'Newcomer' children in non-metropolitan public schools: the lack of state-sponsored support for children whose first language is not Japanese

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‘Newcomer’ children in non-metropolitan public schools: the lack of state-sponsored support for children whose first language is not Japanese

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Abstract: This article explores national government, local government and non-governmental responses to the growing presence of ‘newcomer’ children in the student population. Although most work in this area has tended to focus on urban areas with large concentrations of non-Japanese, these schools are, statistically, the exception rather than the rule. In an attempt to address this imbalance, this article focuses on ‘newcomers’ in a non-metropolitan, so-called ‘rural’ area of Japan, Yamagata in north-east Japan. In Yamagata, as in most of Japan, schools generally fail to qualify for government assistance such as the dispatch of special teachers. As a result, support tends to come not from inside but from outside the school. Often, volunteer organizations are the only source of support for ‘newcomer’ children in these areas. In this sense, Yamagata offers a snapshot of the ways local players have typically responded to the growing diversity of the student population.

Keywords: newcomers, newcomer children, Japanese education, homogeneity

Introduction
At the start of April 2005, Yamagata Prefecture,1 a region of around 1.25 million people located in the north-east (Tōhoku) region of Japan, was in a state of great excitement. For the first time, a local school had reached the last four of the prestigious national high-school invitational baseball tournament. Although they were ultimately to lose in the semi-finals, Haguro High School, from the Shōnai region
of Yamagata along the Japan Sea, had practically brought the prefecture to a standstill. A key player in the team’s success was star pitcher, Mauricio Katayama, a third-generation Japanese-Brazilian who had studied at Haguro since 2003 in the school’s exchange programme. Aside from Katayama, the team also boasted two other Brazilian exchange students, one of whom was dubbed ‘Haguro’s Ichirô’ (after Japan’s most famous baseball player). These non-Japanese students, together with America-educated coach, Kento Yokota, who both inspired and bemused viewers with his English-heavy interviews, drew attention to the fact that even non-metropolitan so-called ‘rural’ areas of Japan are becoming increasingly diverse, both culturally and racially. Nowhere is this more evident than in local schools.

This article focuses on public and private responses to, and initiatives in connection with, the increasing presence of ‘newcomers’ in Yamagata schools. To date, almost all research in this area has focused on what have been called ‘diversity points’ (Tsuneyoshi 2004: 56) or shūjū toshi, urban areas with large visible concentrations of non-Japanese, such as Kanagawa Prefecture (Kawasaki City), Shizuoka Prefecture (Hamamatsu City), Gunma Prefecture (Ōta City), as well as Tokyo and Osaka. However, most children who require Japanese instruction are not concentrated in such areas but rather spread across Japan: over 80 per cent of schools and more than half of villages, towns and cities have four or fewer such students (MEXT 2005a). In other words, statistically, regions such as Yamagata are much more representative of the experiences of the majority of non-Japanese children in Japan than the ‘diversity points’, which even advocates acknowledge are by no means typical (Nukaga 2003: 81). As such, the purpose of this article is both to note the existence of a gap in the research and to begin to address that gap through original research.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section will define the terms and categories used in the debate on ‘newcomer’ children. The next section will examine the common notion that Japanese schools are homogeneous places which force newcomer children to assimilate to the Japanese language and culture. Then, following a summary of national policy responses towards ‘newcomer’ children, the article moves on to an overview of the situation in Yamagata. This section gives voice to parents, children and teachers in Yamagata using questionnaire, interview and other data. The conclusion will reiterate the central argument, namely that, contrary to the impression given by most academic research and media reports, the majority of public schools are unable to provide adequate – if any – support to newcomer students. Rather, it is local volunteers and non-governmental organizations that are the major players in supporting newcomer children.

Who are ‘newcomer’ children?

Research on the latest wave of diversity in Japanese schools (for example, Miyajima and Suzuki 2000; Ōta 1996, 2000; Shimizu and Shimizu 2001) has
tended to focus on the category ‘newcomer (foreign) children’. Shimizu and Shimizu (2001: 3) define ‘newcomers’ (nyūkamā) as those who came to Japan from the mid-1970s onwards. Like the term ‘newcomer’ itself, ‘newcomer (foreign) children’ typically refers to children who were born and brought up outside Japan. Children of Nikkeijin (South Americans of Japanese descent) are a typical example. Another example are step-children, exemplified by the case of a non-Japanese woman marrying a Japanese man who brings (or is later joined by – yobiyose) a child or children (tsureko) from a first marriage (Fukatsu 2003). In contrast, children who are born and brought up in Japan (and who have linguistic and cultural fluency in Japanese and, very often, Japanese citizenship), even if one or both parent(s) is a ‘newcomer’, tend not to be included in the category ‘newcomer children’. Nevertheless, such children may also have additional languages, experiences, knowledge and identities. They may also look different.

The number of registered foreign children of compulsory school age as of December 2004 was 120,417 (Hōmushō 2005: 31–2), a figure which does not include the children of the 240,000 or so undocumented migrants estimated to be resident in Japan (Hōmushō Nyūoku Kanrikyoku 2005). The number of non-Japanese children actually enrolled in Japanese public schools was 70,345 as of 1 May 2004 (MEXT 2005b).

The work of Ōta Haruo, an authority in the field, illustrates the difficulties in defining ‘newcomer’ children. In his 1996 article, Ōta (1996) examined nyūkamā gaikokujin no kodomo (newcomer foreign children), mirroring Takahashi and Vaipae’s (1996) book of the same year which also refers to ‘foreign children/students’. However, his 2000 book (Ōta 2000) focused on nyūkamā no kodomo, dropping the ‘foreign’ qualifier. This acknowledges the reality that, despite being born and brought up elsewhere, many children do naturalize and become Japanese citizens, a procedure which in recent years has become relatively simple (Murphy-Shigematsu 2004: 53). However, the popular association of the term ‘newcomer’ with ‘recently arrived’ forced Ōta (1996: 141) to exclude residents (teijū gaikokujin) from his definition. The arbitrariness of the distinction between ‘newcomer’ and ‘resident’ – and the difficulty in deciding when a ‘newcomer’ becomes a ‘resident’ – may have prompted a change of tack. In his 2002 article, Ōta focuses on ‘children whose first language is not the school language’.

This latter category bears similarities to (but also important differences from) the category adopted by MEXT (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology), namely Nihongo shidō ga hitsuyō na gaikokujin jidō seito (foreign students who need Japanese language instruction). As of 1 September 2004, 19,678 foreign children were classified as requiring Japanese language instruction in public schools, 28 per cent of the total enrolled (MEXT 2005a). Of these, 16,529 (84 per cent) were reportedly receiving some sort of support.

MEXT’s category is problematic for a number of reasons. First, there is no clear official definition of the term, judgement usually being left to individual schools (Miyajima and Suzuki 2000: 192). Second, once students are adjudged to have
reached a certain level of Japanese – usually proficiency in daily conversation and basic reading – they fall outside the Ministry’s scope and ‘disappear’ from the statistics. But, as many have noted, proficiency in everyday language (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills or BICS), which typically takes one to two years to acquire, is quite different from proficiency in the language of school life (Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency or CALP) which typically requires five to seven years (Cummins 1981; Fukatsu 2003: 16). The result is that, although the ‘problem’ of language and of acculturation to school life is often considered solved after a year or so, in fact such students increasingly fall behind, unable to participate in or follow what is going on in class (Ôta 1996: 128–9). Sasaki and Akuzawa (2001: 108) are particularly critical of the MEXT categorization, pointing out that, even if such children come to speak and act like Japanese, ‘foreigners are still foreigners’. ‘[A]s the number of nyûkamû children who . . . do not require Japanese as a Second Language assistance increases’, writes Tsuneyoshi (2004: 62), ‘there may be a need to coin another term which is sensitive to the diversity within this category’.

In the absence of an alternative category, for the purpose of this article I continue to use ‘newcomer children’ as convenient shorthand. However, I focus in particular on those children whose first language is not Japanese (nihongo o bogo to shinaijidô seito), a category more in evidence at the local level. This category inevitably excludes key elements of diversity in the student population, such as second- and third-generation migrants, indigenous minorities and ‘half’ children. However, it does avoid the arbitrariness of the MEXT category, including children who: (a) have attained proficiency in everyday Japanese; and (b) hold Japanese citizenship. It also reflects the recent unprecedented diversity – in terms of numbers, languages and geographical spread – which Ôta has called ‘one of the most significant historical challenges to the Japanese public school system’ (2000: 6).

‘Newcomers’ in Japanese public schools

Both the Constitution and the Fundamental Law of Education guarantee nine years of compulsory schooling for Japanese nationals. Although there is no similar domestic provision referring to the education of foreign nationals, in practice any non-Japanese child who expresses a desire to go to public school and submits a negaisho (letter of request) can enter on the same terms as a Japanese child (MEXT 2005b: 4). This policy of equal treatment, with its roots in the 1965 Japan-Korea Status Agreement (Fukatsu 2003: 13), was originally focused on the children of resident Koreans. Sasaki and Akuzawa (2001: 98) relate the 1987 case of Cambodian parents of a school-age child failing to receive notification to attend school. However, by 1991 local governments were required to send out shugaku annai (information on attending school) to the school-age children of all registered foreign nationals; moreover, educational rights and entitlements are now enshrined in various international conventions ratified by the Japanese
government (Okano and Tsuchiya 1999: 136). While some criticize the need to gain ‘permission’ to go to school as making education appear a ‘favour’ rather than a right (Ōta 1996: 124), instances like the 1992 case of a child being refused entry due to lack of Japanese ability (Sasaki and Akuzawa 2001: 98) are practically unheard of today.11

While the principle of ‘equal treatment’ ensures that non-Japanese children are treated the same as Japanese children, many writers have noted that difference tends to be suppressed in Japanese education. Tsuneyoshi (2004: 76–7) describes an ideology of īseiki kyōdōtai shugi (togetherness), which, by placing value on working co-operatively and dressing uniformly, helps to sustain an image of homogeneity. Similarly, Shimizu and Shimizu (2001: 4, 26) describe school culture as uniform, closed and based on a principle of īseī shūdan shugi – the group acting in unison, all together – traits which put great pressure on students to assimilate. What is interpreted as ‘assimilation’ usually entails urging students to become more ‘Japanese-like’ (Nukaga 2003: 82). Ōta calls this the principle of national education (kokumin kyōiku), the idea that the fundamental purpose of schooling in Japan is to educate Japanese citizens (Fukatsu 2003: 14).

Recent government educational reforms provide some support for this position. For example, the Central Council on Education describes the goal of education as ‘nurturing spiritually-rich and strong Japanese to open up a new path in the 21st century’, noting that ‘it is important to raise (hagukumu) individuals who are conscious of the fact that they are Japanese, who love hometown and nation, and who have proud hearts’ (Central Council for Education 2005: 3). Moreover, a patriotic attitude is listed as one of the key educational goals in the revision of the Fundamental Law of Education (Yomiuri Shinbun 2005a), which was passed by the Diet in December 2006 (Daily Yomiuri 2005a). Yoon (1996; 1997), like Ōta above, is critical of what he sees as ‘nationalistic’ system of education in Japanese schools and argues for a system more accepting of children with different cultural backgrounds. However, this kind of ‘multicultural’ discourse is not without its critics. Okubo (forthcoming), in a study of Chinese and Vietnamese children in a buraku community in Osaka, noted how many teachers and volunteers strongly promoted ‘retaining and nurturing ethnic identity’. The slogan of multiculturalism, she argues, resulted in the marginalization of newcomers who were ‘forced to’ claim ethnic identities and ‘expected to’ live as minorities.12 Contradictions are rife. On the one hand, a number of researchers have argued that Japanese schools are homogeneous places characterized by strong pressures to assimilate. This stance is perhaps unsurprising given that educational assimilation was a key feature in the integration of older minority groups in Japan, such as the Ainu, Ryūkyūjin and Burakumin, and also, at least until the mid-1990s, Japanese returnees (kikokushijo). On the other hand, both nationalistic and multicultural discourses can work to marginalize foreigners and exclude them from becoming Japanese, suggesting strong pressures against assimilation. Clearly, non-Japanese children encounter a number of contradictory signals. ‘They should become
like us’, writes Fukatsu (2003: 132), ‘and yet they should know that they are different.’

One problem is that many researchers have tended to adopt a generalized one-dimensional view of all Japanese schools, one that ignores their complexity and variety. Rohlen and LeTendre’s (1996) edited volume contains a number of ethnographic studies of Japanese classrooms that suggest that Japanese public schools – at least at the primary level – are not homogenizing but very much student-centred and inquiry based. Susser (1998: 56–60) provides an excellent summary of other relevant literature in a detailed critique of the common stereotypes of Japanese education as group-oriented, hierarchical and harmonious. Finally, Lewis’s (1995: 12) observation that elementary school teachers devote a good deal of attention to developing a sense of community so that all children come to feel like valued members of the school community shows how ‘conformist’ can be reinterpreted as ‘caring’. The only conclusion that can be made is that the kind of environment that newcomer children enter – and presumably the kind of support they receive – varies hugely depending on what stage they enter the school system13 and the individual school itself.

Another problem with many existing studies is their failure to acknowledge that students are not passive ‘victims’ moulded by their environment but active agents negotiating multiple discourses – homogeneity, nationalism, multiculturalism – as they constantly construct and reconstruct their identities. Morita, in a study of three Japanese-Brazilian students enrolled in a Japanese elementary school, describes her subjects as follows:

They are not simply passive recipients of obstacles, but are tactically sensitive agents: the seemingly disadvantaged foreign students actually maximize their personal resources and maneuver survival strategies for identity politics, whereby they position themselves as equal to or better than multiple marginal students. The perspective of agency and politics can trigger Japanese researchers to reconsider their static thinking of Japan’s unique demerits (i.e. cultural incompatibility and oppressive homogenizing pressure) as the newcomer foreign children’s major obstacles.

(Morita 2002: 1)

By not starting off with assumptions of homogeneity, Morita is able to show how the three students managed to integrate socially by actively taking control of their identities and creating positive senses of themselves. Nevertheless, however resourceful individual students may be, the construction of positive self-identities clearly depends a great deal on their social interaction with and the support they receive from those around them, including (according to Morita’s findings) other ‘minority’ students. Morita’s research, like most existing studies, sheds little light on the situation in non-metropolitan areas, which are typically ineligible for national government aid because newcomers are so few in number and rarely concentrated in a single school.
National support for ‘newcomer’ children

Although there is no space to discuss national government policy in any detail, MEXT’s ‘Policies towards Returnee and Foreign Students’ (‘Kikoku/gaikokujin jidō seito kyōiku ni kansuru shisaku’) (MEXT 2005c) are mostly concerned with guidance on learning Japanese and adjusting/adapting to Japanese school culture. The most visible manifestation of this is the dispatch, since 1992, of teachers to individual schools specifically to teach Japanese as a second language (JSL) and provide guidance on school culture (MEXT 2005c). However, according to Ōta (2002: 96), these teachers are not all Japanese teaching specialists and, in any case, are too few in number, being dispatched only to schools with large concentrations of newcomers. Moreover, as Fukatsu (2003: 19) points out, funding from the national budget for these teachers was abolished in the 2003 academic year. Now, the national government pays half the salaries of these teachers – who numbered 985 in 2004 – under exceptional additional expenses (tokurei kasan) (MEXT 2005b). Numerically, holding workshops, the posting of assistant teachers and setting up of counselling services remain by far the most commonly implemented policies (MEXT 2005a: 17). Since 2003, the government has encouraged municipalities to launch tokku special structural reform zones eligible for deregulation. For example, after having its tokku project approved in March 2005, Ōta City hired seven full-time bilingual teachers holding teaching certificates from either Japan or Brazil (Daily Yomiuri 2005b). Again, though, the point is that such funding is exclusively channelled to urban areas with high concentrations of newcomers. In the following section, I examine the support available to and the problems encountered by students in a non-metropolitan area.

The research site: Yamagata

Yamagata has the highest percentage of three-generation households in Japan (Yamagata-ken Tōkei Kyōkai 2005: 24), a statistic which reflects the continued influence of the traditional ie (household) system in the prefecture. Indeed, the desire of some ie to reproduce themselves and the associated agricultural way of life resulted in local governments, concerned at the increase in unmarried eldest sons, implementing kōkeisha taisaku (measures to retain heirs) (Tamanoi 1998: 200). One manifestation of this policy was the ‘importation’ of foreign brides (Suzuki 2000: 147). In 1985, Asahi Town in Yamagata became the first place in Japan to bring in brides from abroad (Shukuya 1988). Today, one in seventeen (6.1 per cent) of all marriages in the prefecture are ‘international’ marriages, compared with around one in twenty (4.9 per cent) nationally (Yamagata Shimbun 2005a). These marriages have fuelled the rapid growth of the foreign population in the prefecture, which has more than doubled since 1996 (Table 1). As non-Japanese spouses become increasingly settled in an extended family, a neighbourhood and
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Table 1 Registered foreigners in Japan and Yamagata by number, 1994–2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1,354,011</td>
<td>1,415,136</td>
<td>1,512,116</td>
<td>1,686,444</td>
<td>1,851,758</td>
<td>1,973,747</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(% increase)</td>
<td>(4.5%)</td>
<td>(6.9%)</td>
<td>(11.5%)</td>
<td>(10%)</td>
<td>(6.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamagata</td>
<td>3,071</td>
<td>3,619</td>
<td>4,756</td>
<td>6,347</td>
<td>6,926</td>
<td>7,312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(% increase)</td>
<td>(18%)</td>
<td>(31%)</td>
<td>(33%)</td>
<td>(9%)</td>
<td>(5.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Notes: Figures are for December of the relevant years. ‘% increase’ is from the previous year in the table.

a local community, many choose to apply for permanent residence or even citizenship.

Despite prevailing images of ‘Filipino brides’, Koreans and Chinese comprise almost 70 per cent of registered foreigners in Yamagata, the vast majority being ‘newcomers’ rather than ‘oldcomers’.\(^\text{14}\) Foreign spouses easily comprise the largest group of newcomers in Yamagata. These spouses, rooted in an extended family, a neighbourhood and a local community, have infiltrated local society in a way that many temporary or circular ‘trans-national’ migrants in other areas have not (Burgess 2004a, forthcoming). Aside from the spouses, another group of newcomers stands out. Yamagata has the second highest number of returnees from China (Nishigami 1999: 225). The presence of several thousand Chinese returnees in Yamagata is due to the high rate of labour migration from the prefecture to Manchuria during the 1930s (Takagi 1997: 100).

The number of non-Japanese children (age 5–14) registered in Yamagata stood at 275 as of December 2004 (Nyūkan-Kyōkai 2005), a figure which does not include those children born in Japan to one non-Japanese and one Japanese parent, those who have naturalized or those who hold dual nationality. Data on non-Japanese children actually enrolled in public schools was not available. However, Yamagata City states that there are no non-attendees within the city. As discussed earlier, MEXT data on ‘foreign children who need Japanese instruction’ covers only those foreign students who are considered as needing JSL instruction. Nevertheless, Table 2 does give some indication of the number of older children brought to Japan in recent years.

As Table 2 indicates, students whose mother tongue was Chinese were by far the largest group, with Korean native speakers a distant second. Undoubtedly, this reflects the presence of many Chinese returnees in Yamagata. Children whose first language was Portuguese numbered only two, reflecting the small number of Brazilian Nikkeijin in the prefecture. This is the opposite of the national picture in which Portuguese and Spanish native speakers comprise more than half of all such children. However, as nationally, children are spread across schools, with
Table 2 Foreign students who need Japanese instruction, showing mother tongue and school level, Yamagata Prefecture, 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Korean</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Tagalog</th>
<th>Portuguese</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Yamagata-ken Bunka Kankō Bu Bunka Shinkōka Kokusai Shitsu (International Office, Division for Culture and Environment, Section for the Promotion of Culture, Yamagata Prefecture).
Note: As of 1 September.

The realization that, contrary to the impression given by most academic research and media reports, the majority of public schools are unable to provide adequate support to newcomer students arose from a period of PhD fieldwork in Yamagata carried out from September 2001 to March 2002. During this period, I was affiliated with the International Volunteer Centre Yamagata (IVY), a small non-profit organization (NPO) which, while running some projects in Cambodia, was mainly concerned with providing counselling and language support for non-Japanese in the locality, especially women who had come from abroad to marry Japanese men. Initially, the research focused on the identity construction of female international marriage migrants in Yamagata and their role as potential agents of social change (Burgess 2003). However, during fieldwork the issue of ‘newcomer’ children came to the fore. The necessity of providing ‘newcomer’ children with appropriate Japanese language support was first discussed at an IVY-sponsored two-day symposium in Yamagata on 22–3 December 2001, entitled ‘Nihon no gakkō de manabu kodomotachi e no Nihongo kyōiku’ (Japanese Language Education for Children in Japanese Schools). This was followed by a March/April 2002 questionnaire, administered by IVY on behalf of the prefectural International Office.

Questionnaire and interview data

The realization that, contrary to the impression given by most academic research and media reports, the majority of public schools are unable to provide adequate support to newcomer students arose from a period of PhD fieldwork in Yamagata carried out from September 2001 to March 2002. During this period, I was affiliated with the International Volunteer Centre Yamagata (IVY), a small non-profit organization (NPO) which, while running some projects in Cambodia, was mainly concerned with providing counselling and language support for non-Japanese in the locality, especially women who had come from abroad to marry Japanese men. Initially, the research focused on the identity construction of female international marriage migrants in Yamagata and their role as potential agents of social change (Burgess 2003). However, during fieldwork the issue of ‘newcomer’ children came to the fore. The necessity of providing ‘newcomer’ children with appropriate Japanese language support was first discussed at an IVY-sponsored two-day symposium in Yamagata on 22–3 December 2001, entitled ‘Nihon no gakkō de manabu kodomotachi e no Nihongo kyōiku’ (Japanese Language Education for Children in Japanese Schools). This was followed by a March/April 2002 questionnaire, administered by IVY on behalf of the prefectural International Office.
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and in collaboration with prefectural and local education boards. The questionnaire results were used by IVY and other local volunteer organizations to establish the first-ever support programmes for these children.

Three kinds of data are presented in roughly chronological order. The first consists of interviews with non-Japanese women conducted during the initial fieldwork period. Although the original research focus had been on the identity construction of so-called ‘Asian brides’, interviewees with children inevitably talked about child-rearing and education in Japan during the course of their interviews. The second kind of data comes from the prefecture-wide questionnaire, a survey the author helped to put together and translate while in Yamagata, but which has never been made public. The third kind of data consists of interviews with volunteer teachers and project organizers, conducted via e-mail and during a number of short return visits to Yamagata. Although there is space only to hear brief snatches of the voices of these parents, students and teachers, the data do highlight some of the differences between the kind of support given to newcomer children in urban areas, where most of the existing studies have taken place, and that in non-metropolitan areas, like Yamagata.

Parent voices

Marriage migrants with children from previous marriages can either bring their children with them to start a new life together in Japan or leave them with relatives in their homeland so that they can continue their schooling before joining the mother later. The latter option was by far the most common. One example was Yai, who came from China in 1999 to marry her Japanese husband. According to Yai, among Chinese newcomers in Yamagata, it is often said that, in order for their mother tongue to become properly established, it is better for their children to complete elementary school in China before coming to Japan. Then, because the semester system differs between the two countries, children can enter the second semester of sixth grade in Japan and study Japanese (kokugo) intensively before going on to middle school. But when she talks of her 11-year-old daughter in China, she becomes visibly upset:

My husband tells me to bring her to Japan . . . [but] I’ve heard bullying is rife in Japanese schools, you see. And besides, China is the best place for her to study. After she’s a bit older and can make decisions for herself, she’ll come to Japan. We always talk on the phone, but it makes me sad, really sad.

Yai’s daughter did, as planned, join her mother in Japan and is now attending the local middle school. Yai’s story mirrors that of Myung-Mi, a Korean who also came to Yamagata in 1999 to marry her Japanese husband:

There was nobody in the house except for me and my husband and father-in-law. I was lonely. My daughter didn’t come with me. I was on my own.
was hard. At first I didn’t tell anybody about my daughter. For about a year I really suffered [with that secret]... I was worried about my daughter, whether she would be happy living here not knowing the language in a different culture with different customs.

Like Yai’s, Myung-Mi’s 13-year-old daughter eventually joined her in Japan and entered the local school. According to her mother, she now has no problem with either Japanese or Korean. The final interview excerpt is from Kanlin, a Chinese woman who had come as a foreign student to Japan in 1992 and was now working. She was married not to a Japanese but to a fellow Chinese, and was concerned not with bringing her son to Japan but when she would take him back to China:

Now my son is a middle school student. I brought him to Japan when he was a first-year elementary school student. He speaks mostly Japanese now, though he can speak Chinese. It’s kanji. He can’t write [Chinese] kanji. Can’t read or write. That’s because we couldn’t teach it at home. Last year we debated whether to go back home or stay in Japan. In the end, we decided that for his sake we should stay a little longer in Japan.

These excerpts provide some background for understanding the 2002 questionnaire, a survey which represented the first attempt to grasp the situation of newcomer parents and children in Yamagata systematically.

Student voices

Entitled ‘Nihongo o bogo to shinai jidō seito to hogosha o taishō to suru anketo’, the questionnaire was aimed at those children (and their guardians) attending elementary and middle schools within the prefecture whose first language was not Japanese. Of the 263 questionnaires, 105 were sent to those identified in MEXT’s 2001 survey as requiring Japanese language instruction, fifty-three to students deemed in the past to have required instruction and 105 to the children of Chinese returnees deemed to require (or who in the past required) instruction. In addition, sixteen respondent families (thirteen Chinese and three Korean) agreed to follow-up interviews carried out in their native language. Questionnaires were provided in Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Tagalog, Portuguese and English. The reply rate was 27.4 per cent.

With questions focusing on learning and lifestyle, results and recommendations were presented in a March 2003 unpublished prefectural report. One interesting point was that over half of the respondents chose to fill out the Japanese questionnaire, while a quarter of children who were judged to require Japanese instruction had Japanese nationality. As pointed out earlier, these children would not have appeared in MEXT’s ‘foreign student’ category. The vast majority of children had been in Japan between six months and three years. When asked what they would like the school or locality to do, replies included Japanese instruction (43),
lesson support (31), dispatch of interpreters (14) and mother tongue support (10). When asked who they would like to see in school or in the locality, the top three answers were someone who can teach Japanese in their mother tongue (27), someone who can interpret and counsel in their mother tongue (23) and teachers who understand their mother tongue (20). A child-friendly dictionary (39) together with bilingual materials (22) and textbooks (13) were items picked out as most desirable.

Although statistical data were useful, it was the (anonymous) individual voices of the children themselves in the free response part of the survey that provided some of the deepest insights. For example, only individual words can fully convey the hardships of the early months:

It's a year and a half since I came to Japan. This year and a half, however hard I study I feel progress in Japanese has been slow. At school, when I see my classmates talking about something interesting and laughing out loud I have no idea what to say. Watching others next to me laughing makes my face stiffen. At such times, I feel really bad. Next year, I will take the entrance examination to go on to high school. At first, I intended to take the exam of the best school in the area, but now, with my Japanese level, it's extremely difficult. I can’t count on passing. I really don’t know what to do.

Worry over the future and particularly over progressing on to high school was a constant theme. Some children talked of hating school and study and wanting to go back home, to their native country, to see relatives and friends. Nevertheless, many children did overcome their initial difficulties and achieve some measure of happiness and success:

The first year after coming to Japan was really tough. I was troubled by Japanese language study, cultural differences, and relations with friends. However, bit by bit I came to speak Japanese and school became fun. I have made lots of friends and now it’s so much fun I can barely contain myself! I’m going to graduate soon, but even after that I want to strive to do the best I can.

Some students even made practical suggestions regarding ways to alleviate the feelings of isolation and loneliness that tended to characterise the first year or so:

It was really tough [at first]. Sitting in the classroom, listening to the lesson – well, I couldn’t understand anything. Even if my friends laughed I had no idea what was funny. I was on my own, alone. At first I would have loved to have been taught by a teacher who knew my native language. That had always been a wish of mine. If there had have been someone I could discuss things with in my native language, someone who would listen to what I have to say, it would have been fantastic.

This kind of comment was fairly typical, a powerful reminder that in most cases the student was the only non-Japanese native not only in the class but also in the
whole school. Many respondents noted how much easier adjustment would have been if, during the first few months, there had been someone who understood their native language around. In particular, students struggled with Japanese (kokugo) and mathematics, with around 30 per cent saying they could not understand these classes. With only a handful of Chinese- or Korean-speaking instructors of Japanese dispatched by volunteer organizations in Yamagata City itself at the time – and no systematic support at all outside the prefectural capital – IVY identified native language support and supplementary classes as the key areas that needed to be developed.

**Teacher voices**

The results of this questionnaire shed light on some of the difficulties and problems faced by newcomer children about which previously little had been known. However, despite the fact that the questionnaire was carried out under the auspices of the prefectural International Office, public organizations showed little inclination to introduce any policy initiatives. Instead, it was left up to local volunteer organizations to provide support. For example, since the 2002 questionnaire, IVY has sponsored workshops and teacher-training courses, career guidance sessions with interpreters present and study-bees to supplement regular school classes, including a Saturday class for returnees from China. One Chinese-speaking Japanese IVY member who teaches Japanese (kokugo) part-time in a local high school summed up her experiences as follows:

It’s been three years now I’ve been teaching there. In the first year, all I did was to translate letters between the guardian of a Chinese girl, who was in another class, and her teacher. The school didn’t realize that the girl needed academic Japanese support and it seems she couldn’t keep up. In the second year, last year, I had a Korean boy in my class, and this year there’s a Chinese girl… The Korean boy was upper class and in that sense he seemed settled. The class itself was easy to teach and caring for him was also relatively easy… he provided a lot of opportunities for everybody to think about the odd points and special features of Japanese which he noticed.

However, despite the presence of some individuals like this within the schools, in Yamagata newcomer children for the most part receive support not inside schools but outside. The key programme here is the Yamagata Schooling Support (YSS) programme, run by the Yamagata City International Friendship Association (YIFA). YIFA, although nominally an independent organization, is closely affiliated with Yamagata City, receiving most of its funding from the city and with the mayor as its head. In May 2004, YIFA made use of a national government regional development grant to establish a ‘Resident Foreigner School Support Programme’ (Zaijū gaikokujin shūgaku shien jigyō) (Yamagata Shinbun 2004). Aimed at children between 5 and 20 years old and utilizing both bilingual staff
and student volunteers, there are three main ‘courses’ on offer, on top of a summer intensive course and a school-visit course. The first is a four-hour-a-day, five-day-a-week Japanese class for newly arrived children. The second provides supplementary classes at weekends for those already attending school. The third is a ‘high-teen’ five-day-a-week class aimed at older children who have finished compulsory education in their own country and who may be thinking of going to high school or university in Japan. From May 2004 to March 2005, there were ten, forty-three and eleven participants respectively for the three courses, with countries of birth comprising China (43), the Philippines (8), Korea (7), the USA (4), Thailand (1) and Japan (1). Since classes take place in the Yamagata City Sister City Exchange Centre – management of which is entrusted by the city to YIFA – most students (60 per cent) were from Yamagata City itself. The Centre also holds various one-off events, such as parties, career counselling, get-togethers for guardians and workshops for teachers.

The YSS programme has been an unreserved success. In some ways it has been a victim of its own success as the venue has become a popular refuge where newcomer children who cannot concentrate in school and/or who lack motivation come to hang around, often for hours on end. The key problem is inevitably funding. With the initial government grant of 16.7 million yen being for one year only, there were real fears that the programme might have to be scrapped once this ran out (Mainichi Shinbun 2005). Eventually, thanks to a 6 million yen grant from the city, a further million from five other surrounding cities and towns and some help from local NPOs and the prefectural and national government, the programme was able to continue into its second year, albeit with cutbacks in personnel and classes (Yamagata Shinbun 2005b). One insider, a Japanese teacher who also helps run the programme, describes the situation in quite bleak terms:

The effects have been dramatic. In the 2005 financial year, only the coordinator has remained full-time, with the other [four] teachers now paid hourly. . . . The two other teachers from last year have gone elsewhere. Of course, the programme has been drastically cut. Despite the fact that we’re supporting children, one precondition [of the new funding] was that we couldn’t dispatch teachers to schools, something I strongly objected to and fought against. Eventually, and only very recently, we’ve been allowed to do this on a limited basis. In terms of how we support [the children], there are too many problems to list, but basically lack of funds mean we can’t run a proper programme. On top of this, the administrative framework and restrictions are too much. I no longer know who this support programme is for and what its purpose is.

The dilemma is that, while volunteer organizations like IVY and YIFA do not have the funding to offer proper support on their own, local public funding is often so tied up in red-tape as to compromise their activities. The bottom line is that in rural areas with small numbers of newcomers the issue is not a priority and the conservative members of city, town and village education boards where decisions
are often made typically take the view that such children should be integrated as quickly as possible. As one recent headline in the local newspaper put it, ‘Nihongo hayaku narēte ne’ (Get used to Japanese quickly, OK!) (Yamagata Shinbun 2004).

**Conclusion: invisible children**

Yamagata’s recent success in the national high school invitational baseball tournament was a reminder that diversity is no longer limited to metropolitan areas – or schools – in Japan. This is not to say that places like Yamagata have large populations of ‘foreigners’. Representativeness is a slippery term, and in terms of registered foreigners it is difficult to say that Yamagata is particularly representative of diversity in Japan. Nevertheless, public schools with small concentrations of non-Japanese are, statistically, the rule rather than the exception. However, to date it is the exceptions, the so-called ‘diversity points’, which have tended to receive the majority of media and academic attention. While such work has importance, it is also important to look at what is happening outside places like Kanagawa, Shizuoka and Gunma in order to broaden our understanding of the experiences of newcomer children in Japanese society.

The problems with the terms and categories used in the discussion on ‘newcomer’ children work against this broadening of the field of study. The category ‘foreign students who need Japanese instruction’ is particularly problematic for the way it excludes large swaths of diversity, disguising the true extent of multiculturalism in the regions. Nevertheless, the reality is that the 80 per cent of schools who have four or fewer students who are adjudged to ‘need Japanese instruction’ generally do not qualify for national government assistance such as the dispatch of special teachers. As a result, support tends to come not from inside but from outside the school. Sometimes volunteer organizations are the only source of support for the majority of ‘newcomer’ children in Japan. In this sense, Yamagata offered an example of the ways local players outside schools have responded to the growing diversity of the student population. Following the belated recognition of the issue, the initial steps in Yamagata came from a local NPO. Later, the prefectural city – collaborating closely with the NPO – set up a practical programme of support. However, without a clear overall policy statement at the prefectural level for the education of the ‘culturally different’, programmes remain *ad hoc* and dependent on annual budget fluctuations.

Two of the most authoritative recent Japanese studies of newcomer children in Japanese public schools have opened with similar observations. For Ōta (2000: 25–6), MEXT’s policy of treating newcomer children the same as Japanese children renders them ‘invisible’ or ‘absent’. Shimizu and Shimizu’s (2001: 34) study observes that newcomer children are, ‘if not invisible’, then ‘difficult to see’ or ‘inconspicuous’. However, the many academic studies, including the two above, which have focused on schools in urban areas that have large numbers of newcomer students mean that children in these areas have attained a reasonable degree of
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visibility. The problem is that the many other newcomer children scattered around non-metropolitan areas who attract neither research nor government funding have become, if anything, even more difficult to see. This article is intended both as a reminder of the existence of these ‘invisible’ children and also as a trigger for further research.

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**Notes**

1. Hereafter, Yamagata. When referring specifically to the prefecutal capital, the term Yamagata City will be used.
2. Some writers, such as Sasaki and Akuzawa (2001), have used the term ‘minority’ rather than ‘newcomer’ children. ‘Minority’ generally designates a group that is not only numerically small but also disadvantaged or otherwise has less power. As I (2004a: 229) argue in the context of international marriage migrants, the term tends to lock a group into a state of permanent marginality or victim-hood when in fact they may actually have the potential to shape fundamental social change.
3. Such children generally have no problem acquiring a visa if the Japanese spouse is in agreement. However, other cases continue to be judged on a case-by-case basis. Fukatsu (2003: 8) notes that, although Chinese ‘war orphans’ are legally allowed to be accompanied by their children’s families, deportation orders have been issued against those with no blood ties to a war orphan. Courts have issued conflicting judgments on this issue. On a more positive note, the Ministry of Justice has indicated a more flexible approach in granting special permission to stay in Japan to people without proper visas facing deportation, particularly in cases where deportation would result in the break-up of families (Hōmushō Nyūkoku Kanrikyoku 2006).
4. In Japan, those who look physically distinct from majority Japanese, regardless of nationality, tend to be labelled as gai(koku)jin, reflecting the ideology that ‘Japaneseness’ is inextricably intertwined with notions of ethnicity and blood. Children with one non-Japanese parent – particularly (white) Americans who can speak English (Murphy-Shigematsu 2000: 212–13) – are also labelled as hāfu (half). In contrast, those who are physically indistinguishable from majority Japanese are generally expected to behave exactly like ‘ordinary Japanese’.
5. As Fukatsu (2003: 12) points out, there is a slight discrepancy in the data, as the Ministry of Justice figures are for ages 5 to 14, while the compulsory school age in Japan is from 6 to 15.
6. Municipal and private organizations, who, unlike government organizations, tend to be in first-hand contact with migrants, are often much more sensitive to categorization. For example, IVY, the NPO I was affiliated with in Yamagata during fieldwork, tended to eschew the term gaikoku'in jidō seito, using instead the term gaikoku shu shin no kodomo/seito (foreign-born children/students) when referring to ‘newcomer’ children.
7. In fact, MEXT has a separate category for ‘students holding Japanese nationality who require Japanese instruction’. There were 3,137 such students in 2004 (MEXT 2005a). One wonders why these students are not mentioned in the shorter download/print version of the survey and, indeed, why the distinction is necessary at all.

8. It is not clear if schools allow students who submit such a request to enter immediately or if they are made to wait until the start of the next school year (April). During fieldwork in Yamagata, I heard stories of children who had nothing to do but sit around at home after being refused immediate entry.


10. Although some schools do accept the children of unregistered (i.e. illegal) foreign nationals, this appears to be the exception rather than the rule.

11. Non-Japanese children can attend public school but are not obliged to. As seen earlier, there is a marked gap between the number of registered school-age foreign children and the number enrolled in Japanese schools. In Ōta’s (2000: 8) study of a mid-size city in the Tōkai region, 16.2 per cent of newcomer children did not attend elementary school, 39 per cent were not enrolled in junior high and fewer than half went on to high school. Moreover, Shimazaki (2003: 22) suggests that absence among newcomer children who are enrolled is significantly higher than that of Japanese children. The situation for Nikkeijin may be even worse: the Brazilian Consulate General in Nagoya estimates that of 40,000 school-age children in Japan, 15,000 go to regular schools and 8,000 to Brazilian schools, leaving 17,000 non-attendees (Yomiuri Shimbun 2005b). Many non-attendees apparently no longer live at the addresses registered on their Alien Registration Cards, meaning shugaku annai never reach them.

12. For more on the problems of tabunka (multiculturalism) and associated terms like kokusaiha (internationalization), kokusai kōryū (international exchange), ibunka (different culture) and kyōsei (coexistence), see Burgess (2004b). Given the centrality of these terms in discussions on diversity in Japan – for example, tabunka kyōsei is the official slogan of Kawasaki City – it is disappointing to see them so often accepted at face value with little or no critical analysis.

13. See the case of Yai, detailed in the data section.

14. As of December 2004, there were only 465 Special Permanent Residents (i.e. oldcomers) and 565 Long-Term Residents (teijusha), the visa type most closely associated with Nikkeijin, but also available to divorced/widowed spouses having custody of their (Japanese national) children (Nyūkan-Kyōkai 2005).

15. IVY (http://www.ivyivy.org) was established in December 1991 by a group of citizens interested in global problems. IVY was originally known as JVC (Japan Volunteer Centre) Yamagata and affiliated with the national JVC organization. In January 1999, it changed its name to IVY and became an independent entity. In June of the same year, it was designated a tokutei hi-eiri katsudō ojin (literally a special non-profit-making action corporation or NPO).

16. See Burgess (2006) for a summary of this case and of the situation in Yamagata in general.

17. For example, in the March 2004 ‘Fifth Plan for the Promotion of Education in Yamagata Prefecture’ (‘Dai 5-ji Yamagata-ken kyōiku shinkō keikaku’), the situation of newcomer children – referred to as ‘students from abroad who do not speak Japanese’ – received only a passing mention. Although noting the rise of such children and Japanese society’s ‘international obligation’ to respond, the policy response was to ‘consider’ individual language instruction (Yamagata Prefecture 2004: 63–4). According to a knowledgeable local volunteer teacher, one reason for the lack of interest in this issue is prejudice against children brought to Japan by ‘foreign brides’.

18. There is no space to explore the suggestion that the class background of students is a factor in academic success, but it fits in with Goodman’s assertion that ‘the low status of most of Japan’s
minority groups can be more closely related to their class marginality than the cultural or ethnic reasons normally cited’ (1990: 9).

19. In March 2005, these five cities and towns, plus Yamagata City, established a permanent kyōgikai or council, officially entitled ‘Japanese Learning Support Network for Foreign Children Residing in the Murayama Area’ (Murayama köiki zaijū gaiokokujin nado kodomo Nihongo shūtoku shien kyōgikai) (Yamagata Shinbun 2005a).

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