

Ethnic Minority School Children, Multicultural Awareness and Language Learning Support Challenges: A Brief Overview of an Ongoing Research Project

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This research project aims to discover and examine the current situation faced by ethnic minority children attending public elementary schools and learning support organizations in a city in the Kansai region of Japan. This study examined in particular some of the trends and challenges for public elementary schools, governmental and non-governmental support organizations who provide language support for these children.

Significance of Research

Known as the “Ancient capital of Japan”, Kyoto is internationally known as being one of the most popular tourist destinations in East Asia, and has been receiving wider attention as an important hub for cutting-edge academic research, the arts and entrepreneurship, and being a favorite for expats and their families for having a safe and quiet environment (Kyoto Research Park website, 2016; Kyoto Chamber of Commerce and Industry pamphlet, 2008). As a result of the city's popularity, the prefecture has experienced a drastic growth in immigrants - foreigners coming to live long-term in Kyoto to raise their children. The majority of these children are enrolled in the local public schools throughout Kyoto. In the past 25 years, research on

ethnic minority youth has been conducted in the Kansai region, particularly in prefectures such as Osaka, Kobe and Shiga, which have dense populations of newcomer immigrant youth (Ishikida, 2005, Shimizu & Bradley, 2014). The ethnic minority youth population in Kyoto, however, are sporadic and are few in comparison. In comparison to other cities and prefectures neighboring Kyoto, the number of foreign residents is low with its foreign population spread throughout the prefecture. As a result, many types of learning and cultural assistance and services offered by governmental agencies for ethnic minority children are insufficient. Ethnic minority children and their families in Kyoto therefore mostly rely on support from grass-root level organizations, who often lack resources (e.g. teachers, educational materials, space, etc.) and funding (Minutes from 2nd Multicultural Policy Meeting, Kyoto City Board of Education, 2016). This ongoing research aims to discover some of the challenges faced by the growing number of ethnic minority children attending public elementary schools in Kyoto City and their accessibility to educational support services. This research study hopes to be a resource to public elementary schools, governmental and non-governmental educational organizations in Kyoto City in encouraging awareness about some of the current issues concerning the educational needs of the growing population of ethnic minority elementary school children in Kyoto City. This

study hopes to be a resource for the city, public elementary schools and support organizations in becoming more aware of ethnic minority school children, improving the accessibility of learning support services, the training for public elementary schools and language learning support organizations.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative grounded theory approach to search for some of the common trends and challenges faced by ethnic minority school children, educational institutions, international foundations and language support organizations. The researcher chose to gather experimental data rather than statistics or measurements, in the attempt to examine phenomena that impacts the lives of individuals and groups of a particular cultural and social context. For this study, 40 - 60 minute one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 43 participants, made up of 19 parents of ethnic minority school children, 2 representatives of international associations, 3 officers from municipal boards of education, 5 educational staff from Kyoto public school elementary schools, 14 Japanese language support volunteers representing either governmental and grassroots support organizations. Open-ended questions asked in the interviews included ones inquiring about their accessibility of current learning support services and resources at their local public elementary schools, awareness and understanding of the existence of ethnic minority school children at school and their language learning needs, and the efficacy of current learning support services and resources.

Results and Discussion

In analyzing the data from the interviews, the common themes that were found in the interviews in particular were the following: 1) insufficient services for language support in Kyoto City public elementary schools; 2) public school teachers' lack of awareness (in particular homeroom teachers, head teacher, principals and other decision makers in the school) of the existence of ethnic minority children at school and about their learning and emotional needs within the school environment; 3) Insufficient experience and expertise at schools for teaching ethnic minority children; 4) Lack

of learning support groups for school children, ethnic minority support groups and organizations in Kyoto; 5) Outdated and unreliable statistical data created by the city on number of ethnic minority school children needing Japanese language support in Kyoto city public elementary schools.

The findings from the interviews have proved to reaffirm that while there may be ample systems and policies in place in some particular public elementary schools of the city, there is definitely a quantity and quality insufficiency in other areas. Kyoto City is continuing to work on improving the efficacy of its learning support systems and policies, and it is the author's hope that this municipality will prove to its citizens that they are truly committed increasing by not only intercultural awareness but providing sufficient educational programs and systems for ethnic minority children in the city.

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