

Title

Translating Differences into Post-graduation Trajectories: Teachers' Mediation and Accommodation in Career Guidance for Immigrant Students in Japanese High Schools

Research Overview

This study examines how differences associated with immigrant backgrounds are translated into post-graduation trajectories in Japanese high schools. Focusing on teachers' mediation in career guidance, it highlights how interpretations of differences shape trajectories within a meritocratic and adaptation-oriented system, while illuminating institutional and cultural barriers in Japanese society.

Purpose of Study

National data indicate that immigrant students are unevenly distributed across postsecondary trajectories (MEXT, 2023), reflecting a system structured by meritocratic selection and hierarchical school ranking.

Research on career guidance for immigrant students has highlighted that educators play a crucial role in shaping how students' future possibilities are understood and pursued (Goh et al. 2007). Prior studies suggest that immigrant students are often viewed through deficit-oriented frameworks or "problem-based" point of view, such as limited language proficiency or insufficient familiarity with the host country's education system (McWhirter et al. 2019). As a critique of those perspectives, some studies emphasize the

importance of culturally responsive ways in which students' migration experiences, resilience, and family responsibilities are recognized as forms of cultural and social capital (Watkinson & Hersi 2014).

Career guidance is therefore understood not only as the provision of information, but as a process through which students' differences are interpreted and translated into perceived possibilities. In this process, educators act as mediators between students, families, and institutional structures, including education systems and labor markets. Their interpretations shape what is considered "realistic," "appropriate," or "attainable," thereby influencing students' trajectories.

However, less attention has been paid to how these processes unfold in the Japanese context, where career guidance at the high school level is largely undertaken by school teachers rather than professional career counselors. This raises the question of how teachers interpret immigrant students' differences and mediate their trajectories within a meritocratic and adaptation-oriented system. Thus, this study addresses the following questions:

- (1) What challenges do teachers recognize and encounter when supporting the career pathways of immigrant students? ,
- (2) How are differences associated with immigrant backgrounds—such as culture, language, residential status, and knowledge of the Japanese education system—interpreted and translated into post-graduation trajectories through teachers' career guidance practices?

By examining these questions, it conceptualizes differences not as fixed attributes, but as something that are interpreted, mediated, and translated within institutional contexts, thus construct their “merit”. Translation is not understood as a direct or deterministic process in which teachers’ views are simply imposed on students’ outcomes. Rather, it occurs through ongoing practices of adjustment and advice, in which teachers seek to support what they perceive as appropriate or feasible pathways. These processes are embedded in an institutional context characterized by eligibility-based selection and strong meritocratic ordering, where adaptation tend to be framed as an individual responsibility and teachers support students despite limited institutional support.

Research Methods

This study forms part of a broader research project on public high schools in Tokyo, Japan. Conducted from 2021 to 2023 by a team of seven researchers, the project employed a two-stage design consisting of a survey and follow-up interviews.

The survey was administered between June and September 2021 to all public high schools in Tokyo ($N = 284$), yielding responses from 99 schools. Of these, 79 schools enrolling students with immigrant backgrounds were included in the analysis.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 teachers and 8 administrators from 29 schools, with multiple respondents in some cases. Most teacher participants were responsible for supporting students with immigrant backgrounds. These interviews were conducted by two researchers at each school and lasted approximately 90–120 minutes. Although a wide range of topics was covered, the analysis focuses on

career guidance for immigrant students and the challenges involved. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the data were coded to examine teachers' perceptions of students' educational pathways and their approaches to support.

In this presentation, we draw primarily on the interview data, using the survey findings as supplementary material.

Results and Discussion

Teachers reported multiple challenges, including language barriers, limited familiarity with the education system, and institutional constraints such as navigating visa requirements and negotiating with employers. These challenges show that career guidance extends beyond pedagogy and is shaped by broader structural conditions.

Differences are interpreted through multiple frameworks, including deficit perspectives, cultural erasure, and strength-based approaches. Across these variations, differences are translated into categories such as academic ability, motivation, and feasibility, constituting a form of institutional translation aligned with meritocratic logic.

Some teachers emphasized relational forms of support grounded in care, particularly in contexts where institutional resources were limited. These practices highlight how care functions as an alternative logic within a system primarily organized around meritocratic evaluation.

Keywords

immigrant students; meritocracy; career guidance; translation; educational inequality

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