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## **The AmerAsian School in Okinawa**

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## Abstract

This working paper offers a case study of the AmerAsian School in Okinawa. Located in a district with a heavy U.S. military presence, it is an alternative school which attracts international children, especially the Amerasian children in Okinawa. The paper traces the origins of the AmerAsian School, in itself an attempt in empowerment. The paper reviews the School's "double" education, which tries to affirm the "double" existence of the children attending there. The efforts to provide a "double" education is reflected in the School's language policies (the use of both English and Japanese), and its educational content; the example of social studies is provided. The latter half of this working paper reviews some of the implications from the research on Amerasians. The paper illustrates the way in which Amerasians have been discussed in the context of social difference, stigmatization and marginalization, and how that is changing. This is an example of a school in Japan which is related to the construction of a multicultural society.

*Keywords:* Amerasians, Okinawa, AmerAsian School, double identity, international children, multicultural coexistence

## The AmerAsian School in Okinawa

### **A School for Amerasian Children**

There are some educational institutions in Japan, which, by their existence, send out a multicultural message. The AmerAsian School in Okinawa is such an institution<sup>1)</sup>. The AmerAsian School in Okinawa is an alternative school which tries to address the needs of a specific group of children--mixed-race children, especially the Amerasians in Okinawa.

The term Amerasian was popularized by the Noble Prize winner Pearl S. Buck, who advocated for the improvement of this population. A broad definition of "Amerasians" stands for children born from an "American" and "Asian" couple, but the term tends to be used for children of U.S. servicemen and local Asian women. Even with this latter narrow definition, Amerasians exist not only in Japan, but anywhere with a history of an American military presence, including Vietnam, Korea, Thai, and the Philippines (Shigematsu, 2002, ch.2, pp. 59-90).

In Japan, the history of the Amerasians is intertwined with the history of Okinawa. Okinawa occupies a distinct place within Japan. Before the late 19th century, it was an independent kingdom, Ryukyu kingdom, flourishing in trade, and developing a culture of its own. Today, it is a popular tourist spot, boasting aqua blue shores, resort hotels, and exotic tourist sites of a kingdom in the past. At the same time, Okinawa was subjected to intense combat during World War II, and with the end of the War, Okinawa was occupied by the United States. Though it was returned to mainland Japan in 1972, 73.9 percent of the U.S. military bases in Japan remain on this small island, constituting more than 18 percent

of Okinawa <sup>2)</sup>. The city in which the AmerAsian School resides, Ginowan City, is a city with a large U.S. military presence. The Marine Corps Air Station Futenma lies in the city's center, and Camp Foster is located in its northern parts.

The AmerAsian School traces its roots to five mothers of Amerasian children who came together in 1997 to form the "Study Group for AmerAsian's Educational Rights" (Amerasian no Kyoikuken o Kangaeru Kai) (Noiri, 2010, p. 93). The principal, Ms. Midori Thayer, is herself the mother of Amerasians who attended the school she and others founded in 1998. Today, the school accepts "international children, regardless of nationality, who require multicultural education in Japanese and English" <sup>3)</sup>.

Why did the mothers use the term "AmerAsian" (notice that the "A" in "Asian" is capitalized to emphasize the school's message) instead of other terms used for this population, such as children with dual citizenship or "halves" (used to describe children of mixed race/culture)? The reason seems to be that: (1) this term, for the first time, gave these children in Okinawa a name to call themselves, (2) the term AmerAsian allows these children to transcend boundaries of nationality, and to come together, regardless of whether their nationality is Japanese, American, Thai, or Vietnamese. This also supports the concept of a "double" identity promoted by the school, that these are children with a dual cultural heritage (American plus an Asian), and also allows Amerasians to send a message to society as a whole (Terumoto et al., 2001, pp. 160-161).

Figure 1. A Science Class (2014)



high school upon graduation.

### **Double Identity Education**

The motto of the AmerAsian School is "double education" (*daburu kyoiku*), in other words, an education that will allow the Amerasian children to take full advantage of their double existence (Noiri, 2014, p. 35). Acquiring both English and Japanese language ability has been emphasized by the School from the beginning, and several reasons are cited by the staff. First of all, without English, these children would not be able to communicate with their father. There is also the expectation of Japanese society that anyone looking "American" would speak English, and English helps these children form a more positive image of themselves (interview with the principal, Dec. 11th, 2014). It is also important to add that the expectation of speaking English is not just a matter of image, it is seen as tied to chances in the labor market (Noiri, 2010, p. 95). A "double" education for the staff, however, signifies something more than just language acquisition, as is evident from the use of terms such as "educational rights" and "multicultural education" in explaining the mission of the school (interviews with staff, Dec. 11th, 2014).

In a way, the School already promotes a mixed-culture experience by its composition. Students meet children in similar situations as themselves. Visiting the AmerAsian School, it is possible to observe the children code-switching, depending on which language—English or Japanese—better enables the particular group of children to communicate among themselves or depending on the context (fieldnotes, Dec. 11th, 2014).

According to the social studies faculty, an example of the social studies curriculum brings in both points of view from Japanese and Americans, on, for example, controversial issues such as the meaning of World War II (see Appendix for a lesson example).

### **Double Language and ICT**

As noted above, the acquisition of both English and Japanese is seen as a basic condition which helps the children to choose from his/her double cultural heritage. Therefore, though the language of instruction, especially in the lower grades, is more English than Japanese, the use of Japanese is brought into the curriculum, and more so as

Figure 2. Lunch Time



Figure 3. Developing a Double Perspective



Note: The social studies teacher explains the concept behind the supplementary social studies material he developed to promote a double perspective.

the child matures and has to meet the realistic needs of entering Japanese high schools.

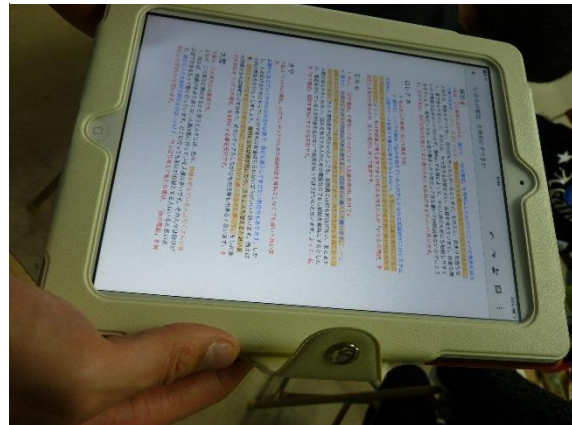
Compulsory education in Japan ends at the lower junior high school level. To enter high school, therefore, students have to undergo some kind of selection. As the age of the students goes up, the staff start to prepare students for the entrance examination for high school, and for life beyond the AmerAsian School.

Figure 4. Japanese flashcards



Note: Pupils prepare for a Japanese test. Each pupil has a different pile of words to remember, depending on his/her Japanese language level.

Figure 5. Tablets



Note: The use of tablets to coach students in taking the entrance examination tests.



With the hiring of an Educational Technology Director, and donations of tablets for each student, there is a new emphasis on ICT.

Figure 6. Presentation in Japanese Using ICT



Note: A group of children present in Japanese using ICT

### **Some Implications from the Research on Amerasians**

The focus of the research on Amerasians in Japan varies, and we have identified several lines of discussions below.

1) First, there is the research on the social construction of difference in relation to this group. Research point to the fact that Amerasians *look* different from the majority of ethnic Japanese, which influences the perception Japanese have of this group of children. Amerasians are identified as "different" the moment people look at them, and their "American" appearance is linked to the expectation that they speak English, are foreign, etc. This also means that, as a visible cultural minority, even if the children try to become totally "Japanese," whatever that means, they tend to be treated as not quite so (Terumoto et al., 2001, pp. 165-167). This then links to issues of identity formation.

Such constructions of difference are social and context-bound, however, and are subject to change. Thus, it might be said that this line of research implies the need for

Japanese society to acknowledge cultural differences, to become a society in which cultural minorities can "be themselves" (*arinomama*). Such a society would allow, by definition, the construction of multiple identities. Phrased as such, the message that is being sent out here is shared with research of other ethnic and cultural minority groups in Japan. At the same time, compared to ethnic schools targeting the needs of a certain ethnic group (e.g., Brazilian schools), the AmerAsian School distinguishes itself in that the School starts from the assumption that children there are "double" (Noiri, 2014, p. 35).

2) The second focus of research places the Amerasians in the context of stigmatization and marginalization. Amerasians in the Okinawan context are often identified with the U.S. military presence in Japan, and with the fact that Okinawa is shouldering the bulk of the military load within Japanese society. The story here is about double marginalization. The marginalization of Okinawa within Japan, and the marginalization of Amerasians in Japanese society.

Though this second line of discourse intersects with the first, there are differences as well. The first line of discussion is based on the social constructions of difference. The socially visible boundary of difference between Amerasians and the majority Japanese lies in their physical "American-ness," though there are differences in what constitutes "American-ness" (e.g., skin color). An "American" look, and the assumption that if you look "American," you would be able to use English, are linked to stereotypes--being exotic, modern, etc. which can work in one's favor, not just the reverse, depending on the situation. Whether they reflect the reality is another matter. The second focus of Amerasian research however, is not just about social constructions of difference, but about the formation of negative stereotypes and stigmatization. The history of Japanese Amerasians in this

context, is often discussed in terms of negative social labeling and falling through the legal cracks of both the father's and mother's nations. Identified with the presence of the U.S. military in Japan, they are described as subjected to anti-military sentiments and negative images which come with the military presence. Thus, it is not surprising that this line of discussion leads to an anti-discriminatory human rights message. Here, the AmerAsian School is seen as a bottom-up effort in human rights, to ensure a transnational education, to develop self-esteem, and to empower the Amerasian children (Noiri, 2010).

The research also reminds us how complex the construction and usage of images is. Media and other representations of Amerasians have been accused of reinforcing stereotypes (Gage, 2007, p. 89; Terumoto et al., 2001, p. 118). One is reminded of the criticisms which were targeted at the representation, or should we say, the misrepresentation, of "poor starving children" of the South to solicit support from the affluent North donors.

3) More recently, scholars have pointed to the improvement of the factors which were presumably at the basis of many of the above-stated negative stereotypes. For example, scholars have noted that though the presence of U.S. bases remains controversial, the local standard of living in the area has risen, the status of local women as against the U.S. servicemen has risen, and women have more choice and power (e.g., regarding occupation, childbearing) (Shigematsu, 2002, p.195). The importance of English in Japan has risen, opening up new occupational opportunities for Amerasian children who speak the language. Now, life histories reveal that in some cases Amerasians are envied because they are mixed-race children (with "American" looks, one might add), which may actually hide the hardships that come with being born "double" and being associated with the U.S. bases

(Noiri, 2014, pp. 44-45; Noiri, 2010, pp. 94-95).

Images are socially constructed. As the context changes, so will the images. Discourse, movements, policies, etc. will influence the direction of the images. Today, as Japanese society diversifies, the message the AmerAsian School is sending out, overlaps with the messages that are sent out by other cultural minorities and indeed by the society at large. Children of international marriages between ethnic Japanese and foreign nationals or Japanese of foreign descent, also face the issue of multiple identity (Shigematsu, 2014). The message of equity and recognition of difference is one which is shared with many

Figure 7. Rows of Prizes to the School



Japanese nationals who are in less-advantaged positions. Global citizenship and the appreciation of diversity are often cited in the mainstream reforms as traits that should be cultivated in all Japanese.

In a society in which most cultural minorities are not visible at first sight, being a visible minority is in itself distinctive. The rows of prizes the

AmerAsian School has won, perhaps attest to both the distinctiveness and universality of the message being sent out.

## Notes

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(1) <http://amerasianschoolokinawa.org/>, retrieved Jan. 2014.

(2) Military Base Affairs Division, Executive office of the Governor,  
<http://www.pref.okinawa.jp/site/chijiko/kichitai/25185.html>, retrieved Dec., 2014.

(3) Taken from the School's homepage, [http://amerasianschoolokinawa.org/about\\_me/about.html](http://amerasianschoolokinawa.org/about_me/about.html), retrieved Dec. 22, 2014.

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Appendix:

An Example of a Social Studies Lesson for Junior High School (Double Education)

The following is an example of the School's social studies staff to advance "double education," or education for double existence. A guest speaker, himself an Amerasian, was invited to talk about his experiences in class.

The image shows two pages from a lesson plan. The left page (109) features a section titled 'ゲストの紹介' (Guest Introduction) with a photo of a man and text describing his background as an Amerasian. Below this is a section 'B.再婚のこと' (Remarriage) with text about his parents' remarriage. The right page (110) features a section 'A.ゲストのプロフィール' (Guest Profile) with a photo and text about his birth in Okinawa and his career. Below this is a section 'D.中学生・高校生時のこと、仕事のこと' (Middle and High School, Work) with text about his education and work. The pages are annotated with handwritten notes and labels in Japanese.

Source: Kitaueda 2014, pp. 109-110

The faculty of social studies at the AmerAsian School have been developing junior



high school learning material for double existence since 2011. According to the social studies teacher, the teachers tailored the material to meet the needs of the Amerasian students, using the appropriate level of Japanese, etc. (Kitaueda, 2014, pp. 88-89). The school started to invite Amerasian guest speakers after the teachers realized that these children did not have many Amerasian role models around them (Kitaueda, 2014, p.89).

The lesson above, invited an Amerasian diet member in a unit describing democracy. The guest speaker talked about his experience growing up in Okinawa, attending a regular high school, and eventually becoming a municipal diet member at the age of 42. The guest speaker notes that he became a politician so that he could revise the rules of the country, such as those pertaining to nationality. The guest speaker also describes the Japanese political system, human rights, that the law is made by the representatives of the people, etc., and gives an example of a case in which he was involved in changing the law.

In order to assist students, each page has a place in which difficult Japanese words are picked out and listed, so that the students can write down the English translation (e.g., origin, environment). In the same way, key terms in Japanese social studies (e.g., aging, lower and upper house) are also listed, and explanations are provided on a different page. The material encourages students to ask questions on what kind of rules exist around them, and what would happen if such rules did not exist.

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