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Schooling, multiculturalism and cultural identity: Case study of Japanese senior school students in a secondary school in South Australia

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This article reports a case study about the process experienced by Japanese International students (JIs) in a suburban high school. The study examined the relation between schooling, multiculturalism and cultural identity. The research explored cultural identity as the outcome of contest: an ideological struggle over values, practices and cultural identity. The major findings of the study were that JIs negotiated new cultural identities in the process of facing difficulties of language, cultural understanding and racism as barriers. In the light of these difficulties three recommendations were made to educational policy makers. This research offers schools and educational policy makers ways to meet better the educational and cultural needs of students in the International Student Program (ISP). Also it contributes to a greater understanding of the contested relation between schooling, multiculturalism and cultural identity in contemporary Australian society.

Schooling, multiculturalism, cultural identity, qualitative methods

INTRODUCTION

My motive for choosing the theme for this research study was from my own experiences in life in Australia. The object of this study is to investigate the relation between schooling, multiculturalism and cultural identity. It focuses on the experiences of Japanese students who came to Australia to study abroad. Through a case study of one Adelaide suburban high school and its ISP, the contested idea of multiculturalism and the dynamics involved in the construction of cultural identity are explored.

In many ways, this study is as much about myself (the researcher), as it is about the researched (the Japanese students). I was born and grew up in a rural industrial city 80kms north of Tokyo. Just like other Japanese girls at that time I was brought up in a traditional way. My parents were very strict in keeping Japanese tradition alive in me. This included religion, customs and other cultural practices related to food and manners. While these still run strong and deep in me, I am different today. I no longer identify myself as a Japanese woman in a traditional sense. I am more multicultural.

My father died before I was 12 years of age. This was a very significant event in my life. I recall that from that point I learned that a life came only once and I wanted to make the most of my life. For me, this meant challenging some of the traditional ways of doing things my parents had worked hard to instil to me. This, of course, did not mean rejecting all Japanese culture as I knew it, but opening myself to other cultures.

I came to live and work as a teacher in Australia. I did not come as a tourist. I came as someone who wanted to experience other cultures: other ways of doing things and other ways of living.

During my early days in Australia, I missed Japanese food, Japanese language and a familiar way of living. However, as time went by, I started to enjoy Australian cultural practices like barbeques and what I saw as a more casual, so-called 'Aussie' way of living. Importantly, at the same time, I maintained some aspects of Japanese culture. My increasing comfort with an Australian way of life did not come at the expense of my Japanese culture.

Since I came to Australia I have been teaching Japanese language to Australian students in state secondary schools. During this time I have noticed greater cultural and linguistic diversity in South Australian secondary schools. For example, in the mid 1970s the students I taught were mainly from Anglo-Celtic and Southern European backgrounds. By the early 1980s I saw more Asian students in the schools in which I taught.

The school where I conducted a survey has an International student program (ISP) that is designed to provide opportunities for overseas students to study at identified state schools. I teach Japanese language to both JIs (Japanese International students) and Australian born students. Most JIs choose to study Japanese language.

While I worked as a teacher in a secondary school since I came to Australia, and particularly since I started to teach JIs, multiculturalism has been an interesting issue. My investigative mind has increased as time passed by and I decided to explore the issue. The investigation and exploration in studies were a huge challenge to me. I acknowledge the consistent encouragement and valuable suggestions of Mr Grant Banfield throughout my preparation and the writing of the research work.

AIM AND FOCUS OF THE STUDY

The focus of this study is on JIs who were enrolled in the school where I conducted a survey. This group was chosen because of their previously limited exposure to Australian culture. As the students came to Australia without their parents, it provided a unique opportunity to research and study the role of schooling in the making of cultural identity.

In addition, it provided an opportunity to consider the extent to which schooling can inculcate multicultural values in young people. However, as is shown, the idea of 'multiculturalism' itself is contested and problematic. The notion that 'multiculturalism' is a singular set of ideas and practices or the idea that the making of cultural identity is a simple process akin to changing one's clothes is fraught with difficulties.

These are things I knew intuitively before this study. I knew them as a Japanese woman who came to a new country and had to negotiate her way through new cultural worlds. I knew them as a teacher of Japanese students. I saw my students struggling (just as I did) with language, cultural understanding and, at times, racism. Our common cultural background and our similar experiences helped forge important bonds between us. As a teacher, this placed me in a unique position to understand and empathise. As a researcher, those common bonds provided a base from which I could interpret the experiences of, and empathise with, the Japanese students.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is important for two reasons. First, by documenting how schools actively contribute to the making of cultural identity, this research may offer schools and educational policy makers ways to meet better the educational and cultural needs of ISP students. Secondly, its broader significance lies in its contribution to a greater understanding of the contested relation between schooling and multiculturalism in contemporary Australian society.

The research work begins with a consideration of the key concepts that underpin it: multiculturalism, ideology, and cultural identity. By taking a socially critical view of ideology,

multiculturalism is described as the outcome of struggle over values, practices and cultural identity.

METHOD

In this research the qualitative case study method is employed. The case study in this research is an example of Stake's instrumental approach, focusing on students' everyday lives at one school. Typical of qualitative case studies, it provides an example of real people in real situations that, hopefully, enables readers to situate everyday events within broader social and historical dynamics (Cohen et al. 2000, p.181).

According to Burns, qualitative forms of investigation tend to be based on a recognition of the importance of the subjective, experiential lifeworld of human beings (1997, p.11). By focusing on the everyday lives of JIs at the school where I taught, my study provided examples of real struggles in their life. During the process of the study, JIs and I quickly established mutual understanding and trust because I spoke the same language, had the same cultural background and lived in the same environment at school as they did. As a result their attitude was open and their expressions were frank. In this close relationship I was able to study the role of schooling in the making of cultural identity.

This qualitative case study was complemented by participant observation and interviews by applying triangulation methods to strengthen the trustworthiness of the data. Triangulation involves using two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour to improve data trustworthiness (Burns 1997, p.324). Triangulation techniques attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint and, in so doing, by making use of both quantitative and qualitative data (Cohen et al. 2000, p.112).

In this case study, I selected the site of a school at which the participants attended and where I was a teacher. For both the participants and myself the site was familiar and convenient. Thus, observation consistently proceeded inside and outside the classroom. Most of the student participants in the study were students whom I taught at the time of data collection. According to Hitchcock and Hughes (1989, p.172), the students and the researcher were able to interact comfortably with each other in familiar "arenas of interaction".

Some Japanese students were willing to talk to me in my classroom after lessons. This situation had the advantage of ensuring confidentiality when the students wanted talk in my classroom. Also I often tried to meet JIs during yard duty at recess times and lunchtimes in the particular area where they usually congregated. As soon as they left the classroom or I returned to my office, I recorded conversations and occurrences, and took field-notes. The observations were carried out in class and in the schoolyard during recess and lunch times. The schoolyard was a familiar and comfortable place for casual talks.

I took extensive field-notes during the time available. These were refined and became progressively more focused as the project progressed. As Burns (1997) has observed, in the early stages of a qualitative research project the investigator generally took down everything. However, over time, observations and field-notes become more selective. This was not to suggest that I became more distant from the daily lives of the participants, but it was an indication, as Patton (1990, p.46) emphasised, of "getting close to the people and situations being studied in order to personally understand the realities and minutiae of daily life".

Interviews were conducted informally and formally, and individually and in groups. In this study, informal interviews occurred spontaneously while talking with students casually inside and outside the classroom. In such interviews, students talked openly and frankly. Yard duty time in

the area where JIs gathered at lunch and recess times was a good opportunity for me to talk freely. They explained their concerns and problems during casual talks in the schoolyard and occasionally before and after lessons. Shy students who could not speak confidently in front of others tended to express their opinions more openly in informal interviews.

On the other hand, for interviews of a formal type the venue and the time were pre-arranged. Formal interviews took place in a vacant classroom at lunchtime and I asked participants prepared questions. I interviewed four JIs. I also interviewed two Asian students who were born in Australia to find their viewpoints about multiculturalism and four Anglo-Celtic students who were born in Australia to check consistency of data.

In individual interviews, participants talked about their lives personally without considering other listeners. In group interviews, participants were encouraged to express their opinions. Often one individual's opinion triggered the thought of another individual. Thus, I found that hesitant participants became more involved in the discussion.

The questions were structured and unstructured. In structured formal interviews, I asked closed questions to obtain specific information on particular topics. However, in more unstructured formal interviews, open-ended questions, which did not demand particular answers, were asked. Here participants could express their opinions, expand on information and explore issues. Employing both unstructured and structured interviews enabled the triangulation of methods and assisted in strengthening the trustworthiness of data. In a structured interview some students were reluctant to respond to open-ended questions, but a structured interview helped them to give specific answers to prepared questions. In informal interviews, additional questions were asked that related to issues previously raised by participants. The types of interviews can be seen in Figure 1.

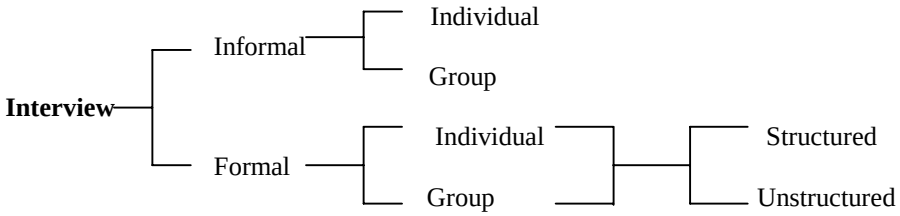

Figure 1. Types of interviews used in this study

I interviewed JIs and also conversed with them in their mother tongue. Speaking in Japanese allowed them to express their opinions without a language barrier. These conversations and interviews were then translated and recorded as field-notes and as interview transcripts in English. The danger here, of course, was a loss of meaning and emotion in the translation. As Patton put it:

> There are words and ideas that simply can't be translated. People who regularly use the language come to know the unique cultural meaning of special terms, but they do not translate well. (Patton, 1990, p.338)

However, the advantage for me in this study was that I had an understanding of both Japanese and English. This meant that I was not simply a translator but an observer-participant with the same cultural understanding and an intimate knowledge of the contexts in which the data were collected.

DATA ANALYSIS

In this research, data analysis started while the fieldwork was still in progress. Indeed it was integral to the fieldwork. Frequent (or significant) events, ideas and observations were recorded as part of the fieldwork process. The ongoing analysis of data was very important in shaping the direction of the research. The act of systematically combing through field-notes resulted in the

emergence of new themes and the development of an understanding of the relations between themes. Data were analysed to find meaning by systematically arranging and presenting the information (Burns 1997, p.338).

I continued to keep field-notes for 19 months to minimise distorted information and to maximise building trust between the respondents and myself. As the site was the place where I taught for nine years, the knowledge of the site was sufficient. Thus, a natural atmosphere was kept and distortion of information from unfamiliarity was minimised. For 19 months persistent observation of issues on schooling, multiculturalism and cultural identity were pursued through three groups: Japanese, Australians, and Asians born in Australia. Notes from observation including field-notes and the interviews, from three different sources (Japanese, Australians, and Asians born in Australia), strengthened my findings.

The field-notes kept were a continuous journal of events and issues written as soon as possible relating to the research. The comprehensive field-notes were kept to capture deep and dense description of what actually happened at school on particular occasions. There was always an opportunity to address concerns again by meeting respondents at school. It was advantageous for me as a teacher and researcher in the place where I taught to be able to maintain on-going observation.

The information from interviews with Australians and Asians born in Australia assisted in avoiding a one-sided story told by Japanese students. Their responses provided a check for the data collected from Japanese students. For example, Japanese students commented on Australian life negatively in the early stages of their stay. However, Australian students and Asian students born in Australia gave opposite viewpoints for the same issues. The main factors such as issues and problems that emerged in formal and informal interviews were pursued by asking further questions as soon as possible, without re-arranging a visit with the respondents. Such a situation provided rich sources for depth of information.

At the research site the colleagues who were involved in the ISP helped to provide necessary information. These exercises helped me to be honest about what I was researching and to clarify vague areas of information necessary to the research. At the same time outside the research site the issues have been regularly reviewed, discussed with my supervisor, who examined them as a disinterested person. As the research became more focused on the theme from analysis of field-notes, the information from the interviews the notes concentrated more on issues based on the theme. In this way analysed data became reliable to a considerable extent.

BARRIERS TO MULTICULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

The study presents multiculturalism, not as an unproblematic singular entity but one associated with power relations between different groups in society. On this account meanings and their associated practices are the objects of struggle.

From analysis of data gathered during the fieldwork, three barriers emerged. They were language, cultural understanding and racism. They were problematic and affected power relations between different groups. JIs negotiated new cultural identities in the process of facing difficulties of language, cultural understanding and racism. The outcome shaped by this inductive analysis can be seen in Figure 2.

Language

Language was considered to be important for communication in a new country. In one of the interviews, a Japanese student showed how language difficulties were not only barriers to good communication but they also limited the possibility of establishing friendships with Australian born students.

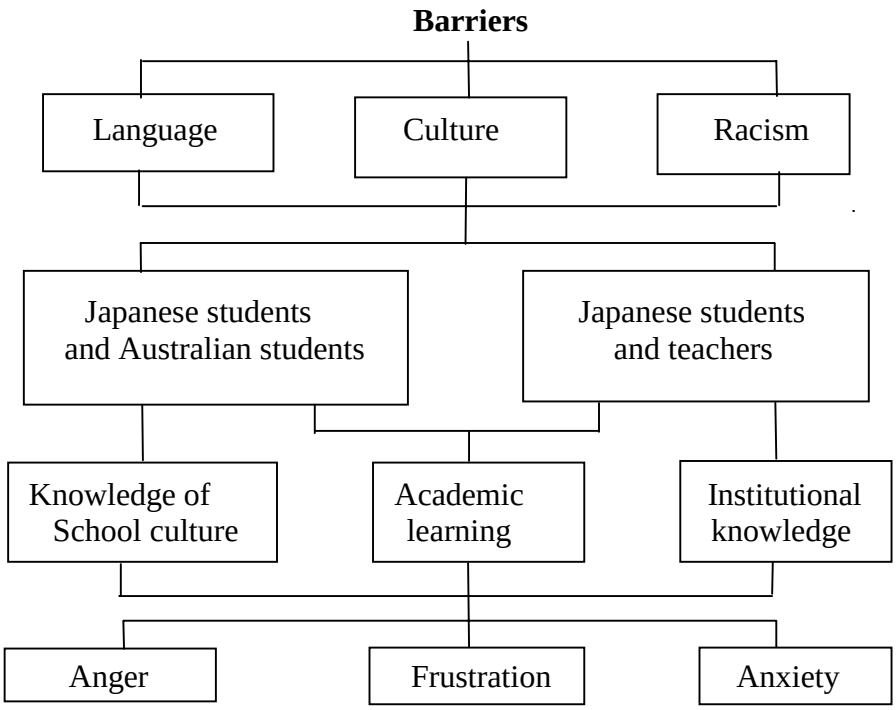

Figure 2. Emergent Themes - Barriers to Multicultural Understanding

Cultural understanding

Not only English skills but also cultural understanding was required to understand jokes. Difficulty in telling a joke related to a lack of cultural understanding: an ability to read or appreciate the collective history of what McLaren (1999, p.6) sees as the struggle over verbal and non-verbal symbols, "the interpretations of metaphors, icons, and structures of meanings". Without such understanding came a feeling of cultural awkwardness and difference. It must be stressed that cultural difference was not the issue when considering barriers to multicultural understanding. Intolerance of difference was crucial. Where issues of intolerance surfaced most starkly was in relation to racism.

Racism

It was not unusual for Japanese students to be the objects of racism during their stay in Adelaide. Racism took different forms: direct or indirect and verbal or non-verbal. The distinction between direct and indirect rested on whether direct reference was made to race or ethnic origin through some form of verbal or non-verbal communication. As such, direct verbal racism would be the act of making racist comments directly towards a person or persons of a particular ethnic group. On the other hand, direct non-verbal racism was expressed through the written form or through bodily signs and symbols. Indirect verbal racism might surface in a person copying or correcting a foreign accent. An example of indirect non-verbal racism would be the act of avoiding mixing with people from particular ethnic groups or setting them up to get into trouble (see Figure 3).

The experiences of the Japanese students presented in the study reflected that multiculturalism was an active and continuous process involving the shaping and formation of new cultural identities.

MULTICULTURAL IDENTITIES

Early during their stay in Australia, it was common for Japanese students to emphasise their own culture and comment negatively on Australian culture. They thought a great deal about their home

in Japan and criticised Australian ways of doing things. They often described Australians as lazy, disrespectful or impolite. However, after their first few months in Australia, the Japanese students began to see Australian life in a more positive light. They also began to offer critical reflections of Japanese ways of doing things.

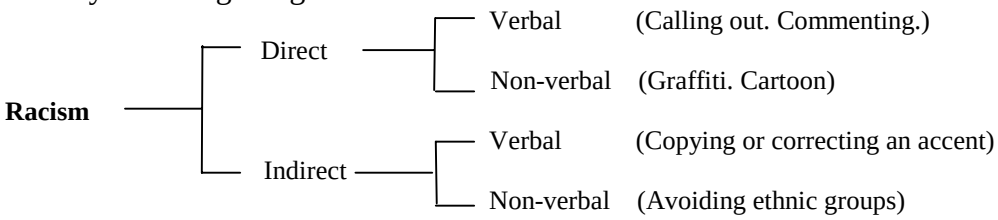

Figure 3. Forms of Racism

One of the Japanese students showed an ability to see Japanese culture from a distance – to step back and reflect critically. She saw herself and Japanese people in general, as introverted and shy. People from other countries and cultures were different. As Japanese students improved their English and came to a greater understanding of Australian culture, they saw aspects of an Australian way of life being quite attractive. This was particularly the case for what they saw as the friendliness and easygoing nature of Australians.

This positive attitude towards Australian culture was also reflected in viewpoints of Asian students born in Australia. An Asian student, the daughter of a Chinese mother and part Asian father, recognised the friendliness and openness of the people in Australia. Asian students who were born in Australia were generally very positive about their parents' culture. They also expressed positive attitudes towards Australian culture. Being bi-cultural and often bi-lingual, children of immigrants had some understanding of their parents' culture as well as Australian culture. One such student, an Asian student, who was born in Australia to Vietnamese parents was proud of his Vietnamese culture. He spoke Vietnamese, attended cultural festivals and visited his parents' country. He considered himself to be Asian when he mixed with Asian people. However, it also felt natural for him to mix with Anglo-Celtic students. He considered himself to be multicultural. However, for him, being multicultural did not mean discarding his Vietnamese culture. This surfaced strongly in a discussion on culture and competition. He considered that the people in the same ethnic group had a competitive attitude and performed better. He showed that multiculturalism did not mean 'sameness'. Competition for him was a marker between Vietnamese and Australian cultures that he wanted to retain.

In this light, multiculturalism is an active and continuous process involving the shaping and formation of new cultural identities. The experiences of the Japanese students presented in this case study reflect this.

OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATION

The JIs experienced barriers of language, cultural understanding and racism. Those problems caused difficulties for new arrivals, Australian born students and teachers. The JIs often experienced great anger, frustration and anxiety from these difficulties. However, through those difficulties, Japanese students began to see their own culture in a new light and take on elements of the new culture. In this way, those barriers were more like hurdles to be negotiated as part of the ongoing contest over Australian multiculturalism.

Language

The language barrier was the principal and immediate difficulty for newcomers identified in this study. Their English skills were limited and this left them unable to express themselves fully. This

often hindered them from adequately communicating with teachers, school counsellors, officers of International Education Services, their host family and Australian students.

Cultural understanding

Japanese students felt that they were not always accepted by Anglo-Celtic and European students. European students could make friends quickly, but it was difficult for Japanese students to make friends. Often Australian born students distanced themselves from Asian students. This situation made it hard for the more reserved Japanese students to mix with Australian students. However, the benefit for Japanese students living in a new country is that their original identity with Japanese culture is shaped in a new country and they adapt themselves. In order to change their identity they face constant conflict between social groups and struggles as they search for ways to be accepted in a new society.

Racism

The case study indicated racism occurred in the school. The students with a different cultural background who were in the minority tended to be targeted for annoyance by those in a majority group. This occurred directly or indirectly and verbally and non-verbally with remarks relating to race or ethnic origin. Examples were found such as name calling or annoyance among students. As a result of these influences JIs felt unwelcome while they were living in an unknown society without their family to talk to about their difficulties. There is a real danger of ethnic groups being reduced to so-called 'add-ons' to the dominant culture. Such conservative multiculturalism was observed in this study with JIs expected to adapt to dominant cultural expectations like accepting the new culture almost immediately on their arrival in the new country.

Recommendations

In the light of these difficulties three recommendations were made to educational policy makers. First, it is essential that JIs have access to counsellors who speak the same language, have the same cultural background and understand students' school life. Second, it is necessary to provide training courses for such counsellors appropriate to these students. Third, public recognition is important for the minority group. It is also beneficial for Australian students to have opportunities to know Japanese International students.

I hope that this research will offer schools and educational policy makers ways to better meet the educational and cultural needs of students in the ISP. I also hope that this research will contribute to a greater understanding of the contested relation between schooling, multiculturalism and cultural identity in contemporary Australian society.

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