who run volunteer language classrooms know that there is a growing need for these kinds of learning support classrooms throughout the city. However, the reason for the low turnout at some of these learning support classrooms is not a lack of demand for the learning support classrooms; it is due to their low visibility in the city because of ineffective dissemination of information. While some EMC parents may check on the internet for language support classes, information about these classes is usually spread only by word of mouth and from the schools. Regarding the dissemination of information, it is not clear whether or not school officials or even homeroom teachers know exactly who is the target for these classes and who should be encouraged to attend. In addition to the vague understanding by the schools regarding the purpose of the learning support classrooms, homeroom teachers are overworked and overwhelmed, and another extra piece of information for them to follow through on, something unrelated to their teaching duties and responsibilities in the classroom, may be placed low on their priority list or even disregarded.

Accessibility

Another challenge is that learning support classrooms are often in locations that are inconvenient or too far for children to commute to by themselves. This is a challenge for both the children and their parents.

“The place of the class is about 10 minutes away from the nearest train

station, so it is a bit far away for children to come on their own. It would be ideal if I could find a place closer to the center of the city to hold the class.” (Participant #14)

Some municipal international exchange organizations are experiencing the same challenges with the location of Japanese learning support classrooms. Depending on where the children live, the location of the class could be too far and/or complicated to get to for them to travel on their own. As some of the learning classrooms are located in inconvenient locations, the cooperation and commitment required of parents to take their children to these classes is in some cases a considerable hurdle for some ethnic minority families who work during the times the classes are being held, or for those who do not understand why their children need extra language support.

“...the municipality should take it upon themselves to offer spaces for NGOs and NPOs to run language and learning support classrooms and should be renting out rooms at local community centers at a low cost. There would be more EMC and their families committed to attending learning support classrooms if they were located in more convenient places.” (Participant #19).

Many public facilities like those Participant #19 mentions above, such as municipal citizen community centers (*iki-iki shimin katsudō sentā*), children community

centers (*jidōkan*), and public nursery facilities (*hoikusho*), have vacant rooms and could offer spaces on days and at times when they are not being used. Offering learning support classes at these local public facilities throughout the city would be convenient for children and their families; it would make it easier for the students to attend classes regularly. This would decrease the burden on the parents, making it easier for them to encourage their children to attend and make a commitment to their child’s learning. The local community would also experience an increase in awareness and understanding of ethnic minority children in their municipality, and this would hopefully have a ripple effect by increasing the awareness of diversity within the city.

Understanding, cooperation and commitment

“The importance of receiving language and learning support needs to be understood by the children themselves, their parents, as well as the volunteer Japanese teachers in order for them to provide support that is effective and worthwhile.” (Participant #19)

Participant #19 maintains that it is essential for both the supporter and receiver of the support to understand, cooperate, and commit to learning-support provision in order for the service to be successful. Moreover, providing a safe and inclusive space for EMC and their families is important not just for supporting children with their learning; it also creates a space they can go to feel a sense of belonging and community,

which will contribute positively to motivation and encourage both social and mental well-being.

Conclusion

This research paper has examined the voices of volunteer Japanese support teachers at the grassroots level who have experienced working with ethnic minority school children and their families. These teachers are on the frontline of Japanese language learning support for the new generation of ethnic minority school children with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The lack of accessible teaching materials at the schools, time limitations, and restrictions in the interaction with students keep volunteer support teachers from providing a sustainable and productive service to the children and their families. The low level of awareness and understanding about ethnic minority school children and about the provision of Japanese learning support by some public schools also contributes to volunteer teacher's frustrations. Nonetheless, these selfless volunteer teachers are highly-committed educators who offer their experience and knowledge, and use creativity and flexibility to accommodate each child and his/her particular abilities and learning needs.

Recruitment Strategies

Criticism of the lack of recruitment strategies — for example, lack of incentives for recruiting volunteer support staff — was voiced by many research participants. Volunteers commented on the unrealistic expectations of the tasks

and duties they are expected to perform, and about how authorities take advantage of volunteers' goodwill and selfless attitude in providing support for little remuneration. One may ask whether it is in fact volunteerism that is taking place, or labor exploitation of these individuals, many of whom are retired female teachers.

Reviewing the term “Volunteer”

Calling the language support system a “volunteer” system, may be termed that way in order to justify the lack of remuneration provided. “Volunteers” are not trained professionals per se; it is not necessary that they be fully trained or have expertise, because they are “volunteers,” and therefore do not have formal responsibility. All of this makes many of these language support programs an unsustainable resource, which cannot be depended on to provide continuing and reliable service and whose work is not governed by commitments or rules or regulations. The volunteer language support systems need to become more sustainable in order for all EMC who need these language support services to be able to receive them properly and indefinitely. Support staff need to be acknowledged for their hard work, commitments, and efforts, and given greater incentives to perform this work.

Greater visibility, accessibility and sustainability

Many learning support classrooms run by grassroots organization are not widely visible. They are often not

advertised or announced at schools or other venues, so word does not reach many EMC who require these services. As a result, few EMC come to these learning support classrooms, and volunteer teachers do not come because there are no EMC who come. A learning support classroom service cannot be sustainable without students coming to receive the support, or teachers who are providing the support, and so these services may end up being cancelled or closed. Sustainability of learning support classrooms is dependent not only on the visibility of the service itself, but also on strong connections between the learning support classroom coordinator and school authorities such as principals and head teachers, to inform homeroom teachers and EMC parents of such available services.

Physical accessibility to support learning classrooms is also an issue, as many are located in places not so easily reached by public transportation. More support from local communities to open unused rooms at more easily-accessible community centers, nursery schools, and youth centers would be helpful, as would the offering of discounted or waived rental fees for vacant classrooms or spaces.

Greater sustainability of the organizations and systems that provide language learning support to EMC would help to ensure high quality and accessible learning support for children who need it, while also offering more benefits (such as increased transportation reimbursement and remuneration) and incentives (such as professional

development opportunities) to potential volunteers and current volunteer support staff. The volunteer systems and services need to be reviewed and remodeled in order to reflect the importance of the work volunteers do, and the time and efforts they put into the job. For it to be worthwhile for people to register, they should receive something back from it — for example, professional development and training, or financial benefits — rather than just self-satisfaction. The volunteer system also needs to be run and maintained in a more systematic way, so that current volunteer supporters can mentor newer volunteers and pass on their knowhow and expertise.

Increased understanding and Awareness

There also needs to be an increased understanding among all educators (including school teachers, principals, board of education, parents, and the local community) about the roles of Japanese language learning support teachers and the purpose their activities. Deeper awareness and understanding could be promoted through multicultural and bilingual education programs implemented in schools for students, teachers, staff, and parents. JSL instruction and intercultural training and workshops would be beneficial for local providers of both informal and formal language instruction in order to give them the opportunity to gain required skills and knowledge that would benefit EMC and schools for many years to come. Supporting not only children from foreign countries but also children with foreign roots who have Japanese nationality,

these volunteer Japanese-language teachers are working towards the same goals: to be of assistance and assurance to the child, to help provide the tools necessary for them to become successful in their learning at school, and to be advocates for inclusive education for all ethnic minority school children.

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