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**Schools Supporting the Migrant Population
in Japan:**

The Night Junior High Schools

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Author's Note

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Abstract

Historically, the Japanese government has been reluctant toward stabilizing educational measures for the foreign-born population. A substantial number of foreign-born students drop out of school, and/or do not continue on to education beyond junior high school.

This paper focuses on the Night Junior High Schools (hereafter: NJHS), which are known as institutions that accommodate one-third of the migrant students within the total student numbers in these type of schools (Asano, 2012). As the NJHS are labeled as institutions that accept students who are beyond the compulsory school age, these schools have served as safety nets for the migrant population, who might have been at risk of not attending any form of educational institution.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the historical role of the NJHS and how they are publically discussed as institutions in Japanese society. This research shows that there is growing attention toward NJHSs in the political discussion after 2013, and this may have a profound impact on Japanese society, although there still remain many challenges.

Keywords: Night Junior High Schools, Migrant Students, Japanese Education, Migrant Education

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Introduction

The migrant population⁽¹⁾ in Japan continues to have disproportionate high rates of absence from school (Sakamoto et al., 2014), and/or not entering school beyond the junior high school level when compared to the total Japanese population (Miyajima, 2014). However, the general political stance towards building a comprehensive education policy to support the migrant population has been noncommittal. In Japan, the students who do not have Japanese citizenship are not legally obligated to attend public schooling. Reflecting this situation, a certain number of migrant students are deprived from any form of education during their compulsory school ages.

Night Junior High Schools (hereafter, NJHS) are known as a type of school which are often run in the evening period within the public junior high schools. These schools are specifically for students who are over the age of 15, who did not have a chance to earn a junior high school degree. Due to the fact that many migrant students find difficulty in keeping up in the daytime classes, these institutions accommodate a third of the migrant students within the total student numbers of these institutions (Asano, 2012). Therefore, this paper focuses on these NJHSs, which play a critical role in the Japanese public school system for the migrant population in Japan.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the historical role of the NJHS and how it is currently discussed as institutions in Japanese society. For doing so, this study hopes to contribute to examining the future possibilities and challenges that lie among the current discussion.

The Japanese School System and the Night Junior High Schools

Who Does the Japanese Public Education Sector Serve?

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (mombukagakusho: Hereafter, MEXT) states their general policy of “accepting a foreign child⁽²⁾ in public compulsory education” as below:

A foreign child is not obligated to attend schooling in our country. However, on the basis of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights or other laws related, when a child requests to attend public compulsory education, the child is guaranteed to attend school free of charge, along with the other Japanese students.

The student is guaranteed the same opportunity of education as the Japanese people, including the opportunities to receive free textbooks and school financial aid⁽³⁾.

(Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2015a)

The term “A foreign child” stated above generally connotes a child who does not have Japanese citizenship. They are not legally obligated to attend education. The government officially states that they will only be accepted if they make a request. This statement reflects the distant standpoint, from which the Japanese government approaches the issue of education for the migrant population. In fact, the Japanese government has not yet laid down fundamental regulation that specifies educational measures for the migrant population. It is largely left up to the local government and schools, whether or not they would carry specific measures to consider students with

foreign backgrounds.

What Institutions Support the Students with Foreign Backgrounds?

There are several possible pathways that a child with a foreign background might choose for education. The first choice is to attend “mainstream” schools⁽⁴⁾. According to a recent research conducted by MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), there are 71,545 foreign students who currently attend public school as stated for 2013 (MEXT, 2013). Within that population, 27,013 students need special support for Japanese language education. The practices conducted at schools largely depend on the local education board and the individual schools. If either decide that there should be some special considerations, they provide special classes according to their budgets.

The second choice is to go to an ethnic school, such as Chinese, Korean or Brazilian schools. These schools accommodate such students whom their guardians preferred instruction through their homeland language, or students who had experienced difficulty in keeping up with the “mainstream” schools. Some ethnic schools are sorted as "Miscellaneous Schools" (kakushugakko) in the educational law category. This somewhat awkward definition comes from the term "Article One Schools" (ichijo ko) which is a name derived from the School Education Act (gakko kyoiku ho) Article 1, which allows their position as a mainstream school, while sorting the others as miscellaneous schools. These mainstream schools, which are stated in article one, are expected to follow the regulations and standards that are outlined by the Ministry of Education, and receive a certain amount of grant money in return. In contrast, the miscellaneous schools receives much less money. Some ethnic schools are labeled in the miscellaneous school category; the same rows of schools used for hairdressing schools or driving schools. Many ethnic schools do not even have the status of school. Therefore,

they receive no assistance from the Japanese government, except for some amount of assistance from the local level.

Since the conditions the Ministry of Education requires are sometimes contradictory to the ethnic schools' unique purpose, some ethnic schools do not invest in the effort toward being admitted as a mainstream, article one school (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations, 2012). Also, some ethnic schools do not apply for getting approved as a miscellaneous school, because they do not know the advantages they could gain in return, and/or because they lack information about the necessary procedures to get approved (Y. Kojima, 2010). Though from the students' standpoint, these schools require tuition, so the students do not have a chance to enter these schools if they cannot afford to pay. Because the student numbers largely depend on economic circumstances, some ethnic schools faced severe financial trouble after the financial crisis in 2008 (A. Kojima, 2013).

The final choice is to not attend to any type of institution during their school ages. Although there is no comprehensive report that shows the total number of those not attending school, some scholars estimate that the percentage is 10% of the migrant school-going population in Japan (Sakamoto et al., 2014); which is approximately 10,000 people⁽⁵⁾. Another fact is that the migrant students' high school entrance rate is noticeably low compared to the rate of the total population of Japan. It is estimated that the migrant students' high school entrance rate is less than half the rate than that of the Japanese population (Miyajima, 2014). Although high school education is not a period regulated as compulsory in Japan, nearly a hundred percent of the Japanese enter high school. Therefore, today it is not easy to find employment options that do not require at least a high school degree. So absenteeism during school years, and the extremely low rates of entrance to education afterward, is a crucial problem in terms of securing a

route to future employment options in Japan.

For students who did not have an opportunity to enter school during their compulsory school ages, there are other options; the "Night Junior High School: NJHS" (yakan chugakko) is one of them. This type of school is not an Article One school, though these schools are often placed legally as evening classes within the public junior high schools. These schools provide educational opportunity for the students who are over the age of 15, who did not have a chance to earn a junior high school degree.

According to a most recent research conducted in 2011, NJHSs accept 2,174 students at 35 institutions (Asano, 2012). NJHSs are not significant in number among the 9,707⁽⁶⁾ public junior high schools in Japan. However, regarding the situation that migrant students are still at the risk of not going to any type of school during their school ages, it is crucial to focus on the role of the NJHSs.

Night Junior High Schools

The first NJHS was established back in 1947, when many people were deprived of the opportunity of education during and after the war period. After WWII, many children did not go to school due to poverty. The children who did not attend needed to work to help their households. So NJHSs were the last options for students who had no other choice than to work during the daytime, as NJHSs allowed them a chance to learn in the evening. In the early 1950s, there were 71 NJHSs and 3,118 students attending throughout the country (MEXT, 2015b).

However, as the social situation changed, the proportion of students entering into daytime "mainstream" education rose. In 1966, the Japanese government officially declared that "Night Junior High Schools shall be abolished, as they are unfavorable in light of the principle of compulsory education" (MEXT, 2015c). The government attempted to scale-down the numbers, leaving just a portion of the institutions for a few

students who had no other options. In this era, the emphasis was rather focused toward stabilizing the mainstream route, and was relatively ignorant about the population who needed the NJHSs due to the social circumstances.

After the 1990s, facing the times of the expansion of the foreign-born population, the awareness grew of the NJHSs as an institution playing a critical role: to provide educational support to people with various backgrounds, including a large number of migrant populations. Some politicians recently joined together to move forward and support the NJHSs. Considering the fact that many NJHSs face difficulty in terms of funds and resources, and most are located near the two urban areas of Tokyo and Osaka, the politicians started to argue for the geographic expansion and allocation of resources for developing the NJHSs (Zenkoku Yakan Chugakko Kenkyukai, 2015).

Who goes to Night Junior High Schools?

There are no official reports that show the entire picture of NJHSs in Japan. During and after the war period, NJHSs were predominantly for students who had no other option than working during the daytime, or for the old resident Koreans who were deprived from educational opportunity. However, the below study conducted by Asano (2012) shows an overview about how NJHSs look differently today.

According to a research conducted in 2011, there are 35 public NJHSs throughout Japan, and additionally, it is estimated that there are 30 volunteer-organized classes which are run by local citizens (Asano 2012). These volunteer-classes are often provided in local areas which do not have any public NJHSs. These volunteers try to provide educational support equivalent to the NJHSs, or else, some students would be deprived of their right to equal educational opportunity⁽⁷⁾.

Based on a survey provided to 1,150 students from the above-mentioned 30 public schools and 10 volunteer-organized groups, Asano shows the following findings.

First, 61.2% currently do not work⁽⁸⁾. This is partly a consequence of the current situation, which is that it is not easy to find a job without a degree in Japan.

Second, regarding ethnicity, the 1,150 students were sorted into four categories. The "Japanese" group represented 24.1%, "Resident-Korean" group 22.7%, the "Chinese Returnee" group 19.7%, and the "Newcomer" group was 33.3%⁽⁹⁾. This study shows the fact that in 2012, one third of the students are from the newcomer groups.

Shifting Discourses of NJHSs

NJHSs were assumed to be marginal institutions in the political context. After 1966, the general political stance of the Japanese government was to decrease them in turn to pour effort towards expanding the mainstream day time education. Also, at the local and individual school level, the common understanding was to accommodate the migrant students in mainstream schools (Okano, 2013).

Though, due to the continuous demand by the NJHS practitioners, a new trend rose after the 2000s. NJHS practitioners throughout the nation have joined together as; the “Night Junior High School Research Group (Zenkoku Yakan Chugakkou Kenkyukai)”. This group has been working together for decades, demanding for national level support. For example, the research group officially submitted a statement to the Japan Federation of Bar Associations in 2003, on request of adequate public research and support of the NJHSs. This captured some of the politicians’ attention, and led them to propose the NJHS issue as an independent diet topic in 2003⁽¹⁰⁾. After a two and a half year research and judgment, the Japan Federation of Bar Associations officially publicized a memorandum, demanding support for the NJHSs as an urgent human rights issue. Later on, this movement led the establishment of the bipartisan diet member network in 2014. The politicians joined together with the purpose to support the geographic expansion of

the NJHSs.

Concurrently with the establishment of the bipartisan diet member network, the NJHS issue was also addressed within the discussion about child poverty. As the child poverty issues in Japan was belatedly “discovered” in the late 2000s (Abe, 2012), “The Child Poverty Initiative Act” (Kodomo no Hinkon Taisaku Ho) was adopted in 2013⁽¹¹⁾. The adoption of this act was a crucial step for the NJHSs, as “the promotion of the establishment of NJHSs” were specified as one of the initiatives to be enforced under the act⁽¹²⁾.

NJHSs were traditionally assumed to be marginal institutions; however, as noted above, the situation began to change due to the continuous effort of local practitioners.

Conclusions

The NJHS issues were raised as an agenda at the Japanese diet in 2003, and subsequently led the establishment of the bipartisan diet member network. Concurrently, after the Child Poverty Act was adopted in 2013, geographic expansion of the NJHSs were promised in the outline. The above process was largely related to the active role of the practitioner research group called the “Night Junior High School Research Group”, which continuously demanded for national level support for decades.

The NJHSs have gained in popularity in the past few years from 2013, as an institution that plays a significant role through its unique position within the Japanese school system. However, there still remain challenges.

First, the major concern of the politician network is to expand the number of NJHSs geographically. Needless to say that this agenda is imperative for the migrant group, it would be shortsighted to presume that solely geographic expansion would be a cure-all initiative. The procedures and practices that support the migrant population must be

considered for discussion as well.

Second, the educational support regarding the students' diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds is not always assumed to be the central agenda within the NJHS discussion. There is a possibility that the evolving attention toward the NJHSs might elevate the migrant education issue to become a central topic. However, currently it is not always discussed in relation to the migrant student population. The target population is kept rather vague. From this perspective, the governments' attitude towards stabilizing a comprehensive education policy for the migrant population still remains reluctant.

This research indicated that the growing attention toward NJHSs may have profound impacts in Japanese society, though in terms of creating a supporting educational route for the migrant population today, there still remain many challenges.

Notes

All quotes in brackets were translated from Japanese to English by the author.

- (1) I use this term “migrant population”, in contrast to the old-timer ethnic minority population (particularly, the people who are so-called the Zainichi, who resides in Japan directly or indirectly in result of the Japanese colonization).
- (2) “Gaikokujin no kodomo” in Japanese.
- (3) School financial aid (shugakuenjo) is stated under the School Education Act Article 19, which guarantees financial support for a person who is admitted as under needy circumstances. Under this law, the student or guardian can require financial support for school activities (such as lunch fees and school supplies).
- (4) Which are specifically, public elementary school, junior high school, high school and special-needs schools (schools for the students with physical or mental challenges).
- (5) The compulsory school age in Japan is 6-15. According to the public research, the number of 6-14 year old foreign residents in Japan are 101,485 (Ministry of Justice 2013).
- (6) Derived from the School General Statistics 2014 (Gakko Kihon Chosa) http://www.mext.go.jp/component/b_menu/other/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/12/19/1354124_2_1.pdf.
- (7) Although these volunteer-organized classes provide the similar education as the NJHS, these classes do not offer a junior high school degree.
- (8) Suppose, this is because there are a certain number of old age groups. However, even limiting to the newcomer groups, the numbers who do not work are still 44.6%.
- (9) 2 students were counted as uncertain in ethnicity.

- (10) From the record of the Education Science Committee Meeting (bunkyoagakuinkai), 26th March, 2003, from the Official Diet Record System, <http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/>.
- (11) The common belief until the late 2000s was that Japan was rather consisted by a vast majority of the middle class, sharing similar backgrounds.
- (12) From the outlines (Taiko) of “The Children Poverty Initiative Act” (Kodomo no Hinkon Taisaku Ho), p14.
<http://www8.cao.go.jp/kodomonohinkon/pdf/taikou.pdf>.
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