

# The Grass is Always Greener? Autoethnography of a Year in the UK Parenting Bicultural Young People with Learning Disabilities

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## Abstract

This paper has two main aims. The first is reflecting on my experiences parenting “mixed” culture young people, including two with different types of learning disabilities, during a year on leave in the UK, in terms of intersections of ablism and racism, and against the backdrop of my experience parenting them as a white foreign woman in Japan. The second aim is to share my experience with fellow parents of “mixed” children with disabilities or neurodiversity. My method is to analyze my own experiences through the year and reflect on my prior experiences in Japan. As one might expect, for *me* in the UK, the children’s disability/neurodiversity impinged on my experience far more than the children’s Japanese background. Despite some stressful times and high expenses, the year was a positive experience for all of us. After years of feeling like an outsider even from my children, sharing elements of my ethnic/racial identity as normal was a joy.

## Introduction: “Mixed” Culture Parenting and Intersectionality

Many parents in intercultural/interracial marriages between westerners and Japanese in Japan hope to raise their children to be bicultural, so both parents can enjoy passing on some of their cultural sensibilities, and to equip their children to function independently as natives in either parents’ home. This is

not easy for many parents in mixed marriages, given the costs of traveling or attending international school, and the challenges of maintaining networks from both parents’ cultural heritages. When the children are atypical or have disabilities, the barriers may increase as mainstream settings exclude children outside “normal” range of ability.

In our family’s case, the children attended local Japanese schools, and I made opportunities to share my ethnic heritage outside school. For years I dragged my children to Saturday mixed roots English club, aiming to build a collective identity and peer support among fellow “mixed” kids. But participating was a struggle as much as a support network. The teachers struggled to include my children and meet their learning needs. I was careful not to take more than a fair share of the teacher’s attention, and I stayed in class to support while other parents socialized. Still my daughter was slow and still my son was wild. Just sharing a mother tongue or racial category did not seem enough to expect fellow parents’ acceptance of behavior outside group norms. On visits to grandparents, schools in the UK were glad to offer short-term placements to my children without diagnoses; but for my daughter who obviously needed more support, the school gate was closed.

Meanwhile, although privileged as white foreigner in Japan, I still face the racism of being seen as less than a fully adult member of the community (Arudou 2016). An undercurrent of everyday racist

microaggressions (Pierce 1970) leaves me feeling unsure of myself and my right to assert my sensibilities in public or share them with my children. And practically, simply being totally outnumbered in an ocean of Japanese-ness disempowers me from building shared assumptions, behaviors, and joys – culture – with my children.

For example, in Japan, soon after my son's diagnosis I arranged a meeting at his local primary school, to report, to request support, and to explain our planned year in the UK. With a flash of inspiration, perhaps recalling something from some "multicultural" training, my son's teacher warned me living overseas would damage his identity: "He's 100% Japanese!" My breath froze. My stomach tensed. I took a few slow-motion seconds to reel. What on earth was she saying? Wasn't I his mother? How could this school teacher feel entitled to claim my child's identity/belonging and exclude me?

I use the theoretical framework of intersectionality to help get a handle on how different aspects of our social identities interact to affect our lived experience (McCall 2005). Each person can be seen as belonging to a number of social categories, according to gender, race, ability, class, sexuality and so on. For each category and in each social context, there is a normal "unmarked" or privileged range and an abnormal, marked or stigmatized range. For example, as a category men are more socially privileged than women, the majority ethnic group is usually more privileged than minorities, and so on. As each person belongs to a number of categories, they may be privileged in some ways and oppressed in others. Some people, like women with disabilities, are subject to multiple layers of disempowerment. Further, since the categories themselves - "race" for example - are to some extent socially constructed, understanding how they are produced, experienced and reproduced (Glenn 2002) may help us change hurtful and limiting discrimination (hooks 1984).

Studies of intersectionality usually focus on experiences of people facing multiple types of discrimination. In my case, in Japan I am privileged compared to some foreign residents because I am white and middle class, with the opportunity to relocate out of choice, with my children. But as a foreigner, a woman, and a carer for a girl with a severe learning disability and a neurodiverse boy, I face the stigma of raising a child

who is unlikely to be economically productive, and structural inequality in terms of extra demands for me to provide care because their needs are considered "special."

In this brief article, I explore intersections of disability and race in my experience parenting my Japanese-British children at "home" in the UK for a year, in comparison to my experience in Japan. Much of the discussion centers on the children's schools. The analysis is based on reconstructions from my journal notes, with added interpretation and reflections to set the notes in context – an autoethnography. This approach enables me to focus on my lived experience of certain intersections between ablism (discrimination against people with disability) and racism (Hills and Bilge 2016; Bowleg 2008).

### My Daughter's Schools

When I told my daughter's school she would be spending a year abroad with me, the administration had to consult with higher ups in the prefectural Board of Education. There was no precedent for a student with an intellectual disability studying abroad. Managed by the prefectural government, the school was told to follow the same rules as other prefectural schools. I was given a choice of returning my daughter Mio to the same cohort or of taking a gap year and returning to the cohort one year younger. Although we are a first for the school, no one has suggested I am doing something negative – spoiling Mio's identity or damaging her education. Perhaps she is already completely outside "normal" that living abroad makes no difference to her life chances in Japan. She will still need significant support and live in "special" work and residential settings.

Seven months before we actually arrived in the UK, I contacted the local special school to begin the process of applying for a place. I expected this would secure a placement upon arrival. In fact, though, funding constraints meant the authorities did not put out a call for a new staff member until we physically arrived, and it took a further six weeks before Mio was allowed to attend. With limited local support network, the best I could do was to keep her safe watching DVDs. Though no one deliberately discriminated against us, this system meant my daughter was excluded from compulsory education, and I was partially excluded from employment.

Finally, Mio's place materialized and she soon settled into school. Assigned to the life skills class, her curriculum focused on learning to access community resources such as public transportation, the local leisure centre, and shops. The school was set up to teach and take care of her, and after the initial long wait, I had no cause to struggle. Mio seemed to be supported, valued and learning within this segregated context. Her mixed ethnic background seemed to have minimal bearing on her school life, although the school made a point of telling me the additional aide they had hired had a Japanese sister-in-law... In a class of about eight young people, one other was clearly a child of eastern European migrants, and one was mixed race. For me, as long as Mio went happily and came back smiling, it was just a relief to delegate her care and education for six hours a day.

Mio needs supervision and some help when she is out and about. She would need as much support as a young child to participate in social activities, and her favorite movies are those aimed at young children. Both the school and regular after-school activities I arranged for her were segregated "special" venues for people with learning disabilities. My experience with her in Japan and in the UK is, trying to keep up with a mainstream group makes an activity frustrating for us. And in some cases, organizations simply refuse to let her take part, citing lack of staff. For example, I tried to set up horse riding in the UK, but the local stable refused, signposting us to "Riding for the Disabled" an hour away. I understand this exclusion and self-segregation is a type of ablist discrimination. I wish it were easier to be included in mainstream activities. But as Mio has grown older, I have become accustomed to it, and prioritize what is fun for Mio.

To sum up, in the UK, Mio's disability/support needs were the ostensible reason she and I had to wait a long time for the local authority to release funds for a compulsory school placement. In the end, the placement was supportive, and had her moving around town, learning to live there. But that the funding system resulted in such a long period out of school is discrimination based on disability. In the UK, I did not feel Mio's mixed race was an issue, and as a white person raised in the area, I was not made aware of my race.

## My Son's Schools

In my son's case, before arriving in the UK I had recently managed to get a costly English language assessment with detailed recommendations. I submitted this along with his application to the local mainstream school, assuming school and health service professionals would follow the doctor's orders. Dyslexia is a household word in the UK, and various supportive therapies appeared to be available through the National Health Service. The school itself had "pastoral coordinators" supporting students' school life outside academics. And the school's website noted English as a second language support. To discuss my son's needs, I set up a meeting with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), and we agreed on supports to be set up at school. I felt confident that between the school, the health service and myself, my son would be fine. And somehow he got up most mornings and set off on time, properly dressed, and with most of the items he needed.

But it was a rocky first few weeks. He climbed up on the roof of the house. He played computer games for hours. He had stomachaches and headaches. He would stay in bed all day. Or kick things and threaten me.

At my request, the pastoral coordinator set up an appointment with him after school, to check up on how he was managing. The date was on my calendar. But that day he came home at the usual time. The pastoral coordinator phoned me to say he had "deliberately avoided" her and was "resistant." How did she know that, I wondered. Wasn't her job to support, rather than judge? I asked my son about the appointment. His eyes stretched wide and he smacked his forehead. "Oh!! I forgot about that!" This time he was clearly telling the truth. Maybe I had the wrong idea about the pastoral coordinator's role? Or were my expectations completely unrealistic? The bottom line was she was not providing the support my son needed to settle in.

Near the end of term, I had a follow-up meeting scheduled with the SENCO. I prepared carefully and looked forward to getting ready for the next school year. Then the night before the meeting, he emailed me to cancel. After my hard work arranging my schedule and finding care for my daughter! The SENCO explained, another student was in crisis, and as Safeguarding Lead he had to prioritize that. Understandable. What I could

not understand, though, was the SENCO's refusal to reschedule a meeting to avoid a crisis for my son. He was struggling emotionally, and the school was not yet providing any of the supports recommended. It seemed neither school nor health service was prepared to help until a child was in crisis. And I would not let a crisis happen.

I considered our alternatives, and started looking at private schools, which cost more money than I have ever spent before. My son and I visited St. David's College, over two hours' drive from home, set up to include neurodiverse young people in a mainstream setting. I worried about splitting him from his siblings, but the environment at home was not working for any of us. A few weeks before the new school year was to start, I took the high stakes gamble of enrolling him, sending him away to boarding.

It was a good decision. The next time I met my son, a month after the start of school, he was calm and cheerful. As he left the boarding house for his first weekend back at home, he fist-bumped a slew of dorm mates. His teachers were positive. He danced with me in the kitchen. He listened and chatted on the long drive between home and school. He gave me a hug goodbye. I missed him hugely, but I could see that small classes, positive support, strategies for reading, clear routines, and plenty of exercise – whatever it was, St. David's was enabling him to learn and thrive. His neurodiversity was not an issue at St. David's, presumably because it was accepted and supported.

Conclusion: The Grass is Always Greener?

In Japan as a foreigner and a mum of children with disability/neurodiversity, I experience a combination of intersectional exclusions. However, at least since growing accustomed to my daughter's being, I *feel* more excluded on the basis of race/ethnicity than of ablism. In contrast, in the UK, the school systems disadvantaged me and my children because of their disabilities, but I *felt* the privilege of sharing the dominant race/ethnicity.

With my daughter, in both countries, disability had a stronger impact than race/ethnicity on my lifestyle. In both countries, my daughter's school and many of her social settings are segregated, as mainstream

environments are not prepared to include her. It may be that she is so obviously non-normal that people do not see race as a factor in her difference. For my neurodiverse son, in Japan "disability" and race combined to impact my experience, but race was what made me *feel* excluded. At his second school in the UK, an autism-positive private college, both my son and I felt included and valued. But the huge fees meant it was open only to economically privileged families.

I admit, I was surprised by the barriers to accessing disability support in the UK. I had read about austerity's effects on people with disabilities, and the financial and academic pressures on mainstream schools. But reading about public awareness raising and disability policy, I assumed my children would be better supported in the UK. Experiencing the situation (at least in one part of England), I've come to appreciate the supports available in Japan – after-school care and timely financial support without having to fight. The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence?

In this analysis I reflected on my *experiences* of intersectionality in parenting my children in the UK and Japan. I have not adequately considered how the categories of disability and race are reproduced in either context, and this remains an area for future research.

Finally, a word to fellow parents: my children's disability and neurodiversity have probably meant extra challenges to raising them biculturally. In particular, the past year in the UK was not easy for us. But we gained a lot. For me, what stands out are the joys of sharing with my children, speaking our mother tongue together, and feeling they see me as a real person, not a foreigner.

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