

Reimagining Immigrant Student “Empowerment”:

A Collaborative Autoethnography of a Participatory Action Research Project in Japan

Research Overview

In this presentation, a faculty member and two graduate students engage in a collaborative autoethnography to critically reflect on a three-year participatory action research (PAR) project at a Japanese public high school. We examine its tensions, dilemmas, and insights to reimagine immigrant student “empowerment” in an East Asian context.

Purpose of Study

Scholars worldwide have examined ways to respond to the diverse and intersecting needs and experiences of immigrant and refugee children and youth (Bajaj et al., 2023; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). In countering the assimilationist and deficit-based approach to immigrant education, scholars and educators have often drawn on U.S.-originated multicultural education scholarship, such as culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018) and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 2021), which focus on students’ strengths and cultural knowledge to enable effective teaching. Similarly, scholars in Japan and other East Asian contexts, facing growing immigrant student populations, have often adopted these approaches (Yiu, 2024).

A few scholars have criticized that CRP and related frameworks are accepted as “globally dominant multicultural knowledge” (Yiu, 2024, p. 575) without sufficient attention to contextual factors. Similarly, they have suggested that scholars problematize the understanding and application of “empowerment,” a key concept of critical pedagogy, which has mainly developed within the socio-political and historical contexts of the West (Yiu & Yu, 2022). In an Asian context, where harmony and relationships are valued (Ho, 2017; Yiu, 2024), how could we conceptualize “empowerment” for immigrant students, not by merely adopting

Western concepts, but by critically engaging with them and paying attention to locality and context? We approach this question through engaging in collaborative autoethnography, which is suitable to disrupt “the established binaries of being” and challenge universal and dominant concepts (Silova et al., 2017, p. S94).

In this presentation, we, a faculty member and two graduate students, use a collaborative autoethnography to critically reflect on a three-year participatory action research (PAR) project at a Japanese high school. We examine the tensions, dilemmas, and wisdoms that emerged as we attempted to reimagine immigrant student “empowerment.” Inspired by PAR’s commitment to community collaboration, deep engagement, and social change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Lenette, 2022), our university team has partnered with a public high school in the Kanto region and a local NPO since 2022 to support immigrant students. Drawing on concepts from CRP and critical pedagogy, we co-developed and facilitated workshops such as welcoming events, fieldtrips, community gatherings, and multilingual identity workshops.

Research Methods

We engage in a collaborative autoethnography to critically reflect on our positionalities and make sense of our experiences of the PAR project. Collaborative autoethnography attempts to interrogate a sociocultural phenomenon (Chang et al., 2013) through collectively “connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739), weaving common and divergent voices.

The data collection, analysis and interpretation unfolded iteratively—each of us first wrote reflections on the research questions, read each other’s reflections, had a group sharing, and discussed emerging themes. Power sharing and community building were critical in the process (Chang et al., 2013).

Results and Discussion

We found three main themes: (1) Relativizing assumptions embedded in multilingualism and multiculturalism, (2) interrogating “collaboration” with school teachers, and (3) unpacking “strengths-based approach” and “empowerment.” First, we examined our dilemmas in valuing students’ multilingual and multicultural backgrounds and identities. While CRP scholars advocate drawing on immigrant students’ cultural and linguistic practices and affirming multicultural and multilingual environments, we came to recognize that multilingualism and multiculturalism are themselves value-laden—not simply resources to be instrumentalized. We became aware of the need to reconsider these assumptions through the resistance and reluctance from some immigrant students participating in the multilingual identity workshop.

Second, we explored the challenges of collaborating with schools, unpacking what “partnership” and “collaboration” could mean in a Japanese school context. While CRP scholars often suggest community partnerships as central to supporting immigrant students (Pacino & Warren, 2023), we encountered hierarchical dynamics between school teachers and university students, as well as teachers’ hesitancy to step into what they perceived as the domain of university faculty. While ongoing dialogue with teachers has gradually shaped the form of our partnership, the process has been messy.

Third, we discussed the dilemmas of centering “strength-based approach” and “empowerment” as project goals. While we acknowledge the value of drawing on the strengths of immigrant students, we struggled to translate its meanings to teachers in ways that avoided superficial and essentialized interpretations. In addition, the graduate students felt presumptuous and somewhat arrogant to apply social justice-oriented terms in a Japanese context.

Through reflecting and writing together, we illuminate the factors shaping our experiences and suggest culturally sensitive and context-responsive ways to conceptualize

immigrant youth “empowerment” in an East Asian educational setting.

Keywords: Immigrant, Empowerment, Collaborative Autoethnography, Participatory Action Research, Japan

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