

Are Overseas Japanese Schools Still “Japanese”?

Rethinking Education in Transnational and Liminal Contexts

Research Overview

Overseas Japanese schools, which have traditionally intended to nurture Japanese citizens, experience rapidly changing global and local conditions. We examine the transitional educational experiences of students, parents, and teachers in these schools’ liminal position between Japan/host societies and public/private domains.

Purpose of Study

The capacity for autonomous mobility has become a key factor in the stratification of social classes (Bauman, 2000). For internationally mobile families, school choice has become a global phenomenon that extends beyond local politics (Ball & Nikita, 2014).

In addition to international schools and local schools mainly in English-speaking countries, overseas Japanese schools (OJS) are another option available to Japanese people living abroad. In the 1960s, OJS began to be established to secure national continuity by enabling children of expatriate families to reintegrate seamlessly into Japan’s education system upon return. Today, however, OJS are experiencing growing demand for the admission of children from permanent resident and international marriage families. This raised questions about the kind of education OJS should provide and the intended recipients of that education.

The Law on the Promotion of Education in Overseas Educational Facilities, enacted in 2022, states that OJS should not merely provide an educational environment equivalent to that of domestic schools but cultivate in students an attitude of respect for

diverse cultures and promote the international understanding of Japan. However, how these revised purposes are interpreted and implemented is left to individual schools' discretion.

Given the situation, this symposium examines how OJS in different national and regional contexts confront, negotiate, and adapt to rapidly changing global and local conditions. OJS are positioned between Japan and host societies, as well as between public and private (Shibano, 2026). While they are located outside of Japan, OJSs follow the Japanese National Curriculum in Japanese. Although they are private institutions established by local associations of Japanese expatriates, they are supported by the Japanese government. Simultaneously, they are also embedded in local social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Thus, OJSs are positioned in transnational “liminal spaces” (Kimura, 2020).

By focusing on this liminality of OJS, we aim to examine the transnational educational experiences of main actors in OJS. We will present three papers that illustrate how OJS—which once provided a national education—are adapting to today’s more diverse and fluid circumstances.

Results and Discussion (research methods noted for each paper)

The first paper illustrates ongoing collaborative action research since 2023 at OJS in Mexico, employing a plurilingual approach. Focusing on interviews with five high school students who transitioned between the "Japanese" and "Mexican" courses, it clarifies their school experiences through the lens of transnationalism. In the 1970s, the Japanese government established a clear boundary between Overseas Japanese and *Nikkei* schools. However, OJS in Mexico hosts both courses exceptionally. Today,

students move across these boundaries. Their identities, formed within this liminality, are not fixed to the conventional category of "Japanese" but remain fluid, reflecting complex school experiences within this environment.

The second paper examines the educational strategies of parents whose children attend an OJS in Australia, organized into its Japanese Division and International Division. Drawing on interviews and surveys, it analyses how parents perceive the school's liminal position. The Japanese Division follows the Japanese national curriculum with teachers dispatched from Japan, while students from both divisions share English classes taught by native speakers. Regardless of settlement or return plans, parents combine national schooling and English education to cultivate ethnic foundations and transferable language skills, aiming to broaden opportunities for children to exercise agency in shaping transnational life courses.

The third paper focuses on the experiences of teachers dispatched to OJS. Based on survey and interview data, it examines how they negotiate their educational stances in practice from a transnational perspective. Most teachers at these schools are dispatched from public schools in Japan and are sent abroad under a state-led framework with a shared mission. However, their practices are far from uniform. Positioned in liminal space across multiple institutional boundaries—such as home/host country and public/private—these teachers develop diverse educational practices through the interplay between their prior teaching experiences and the local conditions of their host contexts.

The three cases discussed above illustrate OJS from the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers who are not only situated within liminal spaces but also actively participate in their production. Liminality is both produced by and an outcome of

ontological positioning across spatial domains (private and public spheres), political formations (nations), scalar configurations (the local and the national), and relations between self and the Other. Because these schools are historically oriented toward national continuity, tensions exist between transnational aspirations and nation-centric education. Our papers will show how differently positioned agents at ethnic overseas schools negotiate identity, mobility, and inequality in a globalized educational landscape.