

A CALL FOR DIVERSITY TRAINING FOR CHILDREN IN JAPAN

Michelle Henault Morrone¹, & Yumi Matsuyama²

¹Nagoya University of Arts and Sciences (Japan)

²Nihon Fukushi University (Japan)

Abstract

Growing diversity in Japan's population has not been matched by changes in attitudes regarding "difference." The old notion of racial and cultural homogeneity still holds sway in Japan, especially within the official education system. This has led to a disconnect between classroom realities and government policies which do little to address the changing needs of an increasingly diverse student body. For historical reasons, and as a result of more recent demographic trends, there are now large numbers of Koreans, Brazilians, South Asians and other foreign nationals in Japan. Many of these foreign residents have children attending Japanese public schools that were never intended to educate anyone but Japanese students. Moreover, marginalized groups such as members of the LGBTQ and special needs communities are gaining an increasing presence both in public awareness and within the public school system. Despite these changes, changes that are only accelerating, the official school system has done little to foster changes in attitude toward people who are different from the idealized norm. In addition, studies show that these sorts of attitudes can become fixed at a very early age, effectively at the preschool level. This has led us to produce a children's book intended to serve as a form of diversity training for young children. In this way we hope to encourage more open and accepting attitudes among those who will grow up in an ever more diverse Japan.

Keywords: Japan, diversity training, inclusion.

1. Increase of foreign residents

In the past thirty years, the number of foreigners in Japanese society has increased to the point where they now constitute approximately 2.89 million people, 2.3% of the population. The largest numbers of foreign residents are from the following groups:

1.1. Koreans: *Zainichi*

Korean refers to Koreans (and their descendants) who immigrated to Japan before 1945 while Korea was still under Japanese rule. *Zainichi* means short-term residence, although the group has been here for nearly four generations. In the 1980's, some Koreans emigrated for economic reasons; they are not considered *zainichi*. There are approximately 600,000 Koreans residing in Japan as "special permanent residents."

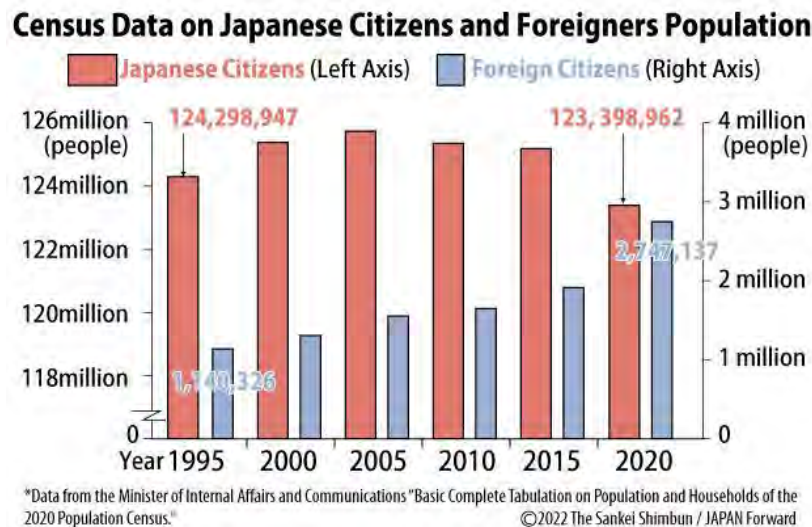
1.2. Japanese-Brazilians or South Americans

In the 1990's the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act was revised to allow those with Japanese ancestry access to work in Japan, mostly in in factories and low-paying, difficult jobs. Approximately three generations stayed, and the number of Brazilians alone is now roughly 300,000.

1.3. Southeast Asians

Japan's rapidly aging population has created a labor shortage that has spurred an increase in foreign workers, now frequently from Southeast Asia. Southeast Asians in fact are the fastest growing group at present. As the graph below indicates, revisions regarding visa and work status started bringing in more workers from Southeast Asia in the mid-2000's, especially as care workers for the elderly. In 2019, a further revision of immigration law was aimed at bringing in more unskilled workers for 14 different industries suffering acute labor shortages.

Figure 1. Japan Ministry of Internal Affairs graph that shows a sinking native population and a rising tide of “foreigners,” who in fact still only represent about 2 percent of the total population.



2. Increase in representation of marginalized groups

2.1. LGTBQ population

Until very recently, the LGTBQ movement had been largely invisible in Japan. Current trends have led to greater public awareness of LGTBQ issues and an increasing emphasis on LGTBQ rights. Discussions of these topics are beginning to impact the education system regarding children’s rights, dress codes, gender-neutral bathrooms, etc.

2.2. Special needs students

The last 10 years have also seen a growing awareness of those with learning disabilities. Traditionally the physically or mentally challenged were segregated in special schools and generally kept out of public view. Now, in part due to falling birthrates, there is more talk of mainstreaming such students, both to increase their presence in society and to take advantage of the empty classrooms in many local schools.

3. Slow response to change

3.1. Changing needs, unchanging attitudes

Despite these many changes in the makeup of the student body, the education establishment in Japan has been slow to respond to the changing needs of students who are often no longer as typical as the students the system was designed for. Schools confronted by “different” students tend either toward segregation or total assimilation, without regard to the educational drawbacks of either approach.

3.2. International, global, and unique

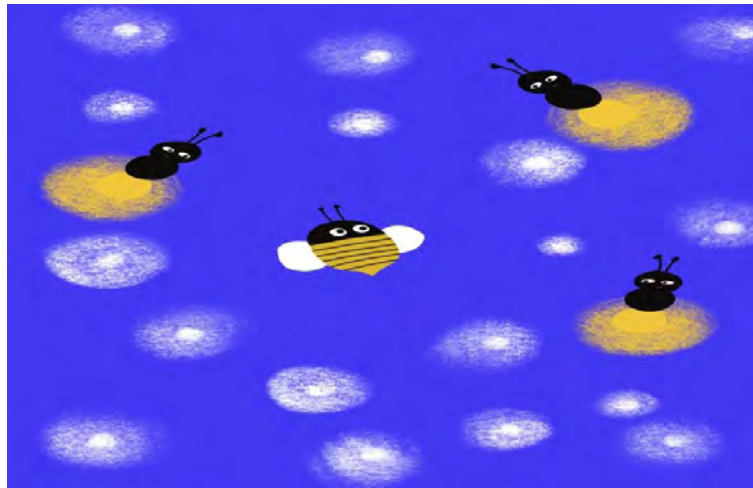
Japan’s Ministry of Education has issued vague directives to encourage Japanese students to learn more about the world outside Japan. But regional schools have the actual responsibility for creating programs that illuminate what is meant by “internationalization,” “self-expression,” or “critical thinking.” Many primary schools use one school lunch a month to highlight the cuisine of a foreign country, or set aside class time to occasionally meet some of the foreigners in the community. The introduction of English classes from third grade is also intended to foster self-expression and global awareness.

Yet research suggests that children pick up their attitudes about differences in gender, race, and culture before they enter primary school. A study asking children to choose preferences for playmates suggests that by three years of age, many children are already forming ideas about “difference” regarding gender; by five years old, these preferences are quite set. (Kinzler et al., 2011.) This tendency to categorize at an early age is especially pronounced in Japan where notions of homogeneity work to create a highly developed sense of what is normal and what is aberrant.

3.3. Attitude shaping

This suggests that efforts to shape attitudes toward diversity and inclusion are more likely to be successful the earlier they are begun. With this in mind, we believe a children's book aimed at the preschool child and read by parents or preschool teachers provides an important tool for fostering more open attitudes toward difference. To this end, we have created the book *Bibi the Bee*. Our hope is that in producing this book (in multilingual form) we can begin to move the conversation about diversity in a positive direction, helping children learn to accept and appreciate the diversity that will soon become only too apparent to them.

Figure 2. *Bibi the Bee*, Text by Michelle Henault Morrone and Yumi Matsuyama; Illustrations by Cecca Morrone.



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