

Chapter 8

Heritage–Language Education for Japanese Children Living Abroad and the Impacts on Their Ethnic Identity: What Are Their Learning Objectives for the Japanese Language?

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ABSTRACT

With consistently increasing globalization, the number of Japanese children living and receiving education abroad continues to grow. Previous studies have compared the Japanese-language abilities of children studying Japanese abroad to those of children living in Japan. However, the author contends that the backgrounds of children studying Japanese abroad vary greatly, as do their learning goals. The former do not necessarily want to learn the same language skills as children who study in Japan. Japanese-language education for children living overseas requires that students understand what they want to achieve in terms of their language ability. This chapter focuses on children who have lived and been educated in multiple countries other than Japan; it discusses their Japanese-language learning goals and the environment needed to support those goals. It also examines their sense of ethnic identity as Japanese and how this relates to their upbringing and language-learning experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has consistently progressed, and the movement of Japanese people overseas has also expanded. As of October 1, 2019, the total number of Japanese nationals living overseas was 1.41 million, according to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It increased by 1.44% from 1.39 million in

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the previous year and recorded the highest number of all time. Among them, “long-term residents,” or Japanese nationals who do not have permanent residency status in their country of residence, numbered 891,473, and “permanent residents,” who have permanent residency status, numbered 518,883. Some do not distinguish between these two groups:

If you think of a “long-term resident” as a temporary resident who lives abroad on the premise of returning to Japan within a fixed term, and a “permanent resident” who does not intend to return in the foreseeable future but leaves options to return to Japan eventually, the difference between the two has become ambiguous in recent years. (Nukaga, 2013, p. 3)

However, for families, especially for children’s Japanese-language education, there is a vast difference between the two (i.e., between those who know when they will return to Japan and those whose plans are wide open). When considering Japanese-language education, the language proficiency goals set by a child and the expectations of their parents can be very different.

The number of compulsory school-aged children¹ in families staying abroad for the long term is 84,253 as of April 15, 2018, compared to 82,511 in 2017 (Japan Educational Overseas Services, 2018). These figures do not include children outside the ages of compulsory education or children from families who relocated permanently overseas. Therefore, the total number of Japanese children educated abroad is likely much higher than these estimates suggest.

Children who move from Japan with their parents live in a different culture. “Japan is one of a very few countries with such a high proportion of people of one language and one culture; 99.3 percent of the population is of Japanese origin” (Grosjean, 2001, p. 6). Although the number of foreigners residing in Japan has been gradually increasing in recent years, Japan is still largely a country of a single language and culture. For children raised in such a place, living in a country with a completely different culture and speaking a different language is an experience that cannot be described simply as “culture shock.” Rather, Japanese children living abroad create a culture that transcends national boundaries between Japan and the country in which they live; they live and learn in that culture in Japanese and using the local language.

BACKGROUND

Japanese-Language Education for Children Living Abroad

Using different languages and growing up while learning them has a large impact on the formation of children’s personalities. “How growing out of Japan’s social and cultural environment affects personality formation is a subject of research” (Minoura, 1984, p. 7). The roles of environmental influence and instructional methodology have become important issues in learning Japanese while living abroad.

The Japanese government has established educational institutions, such as Japanese schools and Japanese-language supplementary schools, for children living overseas. However, many such children do not attend these schools and are enrolled only in local or international schools. Both Japanese-language supplementary schools and Japanese schools are positioned as educational venues for children who have Japanese nationality and are assumed to be returning to Japan (Sato, 2010). However, in recent years, children of internationally married families who do not have Japanese nationality have enrolled in Japa-

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