

Title

Teachers' Beliefs and Practices toward Immigrant Students in Japan:
Possibilities and Challenges of Care

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Research Overview

This study examines Japanese high school teachers' beliefs and practices toward immigrant students within institutional contexts. Drawing on survey and interview data, it identifies three dominant beliefs. While deficit beliefs and cultural disregard persist, emphasis on care offers a more inclusive model, though its sustainability requires stronger institutional support.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the belief systems that shape Japanese teachers' practices toward immigrant students, and to explore how these are influenced by institutional arrangements. In doing so, it aims to propose a model of schooling that can more effectively include children from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In recent years, the number of children with immigrant backgrounds has increased across advanced industrial societies, including Japan. Prior research has highlighted their challenges such as underachievement, school alienation, and identity struggles shaped by discrimination and prejudice.

In the United States, these issues have been addressed within the framework of multicultural education (Sleeter 2024). Critiques of deficit model have led to the development of culturally relevant/responsive pedagogies, which emphasize students'

cultural backgrounds as *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al. 2005). This body of research shows that high expectations combined with cultural recognition can enhance both academic achievement and self-esteem, and underscores the importance of caring relationships in fostering inclusion (Valenzuela 2005). However, less attention has been paid to how teachers interpret care as part of their professional role and enact it in everyday practice.

In Japan, few studies have systematically examined the belief system through which teachers understand immigrant students and respond to their needs, or the institutional contexts in which teachers' beliefs are reproduced. At the same time, Japanese education has been characterized by an emphasis on holistic development and socio-emotional support (Tsuneyoshi 2013), both of which are closely aligned to *ethics of care* (Toronto 2013). Thus, examining the Japanese case offers the potential to refine a care-oriented model of schooling while also illuminating its limitations and challenges.

Based on these considerations, this study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What is the dominant belief system underlying Japanese high school teachers' interpretations of immigrant students, and how is it enacted in everyday practices?
- 2) What institutional arrangements sustain and reproduce the belief system and practices?

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 to all public high schools in Tokyo (N=284), with

responses from 99 schools, of which 79 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. Most teacher participants were responsible for supporting students with immigrant backgrounds. Interviews lasted 90–120 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. The data were coded to examine teachers' beliefs and practices toward immigrant students. This presentation draws primarily on the interview data, with survey findings used as supplementary material.

Results and Discussion

The findings reveal a dominant belief system consisting of three interrelated components that shape teachers' interpretations and practices.

The first is *a deficit belief based on Japanese norms*, in which immigrant students and their parents are viewed in terms of “deviation” from expected standards of language proficiency, academic achievement, school norms, and parental involvement. This belief is reinforced by the strong standardization of Japanese schooling and the lack of institutional support, which places the burden of addressing students' needs on individual teachers.

The second is *a disregard for students' home languages and cultures*, closely intertwined with the deficit belief. Teachers had limited knowledge of students' migration histories or cultural backgrounds. This reflects the absence of institutional commitment to recognizing home languages and cultures, as well as prevailing notions of egalitarianism and the influence of personal data protection. Together, these frameworks strongly shape teachers' perceptions and practices.

Simultaneously, some teachers endorsed a third belief, emphasizing *care grounded in trusting relationships*. They viewed their professional role as supporting not only academic achievement but also students' socio-emotional development and well-being. This belief was particularly evident in schools with struggling students or special programs for immigrant students. Practices such as creating safe spaces ("*ibasho*") through extracurricular activities and leveraging school–community partnerships enabled more responsive approaches that respected students' cultural backgrounds and challenged deficit-oriented views.

Overall, the institutionalized belief system shaping Japanese teachers' perspectives and practices toward immigrant students is multi-layered. While deficit perspectives and cultural disregard remain influential, emphasis on care grounded in trusting relationships points to the possibility of a more inclusive model of schooling. However, because it places significant demands on teachers, its sustainability depends on institutionalizing school–community partnerships and establishing systems that care for teachers.

Key words

high school teacher, immigrant students, belief system, care, Japan

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