

Title: Negotiating Equity and Neoliberalism: Equitable Collaboration among Various Actors in a Multicultural Urban High School in Japan

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Research Overview: This study examines how school and community actors negotiate equitable collaboration amid increasing diversity and neoliberal reforms in Japan. Focusing on a multicultural urban high school, it explores how various actors develop inclusive educational practices while addressing inequality, institutional constraints, and challenges posed by neoliberal educational governance.

Purpose of Study: To ensure that multicultural democratic education is truly effective in practice, it must be developed within local contexts, encompassing schools and communities (Sleeter, 2018). While relationships among schools, migrant families, and communities have become increasingly important, these relationships must be cultivated through partnerships and collaboration grounded by principles of equity and social justice (Ishimaru, 2020).

Japanese education policy has been relatively slow to respond to increasing cultural diversity. However, rapid demographic changes and the 2019 revision of the Immigration Control Act have compelled greater institutional engagement, albeit unevenly, with a more diverse population. In this context, teachers, schools, community actors, and local authorities have collaboratively developed locally grounded educational practices and policies, often informed by commitments to equity and social justice (Kitayama & Imai, 2026).

At the same time, neoliberal trends in Japanese education have significantly reshaped the conditions surrounding these actors. Policies such as the publication of academic achievement rankings, teacher evaluations, and teacher license renewal systems were introduced based on the assumption that competition would enhance educational quality. Neoliberal reforms have also promoted accountability policies and outsourcing of support functions, often transferring responsibilities from schools to local communities. These developments have generated both opportunities and challenges for school–community collaboration.

While previous research has critically examined how neoliberalism reorganizes educational governance and exacerbates inequality (Ball, 2008; Hamamoto & Harada, 2020), collaboration between schools and local communities has often been either praised as inherently desirable or criticized as a manifestation of neoliberal ‘responsibilization’ (Nakata, 2020). In this context, migrant children and families are often viewed through a deficit-based perspective and positioned as recipients of targeted support. This highlights the need to examine how educational governance is being restructured at the local level, particularly

through the reconfiguration of actor roles, patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and the normative orientations shaping these processes, as well as the possibilities for education grounded in equity and justice.

Drawing on the concept of “equitable collaboration” (Ishimaru, 2020), this study focuses on how collaboration is actively negotiated among various actors in situated contexts. The study asks: How do school and community actors negotiate their roles, responsibilities, and relationships amid increasing diversity and neoliberal reform? In what ways do these negotiations enable or constrain the pursuit of equity?

Research Method: This study employs a qualitative case study of a public urban high school in Japan that has experienced a significant increase in students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with teachers, school administrators, community actors, and representatives of local organizations, as well as through observations of collaborative activities and analysis of relevant documents. By incorporating both school-based and community-based actors, the study captures the relational dynamics that underpin school-community collaboration.

Result and Discussion: The findings suggest that collaboration in this context is neither a straightforward solution nor merely an imposed obligation. Rather, it is a complex process characterized by conflict and negotiation, through which actors seek to construct more equitable forms of engagement while cautious of being subsumed into neoliberal frameworks. The study found that, within neoliberal governance, traditional community activists and teachers engaged in multicultural education negotiate new roles and relationships through their shared efforts to resist and rework neoliberal educational reforms. At the core of these practices was an asset-based, rather than deficit-based, perspective toward children and their families, alongside culturally responsive pedagogical practices observed across schools and communities. At the same time, collaboration functioned as a platform through which different actors addressed educational inequalities. In the face of disparities in resources, authority, and institutional positioning, these actors also sought to transcend institutional constraints and cultivate more inclusive practices through equitable collaboration.

By foregrounding the practices and perspectives of school and community actors, this study offers a nuanced account of how equity-oriented collaboration is negotiated in practice. It further argues that, in increasingly diverse and neoliberalized educational contexts, attention to these processes is essential for understanding both the possibilities and challenges of collaboration.

Keywords: Multicultural Education, Neoliberalism, School–Community Collaboration, Equity, Educational Governance