Imagined Communities, School Visions, and the Education of Bilingual Students in Japan

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The purpose of this study is to analyze the policies and practices of schools in Japan that serve large numbers of bilingual students. Using the notion of imagined communities (Anderson, 1991; Norton, 2001), I examine the relationship between the schools’ visions for their students, their current policies and practices, and the students’ identities. Based on the ethnographic data collected at four schools in Japan that cater to very different groups of bilingual children, I argue that schools have visions of the communities and societies in which their students will grow up to participate. Moreover, these visions condition the schools’ current policies and practices and ultimately affect the identities of the students. Because the students at the four schools are expected to lead different futures, they are being prepared for different kinds of bilingualism. In this stratification process, it is the least privileged bilingual children who are socialized into the most impoverished imagined communities.

Key words: imagined communities, bilingual education, Japan, Japanese as a second language, ethnography, language minority education

Every time I land in the New Tokyo International Airport in Narita, I am intrigued by two bilingual signs that greet passengers. One sign, in English, says predictably, “Welcome to Japan.” The other sign, in Japanese, has a slightly different message: “Okaerinasai”—“Welcome home.” Perhaps my uncharitable interpretation of these signs is caused by the lack of sleep and heavy jet lag I am suffering from whenever I land in this airport. Nevertheless they always strike me as a telling example of how Japan—at least its bureaucrats—thinks of its citizens: Anyone who makes this country his or her home speaks Japanese; everyone else is just a visitor.

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In reality, Japan is an increasingly multilingual and multicultural country (Maher & Yashiro, 1995; Noguchi & Fotos, 2001). Some 590,000 Korean and Chinese residents have made this country their permanent home for generations (Homusho, 2000). A growing number of foreign nationals live in Japan either as immigrants, migrant workers, or business expatriates. It is also commonplace for Japanese citizens to spend some years abroad and then return to Japan proficient in English or other languages.

Correspondingly, the demand for the education of bilingual children is growing rapidly. As of 2000, the number of children in Japanese public schools (Grades 1–12) who required special instruction in Japanese was 18,432 (Monbukagakusho, 2001). This is still a tiny fraction—0.13%—of the total student population. But the number has more than tripled over the last decade, and the language minority students are spread across 5,235 schools (13.3% of the total number of schools). For the first time in history, these schools are facing the challenge of educating students whose native proficiency in Japanese cannot be taken for granted. As one can imagine, the confusion and anxiety this situation is causing in schools is considerable. However, schools of various kinds (e.g., public and private, accredited and nonaccredited) are starting to offer innovative programs to meet the needs of bilingual children.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the policies and practices of four schools in Japan that serve large numbers of bilingual students. Using the notion of imagined communities (Anderson, 1991; Norton, 2001), I attempt to illuminate the relationship between the schools’ visions for their students’ future, their current policies and practices, and their students’ identities. I argue that schools envision imagined communities for the students they serve, and that these visions have a large impact on their current policies and practices, thereby ultimately affecting the identities of the students. I further argue that although individual schools can counteract societal ideologies that oppress language minority groups, they can also play a role in social reproduction. It is the least privileged bilingual children who are socialized into the least privileged imagined communities, even though it is this very group of children who could benefit most from an education that dares to imagine a different future for them.

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

For the theoretical framework of this study, I start with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning perspective. Lave and Wenger associate learning with social participation. For them, learning is not just a cognitive process of acquiring a set of skills and knowledge but part of changing participation in communities of practice. One learns as one enters a community and comes to take part—first peripherally, and later more fully—in its particular practices. Learning thus is situated in local community practices, shaping and shaped by concrete relationships.
Norton (2001) draws on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) view of learning and expands it to connect the learner’s future affiliations and his or her current learning. Lave and Wenger’s situated learning theory focuses on learning that takes place in conjunction with the learner’s engagement in a tangible, accessible community. However, as Anderson (1991), who first coined the term *imagined communities*, and Wenger (1998) in his more recent work theorized, we humans are capable of relating to people beyond our immediate social networks through our imagination. For example, we do not know all our fellow compatriots; yet we can relate to them as comembers of a very large community. What enables such association is our imagination. Likewise, Norton (2001), interested in second language learning, argues that individual second language (L2) learners have images of the communities in which they want to participate in the future, and that these “imagined communities” have a large impact on their current learning. They are not yet members of such communities, but they hope to gain access to them one day. According to Norton, whether or not the learners see the learning of L2 as leading them closer to their imagined communities influences their current investment in that learning. In short, it is not only the individuals’ current social participation that affects their learning but also their future affiliations.

I in turn build on Norton’s (2001) conceptualization of imagined communities and apply it to examine institutional visions. In speaking of imagined communities, Norton is primarily concerned with individual learners. But the use of imagination to connect learners’ current learning and their future community membership is not limited to the learners themselves. Dagenais (this issue) speaks of parents’ visions of their children’s future affiliations. Similarly, schools also envision imagined communities for their students: what kind of adult the students will grow up to be and what communities they will join in the future. Just as individual learners’ current learning is affected by their imagined communities, it is likely that schools’ collective visions of imagined communities for their students will also have a powerful impact on their current pedagogical policies and practices. Moreover, educational institutions have the power and expertise to navigate students’ learning toward such visions in a systematic manner beyond the capacity of individual learners and parents. Thus, a school can communicate to its students an image of a society in which they have useful and fulfilling roles to play, and the school can make that image tangible and accessible. Conversely, if a school tacitly assumes limited social participation in the future for certain groups of children, it would be extremely difficult for the children to fight that influence.

The idea that schools reflect a society’s visions and transmit them onto their students is not a new one. Bilingual education, in particular, is often called upon because a society recognizes the need for multiple languages for its collective goals—be they the protection of minority groups, the desire for a more prominent status in the world economy, or greater participation in the global community. As early as in 1976, Fishman called for bilingual education for the English-speaking majority group by arguing, “It is precisely the child who is a native speaker of a language of wider com-
munication (and first and foremost among these, the Anglo American child) who constitutes a problem in the formation of a larger Global Community” (p. 9). Paulston (1980) also noted that “bilingual education programs are the result of societal factors” (p. 50). More recently, Pakir (1999) and Bokhorst-Heng (1999) clearly illustrated this point by describing how in Singapore, bilingual education is effectively used to promote the nation’s goals of rapid economic development on the one hand and the recognition of its linguistic and cultural pluralism on the other. Thus, bilingual education is often mobilized to help achieve a nation’s goals. Conversely, when bilingual education is seen to contradict a society’s goals, it often becomes the target of intense attacks, as demonstrated by President Reagan’s speech in 1981, in which he stated that bilingual education is “absolutely wrong and against American concepts” (as cited in Baker, 1996, p. 360) and more recently by Proposition 227, which banned bilingual education in California (Cummins, 2000).

But schools do not merely reflect societal visions and pass them onto children. They sometimes act as an agency that challenges societal visions that oppress certain groups of people. Freeman’s (1998) ethnographic study of Oyster Bilingual School is an excellent example of a school effective in helping low-income Latino students succeed by recognizing linguistic and cultural diversity as a resource, not a problem. A school’s vision, thus, can not only reflect social ideologies but also strive to subvert dominant ideologies by imagining an alternative future society for its children and by socializing them into that imagined community. The goals of this article then are (a) to explore what kind of imagined communities the four schools envision for their students and (b) to illustrate, in a concrete, ethnographic manner, how these imagined communities inform the schools’ policies and practices, and ultimately affect the students’ identities.

METHOD

The schools chosen for this study are among those considered pioneers in the education of bilingual students in Japan. To maximize variety within the small sample, I chose four schools that cater to different bilingual groups in Japan (all the names of the schools and people that appear in this article have been changed to protect their confidentiality):

- **Nichiei Immersion School** (Grades K–11) offers an early partial English immersion program to Japanese “mainstream” students.
- **Zhonghua Chinese Ethnic School** (Grades K–9) specializes in the education of the children of Chinese residents in Japan.
- **Hal International School** (Grades K–9) caters to the children of Western business and government personnel stationed in Japan and Japanese children of privilege whose parents wish an international education for them.
• Sugino Public Elementary School (Grades 1–6) serves a large number of immigrant and refugee children from China and Southeast Asia.

The basic statistics of each school are summarized in Table 1.

I sought these schools by using information available on the Internet, in magazines, and in newspaper databases, and by soliciting recommendations from educators and parents that I knew personally and were interested in bilingual education in Japan. The first three schools were relatively easy to identify. As long as I consulted people who were members of each bilingual community, it was relatively straightforward to find a “pioneering” school in each category, because there were not many schools in each category to begin with, and still fewer with an explicitly stated goal of bilingualism. More challenging was finding a public school with a strong commitment to language minority education. For this, I consulted two municipal boards of education in the suburbs of Tokyo, and one of them recommended Sugino Public Elementary School.

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork from June 1999 to December 2000. I spent 10 to 15 days, depending on the complexity of the curriculum and structure, at each school over a period of 2 to 3 months. I observed classes in each grade, while taking detailed field notes. In addition, I interviewed teachers, administrators, and parents. Formal interviews with students were attempted, but because of the young ages of the students, they were much more informative when approached in their natural milieus such as classrooms and hallways. Because I generally spent an entire day with the same group of students, I had many opportunities to talk with them during recess and lunch breaks. Relevant documents such as school policies, newsletters, timetables, and class handouts were also collected. For analysis, I identified aspects of the data that were related respectively to school visions, policies and practices, and student identities, making comparisons among the four schools.

### TABLE 1

Basic Statistics of the Four Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Program in Place Since</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Class Size&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nichiei Immersion</td>
<td>K–11</td>
<td>1992&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>538&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>8–24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhonghua Chinese</td>
<td>K–9</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>20–35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hal International</td>
<td>K–9</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>8–25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugino Public</td>
<td>1–6</td>
<td>1992&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>19–36&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>The range is from the smallest to the largest class observed.
<sup>b</sup>The year the immersion program started.
<sup>c</sup>The number of immersion students from Kindergarten to Grade 11. Non-immersion students are not included.
<sup>d</sup>The year the Japanese as a second language program started.
<sup>e</sup>Japanese as a second language classes are much smaller: typically three to six students.
Nichiei Immersion School is a private school that offers a K–11 (to be extended to Grade 12) early partial English immersion program. The immersion program is paired up with a regular (i.e., non-immersion) program. The majority of the immersion students are native Japanese-speaking children who have never lived abroad and have come into the program with zero English proficiency. Initially, students receive two thirds of the instruction in English; by Grade 4 the ratio becomes approximately 50% English and 50% Japanese and continues at that same ratio until the end of the program. The immersion students use an English translation of the textbooks that the students in the regular program use. After the completion of each unit, students in both programs are given the same test in Japanese.

Parents choose the immersion program because they believe that knowledge of English is a definite asset in pursuing professional careers in Japan. The rhetoric of “preparing children for the 21st century,” although a cliché, was frequently mentioned when I asked a group of parents about their reasons for choosing the program. They also noted that they hoped being in this school would help their children become more appreciative of different cultures. “Children must be international!” (original in Japanese) declared one assertive mother. At the same time, the majority of the students are expected to advance to Japanese universities, rather than universities abroad, and will most likely pursue their careers in Japan-based organizations. As such, parents like the fact that their children can receive some instruction in English within the larger context of a Japanese school. This is a point Dr. Harry Mackenzie, the director of the immersion program, emphasized: “Parents here don’t want an international school. They want a Japanese school that gives their children some proficiency in English and a more open-minded sense of the world. They are not looking to have their children become little foreigners.” The school’s priorities therefore are Japanese literacy and knowledge of subject matter; English is not meant to be learned at the expense of Japanese.

Students’ experiences at Nichiei seem consistent with these expectations. During my fieldwork, it was very clear that the students had a very high passive competence in English and had little difficulty understanding immersion teachers’ instruction. Speaking English was more of a challenge, however. Many students tried nodding and shaking their heads, answering in Japanese or, as a last resort, mumbling a few words in English. Dr. Mackenzie, in his feedback to a draft of this article, noted that the extent to which students use English depends in large part on immersion teachers’ instructional approaches, and the teachers teaching that year might not have encouraged the students to speak English in the classroom as much as they could have. At least during my observation, however, I was struck by the students’ reticence to produce English, made particularly noticeable by their contrasting high listening ability.
The reticence to speak the target language seems to increase as the students grow older, a trend Tarone and Swain (1995) noticed in immersion students in North America. Immersion teachers at Nichiei told me that whereas for younger children learning English is like a game, as they approach adolescence and become more self-conscious, they grow less willing to speak imperfect English in front of others. Because their enrollment in the program was their parents’ choice rather than their own, some upper-grade students begin to question why they need to learn English when, at least in their current world, they can get by very comfortably in Japanese. Dealing with such frustration falls on Japanese teachers’ shoulders because of the ease of communication in Japanese. Thus, Mr. Ohta, the Grade 6 homeroom teacher, told me,

> What comes up often is, “Why do we have to do English?” When they are young, it’s all fun. But eventually the issue of having to deal with both English and Japanese does come up, and in reality some kids start to wonder why they have to learn things in English when it would be much easier to learn in Japanese. About 10% of the students think that way; if there are 40 students, maybe 4 or 5. So it is important to take care of these students’ feelings. (original in Japanese)

Zhonghua Chinese Ethnic School

Zhonghua Chinese Ethnic School (Grades K–9) specializes in the education of Chinese residents in Japan, who are by now fourth and fifth generation. Although these students are of Chinese origin, they are native speakers of Japanese and typically come into the program with little Chinese proficiency. In addition to these “old-timer” students, an increasing number of “newcomer” immigrants from mainland China (30%) as well as a small percentage of “mainstream” Japanese students (10%) also attend the school. The program starts with most of the instruction in Chinese, and by Grade 9 most of the instruction is in Japanese. There is a gradual transition from Chinese to Japanese over a span of 10 years.

One of the central missions of Zhonghua is to foster Chinese identity. The principal, Mr. Wu Zhigang, said, “We want them to become the kind of people who can get along in both Japan and China; who, to exaggerate a little, can contribute to both and can participate competently in both countries” (original in Japanese). Because of this mission, an emphasis is placed on the teaching of Chinese culture in the curriculum. The school consciously tries to teach Chinese culture and creates a total Chinese environment to offset the dominance of Japanese language and culture outside. Red lanterns, decorations with Chinese motifs, and photos of China adorn the classrooms and hallways. The names of all students, including Japanese ones, are pronounced in Chinese. When I observed classes, fifth graders were singing a song
called “My Chinese Soul.” In a Grade 6 language arts class, the teacher referred to the long history of Chinese civilization in explaining the difference between haojiu and youjiu (both signify a long period of time). Ms. Wang explained that youjiu connotes a very long time, much longer than haojiu, adding, “In China we have 4,000 years of history; that’s youjiu. We cannot say we have a haojiu history” (original in Chinese). The underlying message was unmistakable: You are part of the civilization with the one of the oldest histories and richest cultures in the world. Be proud.

Zhonghua is a nonaccredited school. Because it is seen as a school for Chinese-national students rather than for Japanese—although evidently many Japanese-national students do attend the school—it is not accredited by Monbukagakusho, the Japanese Ministry of Education and Science. The lack of accreditation presents a major roadblock to the further education of Zhonghua graduates. The school closed its high school division about 17 years ago, because many Japanese universities refused to admit graduates of nonaccredited schools. High schools are easier to enter for graduates of a nonaccredited school, because at that level it is at the discretion of the principals whether or not to accept such students. Virtually all Zhonghua students now advance to regular Japanese high schools, and once in regular Japanese high schools they then become eligible to apply for Japanese universities.

In preparation for the entrance exams to regular Japanese high schools, there is a dramatic shift of emphasis from Chinese to Japanese at the junior high level. At the elementary level, Chinese occupies 75% (in Grade 1) to 50% (in Grade 6) of the instruction. From Grade 7 on, it is reduced to 25%. Correspondingly, students at the junior high level become more dominant in Japanese, both in their academic studies and in their conversations with peers. According to Ms. Wang, who also teaches in junior high school, the conversation of older students includes a much wider range of topics than that of younger children, but because of their limited exposure to and command of Chinese, their ability to converse on a broad range of topics is constrained. As a result, junior high students prefer to converse in Japanese. If they go onto regular Japanese high schools, their exposure to Chinese will be further limited. Mr. Li Xin, the vice principal, articulated the dilemma of a nonaccredited school:

At age 15 their visions and awareness are still unstable. It is a pity that we have to send them off to Japanese society before the most important period of high school, before you can really communicate your views about life and the world to them. (original in Japanese)
found. This is a unique part of Japan where the buzz of English mixes with the sound of Japanese—where outside cafés are just as likely to be filled with fashionably dressed Westerners as expensively clad Japanese. Hal caters largely to the children of Western diplomats and business executives working in Japan. However, because of its long-standing reputation of having strong Japanese programs, it also attracts a relatively large number of Japanese children and the children of international marriages—children from wealthy families that can afford the expensive education at Hal. Currently, approximately 50% of the students come from families where at least one parent is Japanese.

Like Zhonghua Chinese School, Hal is a not accredited by Monbukagakusho. (It is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.) The non-Monbukagakusho accreditation is less of an issue for Hal students, however, because most of them do not reintegrate into the regular Japanese education system after graduation. Although close to 50% of the students go on to high schools located within Japan, the vast majority of them enroll in international schools. In terms of tertiary education—and virtually all Hal graduates go on to college—about 75% of the graduates attend American universities, whereas fewer than 15% choose Japanese ones. The school gives clear priority to English over Japanese because English is the language that directly impacts the students’ future. All classes except for Japanese language arts (in all grades) and Japanese social studies (at the junior high level) are taught in English.

There is also a tacit understanding that students at Hal will follow in their parents’ footsteps and become members of the elite international society. Hal effectively prepares its students for such membership. Its curriculum is extremely rich in multicultural materials. At the time of my fieldwork, first graders were being introduced to Japanese food; third graders working on Papua New Guinea; fourth-grade students making presentations on Chinese dynasties; and sixth-grade students passionately discussing Elián González, the Cuban boy who was rescued on the coast of Florida and whose fate became hugely controversial in the U.S.–Cuban relationship. The school adopts the concept of integrated curriculum, which means, for example, that third graders were rewriting traditional Western stories such as *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Gingerbread Man* using the settings and artifacts of Papua New Guinea in language arts. They were also singing a Papua New Guinea song in music and acting out a Papua New Guinea folklore story in Japanese. There is a sophisticated language-development-across-the-curriculum policy, which places a strong emphasis on reading and writing in all areas. The academic standards are extremely high.

All students are required to take 45 minutes of Japanese every day (one sixth of the instructional time). Although no streaming exists for English-medium classes, Japanese is divided into *F* (first language) classes for native speakers and *S* (second language) classes for nonnative speakers. Japanese students at Hal tend to become highly bilingual and biliterate: They learn English out of sheer necessity of coping
with the extremely demanding curriculum and are exposed to Japanese in the home and in the wider society. By contrast, English-speaking students, especially those expected eventually to return to their own countries, generally do not attain conversational fluency in Japanese. Although they reside in Japan, they live their daily life within a closed, relatively self-sufficient expatriate community where they can function comfortably speaking only English. Ms. Applebaum, one of the language coordinators at Hal said, “Being in Tokyo, you don’t have to speak Japanese if you choose not to. You don’t have to read Japanese, you don’t have to speak Japanese. I know many many many many people who don’t—not a word!” Therefore, to many non-Japanese students at Hal, learning Japanese may have as little relevance to their lives as, say, learning German or French might have to “mainstream” American students in the United States.

SUGINO PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Sugino Public Elementary School (Grades 1–6) is located within a large public housing project in a neighboring city to Tokyo. Because of the location and the subsidized apartments, Sugino has an unusually high proportion of language minority students for a Japanese public school: More than a third of its 226 students are of foreign origin, mostly the grandchildren or relatives of “War Orphans” returning from China4 and the children of war refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Many of the children at Sugino, both Japanese and non-Japanese come from single-parent homes and families on welfare. Many of the parents, especially of foreign nationalities, are blue-collar workers and, in today’s recessionary Japan, are constantly in fear of being laid off.

The non-Japanese students at Sugino are immigrant students planning to live permanently in Japan. Many hope to obtain Japanese citizenship as soon as possible. The challenge facing Sugino Public Elementary School is how to help these bilingual children become members of Japanese society, a point Ms. Takano Emiko, the principal, emphasized:

People who live here are permanent residents; they are going to live permanently in Japan. So we have to help [the children] gain enough power to survive in Japan. We want to guarantee academic abilities that become the foundation of that power. So our role as an elementary school is to make them learn basic academic skills. (original in Japanese)

About half of the bilingual students receive pull-out Japanese as a second language (JSL) instruction three to four times a week, and some bilingual assistance is available to recent arrivals and parents who do not speak Japanese. However, the concept of bilingual education does not yet exist in Japanese pub-
lic schools (Ota, 2000), and Sugino is no exception. Regular classes are taught entirely in Japanese, and the school does not provide any systematic support for first language (L1) maintenance. Since most of the bilingual students at Sugino are either Japanese-born or longtime residents, many of them are more dominant in Japanese than in their L1, although even their Japanese may not be at their grade level. One striking aspect of this school—especially after having been accustomed to the harmony of multiple languages being spoken at the other three schools—is its monolingualism. Throughout my fieldwork I never heard bilingual students speak their L1, except on a few occasions when the teachers solicited it. Even two students from the same language background tend to converse in Japanese.

The academic level of this school, as judged by the standardized tests the city administers every year, is considerably lower than the city’s average. Ms. Ayabe, a JSL teacher, told me that many bilingual students have difficulty moving beyond the Grade 2-level Japanese literacy. She suspects that between the Grade 2 and 3 materials lies a sudden cognitive leap, and concepts to be learned become more abstract and complex. Students who lose their L1 may not have enough cognitive maturity to handle the age-appropriate curriculum in Japanese, she said. However, it is not only the language minority students who suffer from academic underachievement; it is a school-wide phenomenon. The teachers attribute the students’ academic underachievement to lack of stability in the home, poverty, and parental neglect. The seriousness of student underachievement becomes particularly pronounced in upper grades. The Grade 6 teacher, Mr. Mikami said, “It’s like going to a store to buy a fur coat with 10 yen in hand,” emphasizing the gap between what his students know and what the Grade 6 curriculum demands.

DISCUSSION

Schools are powerful social agents that can create images of communities for their children’s future and give these visions flesh and blood. From the vantage point of each of the four schools, Japan as an imagined community looks like a remarkably different place. At Hal International School, one is reminded of Japan’s long-standing admiration of the West and the tremendous power of English as the language to connect the nation to the West. In this school, the idea that the children will grow up to be part of an elite international society is real and palpable. At Zhonghua Chinese School, by contrast, Japan is envisioned as part of Asia. Introduced into the powerful Chinese ethnic networks, students are expected to contribute to both Japan and China. The imagined community from the perspective of Nichiei Immersion School is slightly more inward looking: There is more distance between Japan and the rest of the world. Nonetheless, Japan still looks like a fairly global society in which people are increasingly required to possess competence in
English. Finally, at Sugino Public Elementary School, one encounters a vision of Japan that few Japanese are ready to acknowledge: a highly stratified society in which foreign immigrants are positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy and engaged in jobs that nobody else wants, at or below minimum wage. It is toward these particular versions of Japanese society and the wider world that students at each school are being socialized.

Different visions of children’s future trajectories and imagined communities call for different preparation. For this reason, the four schools, equally committed to the education of bilingual children, adopt markedly different approaches. Indeed, what emerges most strongly from my analysis is that no one conceptualization of bilingualism fits all. These children are expected to need, and are being prepared for, different kinds of bilingualism. The difference lies chiefly in terms of which language assumes priority and to what extent culture learning is part of the curriculum.

In terms of the preferred language, at one end of the spectrum children at Sugino are given no systematic support for their L1. They are not expected to return to their countries of origin, and it is assumed that what they need to make a living in Japan is proficiency in Japanese—not Chinese, Cambodian, or Vietnamese. At the other end of the spectrum, English is given clear priority over Japanese at Hal. For Hal students, the majority of whom will leave Japan by the time they reach college age, English, not Japanese, is deemed to be the most important language they need to secure their future.

In terms of culture learning, the teaching of Chinese culture is an integral part of the curriculum at Zhonghua because one of the explicitly stated missions of the school is to help develop strong Chinese identity among its students—many of whom have never lived in China and perhaps never will. As a Chinese teacher quoted in Maher (1995) points out, “Look, you have to remember that for a Chinese you don’t just stop being Chinese. Even if you change your nationality” (p. 133). Bilingualism (and biculturalism) promoted at Zhonghua is just as much for “solidarity as an ethnic Chinese” (Maher, 1995, p. 132) as for the hope that these students will grow up to be cultural mediators between China and Japan. In contrast, bilingualism fostered at Nichiei is mostly for instrumental purposes. English is taught and learned because it will be an advantage for the students’ future careers. As such, the cultures of English-speaking countries are not given much emphasis in the curriculum.

Schools can and do challenge societal ideologies and advocate alternative—faier and more promising—imagined communities for their students. In doing so, they can make a significant difference in their students’ educational trajectories. Such efforts are particularly visible in schools that serve disadvantaged children. Zhonghua contrives an “artificial” linguistic and cultural environment, so that the students will learn a language that they otherwise would have little opportunity to learn. Although the teachers may bemoan junior high school students’ gravitation toward Japanese, compared with Chinese-origin students in public
schools who tend to lose their Chinese altogether, students at Zhonghua have a much better chance of developing additive bilingualism as well as maintaining an active link with their heritage culture.

Compared with Zhonghua, Sugino, being part of the public school system, is subject to many more constraints with respect to the bilingual and multicultural education it can provide. Despite these constraints, however, teachers at Sugino are making concerted efforts to help their children take pride in their heritage, and their efforts seem to be paying off. Ms. Ayabe told me that when she arrived at this school 3 years prior, the first thing she witnessed was a massive fight among JSL students. These students, who had been quiet and invisible in the regular classroom, suddenly exploded when she invited them into the JSL class:

It really stunned me. At first I had no idea what was going on, but I guess it was a sign that they were starting to express themselves. But it was a horrendous fight, you know—grabbing and kicking (laugh). They called one another every name under the sun, using all kinds of profanities in Japanese. (original in Japanese)

Today, such displays of extreme frustration have virtually disappeared. Moreover, in upper grades many of the more popular students who take leadership roles in the classrooms are in fact language minority students. Considering that many minority students in public schools are ostracized (Vaipae, 2001), policies and practices at Sugino are providing language minority students with a safe environment where they can focus on their academic work and social integration.

At the same time, one needs to recognize the limitations of the power and influence of a school. Stedman (1987), in his criticism of the effective schools literature, writes, “I am concerned that effective schools research is restoring too much faith in education as an instrument of social policy. Educators will not end poverty or insure equal opportunity merely by reforming the schools” (p. 223). The validity of this statement is apparent in the comparison of the four schools in this study. The disadvantages that language minority students at Zhonghua and Sugino suffer are immediately apparent compared with Japanese- and English-speaking children at Nichiei and Hal. Take a simple example: If a child at Nichiei or Hal has difficulty keeping up with two languages, her parents can probably afford to hire a private tutor for her. The high level education at Nichiei and Hal in effect assumes such commitment and resources on the part of the parents. Such resources are out of reach for most parents who send their children to Zhonghua and Sugino. Also, parents who choose to send their children to Zhonghua are in some ways punished for their choice: Because of the school’s nonaccredited status, their children cannot benefit from the government subsidies although they pay taxes just like any Japanese citizen, and their children are technically not considered to be in a legally recognized school.
Further, it is important to recognize that the imagined communities a school envisions for its students to a large extent reflects society’s collective visions. As Cummins (2000) points out, even committed and caring teachers may not question the current educational structures that fail to reach nonmainstream students, and instead find all the sources of underachievement within the students and their backgrounds. Several of the teachers at Sugino told me that they see the multilingualism and multiculturalism that exists in the school as an asset; at the same time, some of them also said that many bilingual students do not possess grade-level Japanese proficiency because they speak their L1 at home. I do not think that these teachers are being insincere when they express their commitment to the education of bilingual students. However, they are implicitly trying to help such students find ways to take pride in their ethnic heritage within existing social and educational constraints. Efforts to counteract society’s positioning of a particular group of children and the process of social reproduction can coexist in one school (see Kanno, in press, for a more in-depth discussion of this theme).

CONCLUSION

In this article I applied the notion of imagined communities to an analysis of four schools in Japan that serve large numbers of bilingual students. I argued that just like L2 learners, schools also envision imagined communities for their children and endeavor to prepare them for such membership. Schools’ visions of imagined communities, whether they be implicit or explicit, exert a powerful influence on their current policies and practices, ultimately affecting the students’ identities. Research on second language education has traditionally focused on the connection between the past and the present. It has not found an effective way of talking about the future. In making this argument, I suggest that this alternative movement from the future to the present may have just as powerful an impact on our educational practices as the usual past–present connection.

My second argument is that although individual schools can make a significant difference in directing their students to more enabling imagined communities, they also simultaneously participate in social reproduction. It is on the whole the least privileged bilingual students who are socialized into the least privileged imagined communities. It is as if the students suffer not only from their impoverished present, but also from an impoverished future. And yet it is this very group of students who could benefit most from an education that dares to imagine a different future for them. I am not suggesting that imagining an alternative future will be a panacea; clearly it will not. But if we do not even begin to imagine alternatives, we will be paralysed by the status quo and fail to take action. As Greene (1995) wrote, “Imagining things being otherwise may be a first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed” (p. 22).
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ENDNOTES

1Videotaping was generally not used because I was moving from one classroom to another frequently and teachers preferred minimum intrusion in their classes. The only exception was in Zhonghua Chinese Ethnic School, where I had a research assistant videotape 2 days of classes taught in Chinese, because my Chinese is too elementary to absorb detailed information in these classes. I was later assisted by a Chinese doctorate student majoring in language education in analysing these tapes.

2Japanese and Chinese share a script—Chinese characters—which have different pronunciations in the two languages, although the meaning of these characters are often the same. In mainstream Japanese society, the standard practice is to pronounce Chinese names in the Japanese way (e.g., Mao Zedong is known as Mou Takutou). The practice at Zhonghua is meant to reverse this custom.

3It is technically illegal for Japanese parents to send their children to a nonaccredited school because it is considered to be a violation of their legal responsibility to have their children receive compulsory education (Article 26 of the Japanese Constitution). Japanese-national parents who send their children to nonaccredited schools, such as ethnic schools and international schools, can receive a warning from the board of education in their district.

4War Orphans are Japanese children abandoned in China in the chaos of the Japanese retreat at the end of the Second World War and were subsequently raised by Chinese parents who adopted them. Since the normalisation of Sino-Japan relations in 1972, many of them repatriated to Japan, some of them with the Japanese government’s sponsorship and others at their own expense, often bringing with them their spouses, children, grandchildren, and other relatives (Tomozawa, 2001).

REFERENCES


