

Title: Negotiating Ethnic Identity through Education: The Role of Agency among Mixed Japanese-Thai Young People from a Life Course Perspective

Abstract:

This study examines how agency mediates the construction of ethnic identity within transnational educational settings. It focuses on the educational experiences of 25 mixed Japanese-Thai young people and employs life-story interviews. The findings suggest that the enactment of agency often creates critical turning points, such as school transitions and out-of-school learning experiences, which contribute to the development of ethnic identity.

Drawing on Giddens' (1991) notion of reflexive self-identity and Elder's (1994) life course perspective, this study conceptualises ethnic identity as a process shaped through the interplay of agency, social relationships, and structural conditions over time. Given this framework, the study addresses the following research question: *How is agency enacted across key turning points in educational experiences to shape the ethnic identity of mixed Japanese-Thai young people?*

This study forms part of a broader mixed-methods project on the educational experiences of Japanese-Thai families in Thailand. While the broader study includes both survey and interview data from mixed Japanese-Thai young people who attended schools in Thailand and their parents, this study focuses specifically on interview data from 25 mixed Japanese-Thai participants in order to examine their agency and ethnic identity development in depth. The data were collected using a life-story approach and analysed through narrative analysis, drawing on Elder's (1994) life course framework as an analytical lens.

The findings identify two key sites in which mixed Japanese-Thai young people enact their agency: school transitions and out-of-school learning experiences.

Firstly, school transitions emerge as critical turning points in both educational trajectories and ethnic identity development. These transitions expose students to contrasting cultural expectations, linguistic norms, and peer dynamics, prompting reflexivity and the renegotiation of ethnic identity. During these periods, agency is enacted particularly through engagement in school choice decision-making processes. Motivated by key transitional moments, such as preparation for school entrance examinations, many participants actively explored their academic pathways, at times challenging or redirecting parental expectations. These moments also encourage more proactive engagement with their ethnic identity.

However, the enactment of agency is sometimes constrained by structural conditions, including school curricula, linguistic ability, nationality, and family circumstances. These factors shape the extent to which young people are able to exercise agency and influence both educational trajectories and ethnic identity development. At the same time, experiencing multiple schooling contexts appears to foster more nuanced and flexible forms of ethnic identity, with some participants adopting situational strategies depending on the peer groups they engage with, as well as distinctive labels to represent themselves.

Secondly, out-of-school learning experiences, both in-person and online, also constitute important spaces for ethnic identity exploration. These contexts expose young people to alternative cultural values and perspectives, enabling them to reflect on their positioning and enact agency in both educational and identity-related decisions. Through these interactions, they also form transnational friendships and gain new insights into the possibilities of their life

courses, allowing them to imagine their future careers and places of residence more autonomously. Such experiences are not isolated from formal schooling; rather, these experiences and relationships sometimes lead young people to pursue educational pathways that diverge from parental expectation, highlighting the role of agency in shaping school choice decision-making.

Taken together, these findings suggest that ethnic identity is not solely shaped by structural conditions, such as the schools that individuals attended or parental expectations, but is fluid and continuously shaped over time through the mediation of agency within educational experiences. By highlighting the role of agency in this process, this study suggests that a life course perspective is particularly valuable. It helps unpack the complexity of mixed individuals' educational trajectories while enabling an exploration of how agency intersects with contextual factors within these experiences.

This study further suggests that out-of-school contexts are particularly important sites where mixed young people are empowered through learning and develop their agency to reflect on their life course. Taking this perspective into account, this study demonstrates that it may be important for mixed individual to have access for diverse forms of education that support their exploration on ethnic identities.

Keywords:

Agency, Ethnic Identity, Schooling Experiences, Life Course Theory, Mixed Japanese-Thai Young People