

The Im (Possibility) of Ideal Education: Hope, Uncertainty, and being Safe in the Korean International School in Japan

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Drawing on an in-depth ethnography of students, teachers, and parents at School K, a newly built Korean international school, this paper investigates how students choose their subjects to show their multi-faceted identities within the institutional goals of the school. Rather than promoting an expatriate Korean identity, School K bases its pedagogies on border-crossing and uses trilingual education to cultivate global citizens with the potential to thrive internationally, while embracing their own ethnic backgrounds. School K's emergence indicates a shift in educational policies among Korean schools in Japan that increasingly seek to transcend the goal of ethnic solidarity and affective longing for the Korean peninsula. This study shows that in addition to the distinction between oldcomer and newcomer Koreans, students express various senses of internal borders and show their subjectivities to transcend them. In everyday school activities, such as learning the Korean language and/or interacting with neighbors, Japanese students, and Koreans from Korea, the Zainichi Korean students imagine multiple borders that are context-oriented and rather playful. Institutionally, conducting trilingual education requires more resources for a school than bilingual education and can result in financial difficulties, mainly due to non-endorsement by the Japanese government, which destabilizes the school's management. While parents and students express dissatisfaction about school curriculum and management, they value the friendships made at school and think the school ultimately offers a safer space for Zainichi Korean students, providing middle-class Zainichi Korean families with an alternative educational choice.

Keywords: Koreans in Japan; hope and anxiety; safe space; border-crossing; hybridity; Zainichi

Introduction

I was observing a meeting for an upcoming school festival with students and a teacher at School K, an international school in Japan established by Zainichi Koreans.¹ When the teacher told the students to create instructions for sorting garbage for visitors in three languages—English, Korean, and Japanese, one student resentfully commented:

Even if we write in English, no one will read them. We should tell visitors that we don't

1. In this article, I broadly define Zainichi Koreans as Koreans who have lived in Japan for most of their lives. School K has some students from South Korea, but they are called international students (*ryūgakusei*).

actually use English here. Writing in Korean and Japanese is enough. It's not good to lie (*uso tsukuno yokunai desuyo*)! I feel I was deceived (*muccha damasareta wā*). The school says that people at this school use three languages, but it isn't true.

Another student also said that their expectations differed from reality. For example, there were no “real” international students (*hontō no ryūgakusei*), who came from places like Europe, because most were from South Korea. Here the concept of “real” international students is potentially problematic because it shows the hegemony of Western cultures, particularly Anglophone ones, being taken as a standard.² Although School K does not claim to be that type of international school, these students' comments showed a wide gap between their personal ideal educational environments and what they actually experienced in their everyday lives.

Since World War II, Zainichi Koreans have established proprietary school systems covering primary to tertiary education in many regions of Japan to maintain their ethnic heritage. Many of these Korean schools in Japan, especially the North Korean schools, are presented as unique places that have a Korean-language-only policy, set strict school regulations, and follow a curriculum designed to produce North Korean expatriates who live in Japan.³ However, few new immigrants and long periods of residence have changed the pedagogical focuses of these schools, affecting how Korean schools manage their curriculum.

Over time, Korean schools in Japan have adjusted their curricula and teaching methods to cater to the population that will remain in Japan.⁴ According to Ryang (1997, 207), North

² Imoto (2011, 284) argues that people in Japan perceive English as a “commodified product” and pursue “authenticity” at Anglophone international schools.

³ For a view of Korean schools in Japan from a socio-historical perspective, see O (2019).

⁴ There are about 500,000 long-term Korean residents in Japan, and around 30,000 identify as *chōsen* (Immigration Service Agency of Japan, 2021). Generally, Zainichi Koreans who do not have Japanese citizenship are categorized as special permanent residents (*tokubetsu eijūsha*) who can stay

Korean schools have transformed their pedagogy “from an action-coordinating function to a world-disclosing function.” Simply speaking, they switched from educating students as expatriate North Koreans who would eventually return to North Korea to teaching them to be North Koreans who would spend their entire lives in Japan. Under these circumstances, Korean schools function as “communities of practice” (*jissen kyōdōtai*) where students and teachers create a Korean school community by participating in a “performance (*engi*)” by following certain linguistic and behavioral codes at school, while recognizing that they will not “go back” to North Korea (Song 2012, 208). Bell’s recent observation of cultural performance at Korean schools also supports these points. According to Bell, the diasporic identity of North Koreans in Japan is “affective transnational longing” without a desire to return (Bell 2019, 37). Traditional Korean schools in Japan no longer educate their students to “return” to their homeland. Instead, they place more weight on place-making for an ethnic minority in Japan, rather than what is being taught at school—although the two are deeply intertwined.

This paper suggests that even though there are fluctuations among the curricula and school management systems, students benefit from being with their peers at school. McGuire (2020) states that deaf or hard-of-hearing Japanese youth are isolated in mainstream schools

in Japan permanently. One’s descendants inherit this legal status if both parents are permanent residents. Without Japanese citizenship, they do not hold voting rights and have limited access to jobs in public sectors. Additionally, it is difficult to present a clear-cut category of Zainichi Koreans by certain criteria such as generation, citizenship status, political affiliations, and/or personal identities. These factors are complicatedly intertwined in their daily lives and surface in various contexts. Generally, the number of Korean schools and their enrollments have been decreasing, especially after 2002 when North Korea officially admitted that it had been kidnapping Japanese nationals. Subsequently, the schools depoliticized their curriculums. As of 2019, there are 65 Korean schools in Japan, including kindergartens, elementary schools, junior high schools, high schools, and even a Korean college (*chōsen daigakkō*) in Tokyo (*Zainihon Chōsenjin Sōrengōkai*).

but nurture their identities and friendships at schools for deaf, not in mainstream Japanese schools. Similarly, Zainichi Korean students and their parents at School K express the benefits of being surrounded by those who share similar ethnic backgrounds. At the same time, when the school tries to incorporate the new direction in their curriculum—conducting trilingual education and going beyond their ethnic boundaries, how does that affect the student’s aspirations, school life, and the greater goals of Zainichi Korean education?

Through an in-depth ethnography and interview data, this paper contributes to scholarly understanding of this new phase of Zainichi Korean education, especially regarding how being international students affects their perceptions of themselves, particularly in terms of their internal sense of boundaries. Ethnographic studies on schooling demonstrate that classroom interactions embody larger social and cultural structures (Tobin et al. 2009). Generally speaking, education is deeply tied to the design of social structures through processes such as class sorting and reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Khan 2011; Willis 1981) and ideal citizen-making (Jaffe-Walter 2016). In this regard, School K does not aim to produce ideal citizens for Japan or North/South Korea, but its pedagogical directions and aspirations are embedded in mainstream Japanese school culture and society. Therefore, this study not only addresses Zainichi Korean education, but also how mainstream Japanese education excludes those who do not have a certain ethnic background in contemporary Japan.

I suggest that School K offers a safe space for Zainichi Korean students who still face exclusion in mainstream Japanese schools. Many might agree that School K fails to offer a good quality education. For instance, students’ English proficiency is relatively low. Moreover, the school offers a limited choice of subjects to prepare students for college admission. However, the value of the school is not solely based on its curriculum. A safe space stems from a classroom environment. That is, “a classroom climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge,

attitudes, and behaviors” (Holley and Steiner 2005, 50). Currently, this concept of a safe space is applied beyond classroom settings. The importance of a safe space is advocated in the contexts of community activities and sports events (Spaaij & Schulenkorf 2014, 634). Because learning sometimes needs to challenge the learners’ preconceptions, some state that it is impossible for all learning to be done safely (Flensner & Von der Lippe 2019). Still, the importance of safe space is commonly shared in Western societies. It is also important to note that the term “safe space” sounds similar to *ibasho*, a Japanese term that refers to a place where individuals feel comfortable. However, in this study, I intentionally do not use the term because *ibasho* does not focus on connotations regarding what happens *within* the place. Rather, I tried to focus how students participate in school life and how that affects students’ perceptions of themselves, and how this helps them navigate their future choices.

Methodology

The analysis is based on ethnographic data obtained through preliminary visits and on-site fieldwork. In 2016 and 2017, I interviewed the school principal, vice-principal, and twelve subject teachers while staying in the dormitory and observing several classes. I also attended cultural festivals and ceremonies. Through these visits and interviews, I familiarized myself with the school and established connections with teachers and students who became alumni while I conducted my fieldwork.⁵ After that, I conducted intensive fieldwork between April and July 2019, involving taking classes such as Korean, physical education, and other subjects, attended meetings with students and teachers, and otherwise interacting with people at School K from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. four times a week plus occasional weekends. In late May, I became a part-time English teacher, to replacing an employee who had abruptly resigned mid-

5. However, as of 2019, most teachers I interviewed in 2016 and 2017 were no longer working at School K.

semester. When I visited, I wrote field notes during class and after school. In addition to my daily interactions, I interviewed students, alumni, and teachers individually. Externally, I interviewed five parents (four mothers and one father) and three alumni who had graduated the previous academic year. I used Japanese with students and teachers, English with English teachers, and Korean with some students and visitors from Korea.

Especially in anthropological research, researchers can affect interpersonal interactions and the kind of data they obtain during their fieldwork (Lewin and Leap 1996). For example, at the school, people tended to pay attention to my linguistic proficiency and talked about it. They knew that I was Japanese, that I was raised in Japan, and that I spoke Korean and English. Although I was a graduate student affiliated with an institute of higher education in the U.S., I did not commute there as I lived in Japan for my fieldwork. Neither was I really a teacher, even though I started teaching an English course in the middle of the semester. My liminal status together with my peculiar international background helped to spark conversations with students and teachers. At the same time, my not being Zainichi Korean also affected interpersonal dynamics regarding how I established a rapport with some people. I have tried to keep these points in mind in the analysis in the following sections.

School K in the context of Korean schools in Japan

School K was founded by wealthy Zainichi Koreans in the late 2000s who sought a new form of education rather than a traditional Korean school that would challenge both old-style Korean schools through border-crossing and which would offer trilingual education. Traditional Korean schools can nurture one's ethnic identity and become a shelter from possible discrimination in mainstream Japanese schools, but some are concerned that their curriculum became outdated. Partly because of financial difficulties, Korean schools do not have enough teachers and are often seen as not offering the best quality education for their children. To overcome this dilemma, a few Zainichi Korean businesspersons funded School K, and some

Zainichi Korean intellectuals (and a few Japanese nationals) served on an advisory board.

The school attempts to produce trans-border citizens [*ekkyōjin*] by refusing to support any one national identity. According to one of the founders, *ekkyōjin* means those who can flourish regardless of their gender, nationality, and ethnicity. The school makes English, Japanese, and Korean all mandatory languages. The enrollment is about 20 students in junior high school and 60 students in high school (with annual fluctuations) across six grades. It costs about US\$10,000 to attend per year. Considering its trans-border goals and expensive tuition, School K can be seen as response to the emerging needs of Zainichi Koreans, especially those who have achieved middle-class status and voluntarily migrated to Japan recently.

The following sections discuss my research method, the historical contexts of Korean schools in Japan, and how students, teachers, and parents conceptualize their ideal education vis-a-vis what they have actually experienced in School K. Historical contexts and everyday practices show how these constituents' eclectic backgrounds and customs affect linguistic dynamics and everyday interactions at school. While Koreans in Japan are trying to expand their frame of reference by aiming for a borderless cosmopolitanism, those ideals have not reached universal consensus regarding what kind of education should be offered. Instead, this expectation has become a source of dissatisfaction in the flexible imaginations of the students.

Regarding its curriculum and school culture, School K is characterized by its hybridity of Korean, international, and mainstream Japanese schools in Japan. Compared to traditional Korean Schools, School K's trilingual education and eclectic behavioral principles provide more practical and laid-back language learning opportunities and an alternative frame for interpreting the world. During my fieldwork, it had teachers who were from both North

Korean (*chōsen gakkō*) and South Korean schools (*kankoku gakkō*)⁶ in Japan, as well as teachers from South Korea. This represents a shift in Korean schools' educational philosophy by rejecting monolithic identity-making in favor of producing individuals who can deploy their talents in global contexts instead of being limited to national borders.

At the same time, School K does serve as an alternative educational option for Zainichi Korean families in conjunction with other Korean schools. One part-time teacher who also works in other Korean schools told me that School K is “an option for Zainichi families who do not want to send their kids to Japanese school.”⁷ According to him, parents vacillate between choosing School K, (North) Korean schools, and (South) Korean schools. I also noticed that sometimes, students graduate from one school and enter another to finish their secondary education. School K and most Korean schools, like many other ethnic schools in Japan, are not endorsed by the Japanese government, meaning that graduates' diplomas are not recognized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. Students only need to pass the Certificate for Students Achieving the Proficiency Level of Upper Secondary School Graduates (*kōsotsu ninei shiken*). Although the exam is not that difficult to pass, symbolically, this makes students aware that their school is not normal (*futsū ja nai*). In the next section, I provide an overview of the kinds of people at School K and how they spend their time there.

Students

School K mainly enrolls ethnic Korean students, both old-and newcomers, and displays

6. Here, “South Korean schools” refers to schools managed by the Japan's South Korean organization known as *Mindan* (Republic of Korean Residents' Union in Japan), the South Korean government, and/or the Japanese government.

7. I introduce one narrative regarding this point in the section below, “The value of a safe space.”

characteristics similar to Japanese-style bilingual international schools.⁸ Since 2016, School K has been losing students. Previously, it had approximately 200 students in six grades, but as of 2019, this had decreased to fewer than 80 students. Its junior high school (*chūtōbu*) section had only two incoming students (with a few transfer students) in 2019. Demographically, about 70% of students were female, most of whom were either partly or fully Korean. The school enrolls a few Japanese nationals. Except for ten international students from Korea and a few from the U.S. and China, almost everyone spoke Japanese as their native language. Students' Korean proficiency varied, but they were overall more proficient in Korean than English with the exception of two ethnic Korean students who had “returned” from the U.S. to Japan with their Zainichi Korean parents.

Many students were from middle-class families and aimed to go to college. Most Zainichi Korean students had attended Korean schools in Japan at some point in their education. Graduates of School K, depending on the year, have gone to universities in Korea, the U.S., and, predominantly, Japan. On average, tuition fees for private junior high and high schools in Japan are about US \$5,500 and US \$9,000 per year, respectively, not inclusive of other fees. Consequently, students tend to come from middle-class families who can manage these expenses.⁹ Those taking college entrance examinations must take the Upper Secondary School Equivalency examination (*kōsotsu nintei shiken*) to demonstrate their academic competence.

⁸ At the same time, School K also resembles ethnic Chinese schools (and other Korean schools) in Japan in terms of its culture, domestic status, and management—they struggle to secure financial sources yet firmly do not intend to be endorsed by the Japanese government (Kanno 2008).

⁹ In recent years, working within a particular ethnic economy and achieving middle-class status is becoming difficult. At the same time, working in a Japanese company does not always guarantee stable lifetime employment. For more about the details of Zainichi Koreans and their job placement, see Chung (2021).

Teachers

In terms of ethnicity and educational backgrounds, School K's teachers are more diverse than their students. When I conducted my fieldwork, there were 12 full-time teachers (of whom seven were women) and several part-time teachers. The principal and vice principal were both third-generation Korean men. During my fieldwork, there was one Singaporean teacher who was the only full-time teacher of English at that time. The rest were from Japan or Korea, with three having been brought up in South Korea. Although many teachers were bilingual in Japanese and Korean, two out of four Japanese-national teachers only spoke Japanese. A few teachers from South Korea were fluent in English.

Parents

Many parents were middle-class alumni of Korean schools in Japan. They send their children to School K for one of two reasons: either they do not want to send their children to a Japanese school or they seek an alternative to a traditional Korean school, mainly because they perceive those schools as having outdated curricula and educational philosophies.

Among Korean parents, there were some differences between so-called newcomers and oldcomers. While oldcomer parents thought highly of nurturing ethnic identity and community-making, newcomer parents expected their children to be proficient in Japanese and English and to attend prestigious universities.¹⁰ One unique aspect I observed was that parents tend not to have graduated from Japanese universities, even if they were affluent, which consequently rendered them unfamiliar with Japan's system of entrance examinations. An alumnus told me that he and his family had to rely on a teacher at the public school to apply to universities in Japan as his family had gone to a Korean school for three generations and "knew nothing about Japanese universities."

¹⁰ Interview with the former school president.

While Japanese parents were the minority at School K, they tended to play significant roles in its management, such as becoming president of the parents' association. This was partly because they are either highly interested in education and already engage in educational activism in their community or they want to assist in managing alternative schools. These parents were easier to approach and willing to be interviewed as compared to Zainichi Korean parents.

Compared to mainstream schools in Japan (and similar to other Korean schools), parents at School K were generally deeply involved in school events. For example, during parents' meetings (*hogosha-kai*), a mothers' group (*omoni-kai*) would come and prepare the school lunch (Figure 2). Parents were also vocal in voicing their requests to school management.

A typical day at School K

For many students and teachers, commuting to School K is not easy as its location in suburban Osaka is hard to access. Many students come to school by train and bus, while others bicycle from the train station because buses are very slow and tend to be caught in traffic. In any case, most students take between 60 and 90 minutes to arrive at school. The morning homeroom starts at 8:30. After lunch, they clean their classrooms and school buildings, including restrooms, for which they need to pass their teachers' inspections. As the school does not have a gymnasium, students go to the nearby community center for physical education.

School K enjoys a vibrant atmosphere when its students are around. After school, some students participate in extracurricular activities (*bukatsudō*), but low enrollment numbers limit the options available. Many students spend their evenings working part-time jobs. Others go to karaoke, and a few attend tutoring sessions (i.e., "cram school") to prepare for college entrance examinations. Some live in a dormitory a few minutes' walk from school. Every Monday, I visited the dormitory to eat dinner and spend time with these students. The dormitory manager, an ethnic Korean from China, held a Chinese language class after dinner for those who were interested. The classroom picture (Figure 1) shows students' playful

behavior during a Korean class. I observed that school regulations (*kōsoku*), such as dress codes or pedagogy, resembled those of a regular Japanese school.¹¹ Those from other Korean schools mentioned their surprise upon first coming to School K, whose atmosphere they found very “casual” (*kajuaru*) and “direct” (*furanku*).¹²

The difficulties of being a “miscellaneous school”

If you look at the back page of the textbook, it says, “by tax money, this textbook is free for future generations who support Japan. Please use it with care,” but we have to pay for it. (Takeshi, a male student at School K’s Second Junior High section)

Students experience distinct borders between School K and mainstream Japanese schools in various situations. As with most Korean schools in Japan, a lack of official government endorsement categorizes School K as a “miscellaneous school” (*kakushu gakkō*). This gives it the freedom to choose its curriculum but also presents it with financial challenges. As Takeshi noted in the quotation above, students must pay for government-issued textbooks, and the school also had to reduce teachers’ salaries when its enrolment decreased, resulting in some teachers resigning. Such difficulties have forced many Korean schools in Japan to change their curricula to secure endorsement from the Japanese government, which affords them greater access to financial support. However, this subjects schools’ curricula to greater government scrutiny and requires their teachers to hold national teaching certification (*kyōin menkyo*). In

11. In Japan, secondary education entails an abrupt change to a system characterized as highly authoritarian, test-oriented, and stressful in comparison to primary school (Yoneyama 1999) due to its exhortations that students gain admission to prestigious higher schools and become ideal Japanese citizens (Lewis 1995). However, this now varies from institution to institution (Cave 2016, 11). The recent education reform of relaxed education (*yutori kyōiku*) from around 2002 until about 2013 was consistently implemented in elementary schools but was not fully implemented in junior high schools due to the importance of entrance examinations (Bjork 2015, 13).

12. To learn how Japanese schools emphasize general comportment and deemphasize rules related to academic honesty, see Hill (1996).

this regard, School K tries to maintain control of its curriculum by diversifying its funding sources. When the South Korean government made the school's hoisting the South Korean flag a condition of securing substantial funding, it asserted that flying any national flag would contradict its school policy and rejected the grant. This decision preserved their autonomy but left the school financially unstable. School K's irregular status also leads it to impose extra administrative and financial burdens on students, parents, and the administration. For instance, junior high school students at School K must also register at public schools in their region if their nationality is Japanese. Even if they never attend those schools, they thus receive Japanese certificates of graduation.

Linguistic and cultural hybridity

School K Shows interesting aspects of hybridity—it caters mainly to Zainichi Korean students but also includes a few Japanese nationals and students from South Korea. Its curriculum is geared more toward teaching English and while maintaining some ethnicity-related subjects such as Zainichi Korean history or multiculturalism. However, linguistically, Japanese is dominant except for some Korean borrowings.

Contrary to School K's stance of going beyond ethnicity, the attainment of Korean fluency by contemporary South Korean standards is one of its key educational goals. This requirement not only emphasizes the school's Korean culture, but also attracts prospective students who are interested in Korea. All its Korean teachers are from South Korea, and it uses textbooks issued by South Korean institutions such as Sogang University or Ewha Women's University. It also administers TOPIK, the South Korean government's Korean proficiency test, with the goal of students passing level five or six by graduation. Even though some heritage learners have an advantage in learning the language, several students who did not speak Korean before admission achieved TOPIK level five or six by graduation, the highest levels attainable for non-native speakers (many Korean universities require level-four TOPIK scores for admission). The next section investigates the narratives of students and

parents to understand what they expect from the education and experiences at school.

Hope and aspiration for oldcomers and newcomers

What students think about their future is strongly related to their background. While some students and parents actively chose School K, my fieldwork revealed that it was not always their first choice, with some having experienced school refusal (*tōko kyohi*)—when the student refuses to attend classes—in other schools. The parents of many students at School K expressed concern about bullying in mainstream Japanese schools and an outdated education in Korean schools. To illustrate these concerns and the decisions and experiences related to attending School K, in the following section I analyze the perspectives of a new student and a third-generation Zainichi Korean student on school life and their future. An individual's hopes change over time depending on multiple possibilities of the future they imagine based on their situation from moment to moment (Miyazaki 2013). Therefore, I argue that one's experiences of schooling affect an individual's perspectives on their future. Broadly, newcomers are more likely to focus on climbing the social ladder in Japan (or Korea), whereas oldcomer Zainichi students tend to prioritize building relationships with friends and family.

Newcomers' transnational aspirations

Essentially, oldcomers and newcomer Korean immigrants to Japan show differences regarding why they chose School K, what they feel at school, and what they hope for their future. First, students' nationality affects university admission. While many proceed to Japanese universities, some choose to attend Korean ones. Those interested in entering universities in Korea follow what may be an easier track than Korean students in Korea. Briefly, Korean citizens educated overseas for 12 years can take different entrance examinations for Korean universities instead of the general exam designed for Koreans educated in Korea. This gives them a potential advantage in securing admission to a highly ranked university. At School K,

students from South Korea who came to Japan at an early age and Zainichi students with South Korean nationality often use this 12-year rule to enter those universities in South Korea.¹³

Generally, newcomers (called *ryūgakusei* (international students)) who consider School K to be a steppingstone to good Korean universities seem more interested in success than in their school's historical and cultural aspects. Tae-ho, who aimed to win admission to a prestigious Korean university, expressed his concern that the school was only a fun place to fool around with others. Tae-ho is a high school student who came to Japan at the age of three. Disliking the compulsory education system in Korea, his parents thought that using the 12-year rule for Tae-ho to enter a Korean university would mean that he did not need to compete with students educated in Korea. His days were busy with school, studying after class, serving on the student council, and taking extra English classes taught by the author after school. His parents also want him to learn Chinese. One day after class, we chatted for a while after he asked me questions about how to study English. While he was happy about being at School K, he felt that the school was not helping him prepare for his future success:

T: I like being here because teachers care about you a lot, but I feel that just being here and being content with what you get might not be enough. Some students only fool around during class, and teachers are sometimes too busy to deal with it. I think it is a waste of time and money. I think I need to have a sense of urgency [*kikikan*].

Author: What do you think about Zainichi students?

T: Well, it's like, "aha, those kinds of people exist [*sō iu hitotachi mo irundana, tte kanjidesune*]."

Tae-ho's reference to students who did not seem academically focused reflects the diverse motivations of students who attend School K. For those with previous cases of school refusal or those who had negative experiences in mainstream schools, fooling around with others in

13. One teacher at School K stated that most students who secured admission to top-notch Korean universities used this 12-year rule because it would be "impossible" to compete with Korean nationals in Korea.

school can be a precious experience in and of itself. However, Tae-ho, an aspiring immigrant's son, hoped for something more useful.

One former schoolteacher also told me that he sometimes found himself caught between (*itabasami*) oldcomer and newcomer parents. According to him, while newcomer parents are interested in improving English proficiency and preparing for college entrance examinations, oldcomer parents value nurturing their children's identity as Zainichi Koreans more highly than aiming for prestigious universities.

This exemplifies the school's dilemma. While it aims to transcend national borders in its education, students and parents must carefully consider about their opportunities based on their backgrounds, including nationality. Aiming for success and nurturing ethnic identity are not mutually exclusive. However, in the context of the school designing its curriculum and pedagogy, being academically rigorous and offering a relaxed style of teaching can sometimes be incompatible. In this regard, students (and parents) perceive boundaries among themselves based on their citizenships or their linguistic fluency (which will be discussed more in the next section). Oldcomer parents send their children to School K to nurture their identities as Zainichi Koreans, but for newcomers, School K is just one option among many schools in Japan, including some with cultural proximities.

However, Tae-ho's perceptions of old-comer Zainichi students shifted over time. Although he only seems to be interested in his own future, as a student with native ties to both Japan and Korea, he sometimes bridged the gap between Koreans from Korea with other Japanese-speaking students during class. At first, he was not that interested in Zainichi Koreans in Japan, but being a mediator between Koreans from Korea and those from Japan, he gradually became more sensitive to the difficulties of old-comer Zainichi living in Japan. Initially, he was thinking about majoring in law or economics in college, but after he experienced the student council, he decided to study international relations.

An intimate and distant language: Linguistic anxieties

In a way, imagining the future and learning a new language share some similarities. Multiple futurities are imagined and negotiated based on individuals' current circumstances. When people learn a new language and culture, their learning is based on what they already know and achieved by building on that knowledge. The trilingual education at this international school does not do much to transcend the linguistic/cultural boundaries between Korea/Japan and "the West." Rather, it familiarizes the students with Korean and Japanese. Even if students aim to transcend various dimensions of national and linguistic borders, arguments arise first based on Zainichi Koreans' experiences as an ethnic minority in Japan. This does not mean that goals of internationalization (mainly by gaining English proficiency) are an educational priority over learning Korean or Japanese for the school. However, the frustrations and disappointments among those affiliated with the school demonstrate the difficulties of learning a language and culture distinct from one's own. Compared to newcomers, old-comer Zainichi students tend to be more relaxed about their future, with a few students even choosing vocational schools over college.

Even for those who view college as the only next step, the notes of hope and anxiety sound different coming from newcomers such as Tae-ho. Mina, an old-comer Zainichi student whom teachers expected to go to a good college, had never experienced Japanese school. She was born to Zainichi Korean parents who went through Korean schools in Japan. In her last year of high school, she needed to decide on a strategy for college admission. However, in the dormitory cafeteria after dinner, she confessed her anxiety about her future:

M: I can't decide on my major...I can't even decide what discipline or type of school I want to go to...By the way, do you know X University? One teacher suggested I apply to it.

Author: Yes, I know two people who went there, and one is from this school. Do you want me to introduce him to you?

M: Well...I'm not sure what to ask. The teacher can probably tell me about it.

Author: Don't you think it's better to ask a person who is currently there? He would have more information.

M: Yes...but I'm extremely shy. I'm not good at talking to strangers. I think I'm too used to this small community. I worry about being able to make friends in college—you know, I've never experienced a normal Japanese school (*futsū no nihon no gakkō*).

Even though she achieved a TOPIK level six (the highest proficiency for non-native Korean speakers), she is hesitant to use Korean with people from South Korea. Although most Korean schools in Japan are changing their pedagogy to accommodate South Korean speech style, their Korean pronunciation tends to be Japanized with grammar and vocabulary differing from that used in South Korea. Considering this, some are not happy with the language education at Korean schools in Japan, wherein students become fluent in Zainichi Korean speech (*Zainichi-go*) but not the mainstream South Korean speech style. This linguistic dynamism represents Mina's difficulty in deciding which options she should pursue after the graduation. She also feels boundaries between English-speaking countries and herself.

M: I don't want to speak Korean to South Koreans. I learned *Zainichi-go* at a Korean school, which is different from contemporary South Korean speech...you understand this because you speak Korean, right? So some expressions or words don't make sense to them. When they make faces, I stop talking.

Author: What about an English-speaking college?

M: Before coming to School K, I studied at a high school in California for half a year, but because I didn't know the grammar well, I couldn't learn much English. It was too far (*nanka, tōsugita*). Now I know the reality, and I'm not into exploring it further. My parents would also worry if I were to go there for a long time. Originally, I was planning to stay longer but ended up returning early. Maybe an English-speaking college in Malaysia would be good. My friend goes there.

In this regard, the act of border-crossing is perceived differently by Tae-ho and Mina. In Tae-ho's case, he has already come to Japan with his immigrant parents and is considering going "back" to Korea for his linguistic and cultural development. Japanese universities do not appear challenging to him; however, he and his parents do not have a clear understanding of English-speaking environments and cultures. He said his parents also tell him to learn English because it is important, but he sometimes doubts their advice because they do not

speak English. In Mina's case, she already has kinship networks and communities within Japan. For her, going to a Japanese university—let alone an overseas university—already seems like a big step out of her comfort zone. Going outside Japan is not her preference but based on her own (and her friend's) experiences, she can somewhat imagine what it might be like.

At the same time, Mina used the school's resources for college admission well. Even though she confesses her insecurity about her linguistic abilities and failure to adapt herself for the America high school, her kind personality has helped her build good relationships with her peers and teachers. This has benefited her by helping her earn a good GPA and secure admission to a prestigious private university in Kyoto. This shows that if students can participate well in the school community they belong to they can attain resources from their school to benefit their future (Khan 2012; Hirano 2023).

Zainichi Korean parents in particular tend to keep their children away from Japanese schools, either because they themselves graduated from Korean schools or because their children had previous negative experiences, such as bullying, in Japanese schools. However, parents who graduated from traditional Korean schools in Japan are not always favorably inclined toward the education they received. Mina's parents felt that sending her to a Korean high school would be “too much [of the same]” (*mō jūbun kana*) and chose School K instead. While they appreciated her close relationships with her teachers and peers at the Korean school, they also realized that it did not offer the highest quality of education. They expected School K to adhere to higher educational standards, especially in English.

However, during the author's visits, the English education at School K had barely achieved maturity. Excepting those who had spent time in the U.S. before coming to School K, almost no students were capable of attending an English-speaking college directly after graduation. Yumi, a third-generation Zainichi Korean student who aimed to go to the U.S. after graduation, confessed her anxiety about learning English to me. Having a grandfather

who fought for South Korea in the Korean War, her family avoided sending her to a traditional North Korean School. School K's promises matched with their wish for Yumi to be fluent in Korean and English and study in the United States after high school.¹⁴

While she asserts that she does not have any concerns for her future, learning English has sometimes been daunting. Compared to Korean which she learned quickly during her primary education at a South Korean school (in Japan), she confessed that she sometimes loses her confidence and motivation for learning English. Even though she attended an international primary school and diligently studied English since junior high school, her TOEFL score was barely the minimum required by community colleges. Her confidence took a serious hit when she went to Vietnam for an international high school student conference. The other participants from the U.S., Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam all spoke English better than she did. She is still considering if she should continue studying English, wondering if her inability to master it might mean she's just not cut out for it. However, she believes that learning English is essential for her as an ethnic minority in Japan:

There are many kinds of minorities in the world—Korean Japanese is not the only 'minority' in the world. In the U.S., there are many ethnic groups, so I think I can be just one of the minorities. In that environment, I want to engage in serious discussions.

In short, although Yumi does not have many American friends, she hopes to engage in discussions in the U.S., possibly with other ethnic minorities. Yumi's narrative also indicates that she connects speaking in English with being connected to other minorities in the world.

Linguistic differences between Japanese/Korean and English also hindered students' proficiency in English compared to Korean. This sometimes became a significant reason for student and parent dissatisfaction and teachers' concerns. Interestingly, while many students

14. In 2020, Yumi secured admission to a community college in the U.S.

were fluent in Korean, only a few could communicate in English. School K teaches English, Japanese, and Korean as target languages, with most students and teachers being native Japanese speakers (with the exception of Korean and English native speakers). As the same number of class hours are spent on English and Korean (five hours per week), they receive equal focus. However, it seemed that linguistic similarities between Korean and Japanese and the presence of international students from South Korea resulted in the student body becoming more proficient in Korean than English.

Impossible aspirations for science-track students

Small schools have certain advantages and disadvantages when it comes to their curriculum. While smaller class sizes create better teacher-student ratios, teachers also face a lack of resources and curriculum variation. Many of the students expressed contentment with the school's ability to build close-knit relationships. However, this aspect of the school may not be enough for some aspiring students and families, and they may even consider leaving the school if they need specific training that the school cannot provide. For example, those majoring in science were a minority at School K, with few teachers qualified to teach high-school-level science. A mother who decided to take her child out of School K describes this problem:

If you want to enter college through the A.O. system,¹⁵ School K might be a good choice. However, not all universities and majors accept students via this system. My son wanted to major in veterinary medicine, and it was obvious that no one could teach the subjects necessary for the entrance exam. I was very disappointed by how they prepared students who chose that option (i.e., taking the paper test for college admission). Shortly after beginning 12th grade, he quit school.

¹⁵ The Admission Office system is an admission via university criteria such as essays and interviews, rather than exam results. This is slightly different from the recommendation (*suisen*) system which focuses more on GPA in high school. Recently, more than 50% of students who enter private universities utilize either the A.O. system or the recommendation system (MEXT 2019).

The insufficient number of classes, especially in science and its related subjects, causes problems for those who aspire to those fields. After quitting School K, this student spent most of his time at a preparation school (*yobikō*) to secure admission to college in the field he had originally planned to enter. When students come to School K at the age of 13 (seventh grade), many do not know which field they will enter—and this former student was one of them. When they decide on their majors for the college entrance examination, this kind of issue might occur.

This exemplifies how students are *allowed* to have only the certain aspirations and dreams at School K. As earlier noted, most students plan to enter either Korean or Japanese universities depending on their nationality. Despite the aforementioned advantages of small schools in university admissions and environments, their resource and curriculum limitations restrict certain options, particularly in scientific and medical fields. Students' nationality, major, and background mold their aspirations to some degree. When these match the school's policies and resources, their hopes can be supported more easily. These conflicts and frustrations exemplify the gap between how the school presents itself and how people experience multicultural and multilingual environments at such a small school. At the same time, the curriculum is not the sole criterion for the school's "success."

The value of a safe space: Shelter from the outside world?

One notable factor is that some students end up in School K due to discrimination from mainstream Japanese society.¹⁶ Despite this, a staff member indicated that there are gaps between what the school presents as its values and what students and parents require from it:

When I go to private school promotion events for elementary- and junior-high-school students, I advertise the trilingual education our school offers, but parents' largest

¹⁶ For more about hate crimes on Korean schools in Japan, see Nakamura (2014).

concern is whether their children actually can go to school [to attend classes or not]. Zainichi parents—I actually am one, too (*watashimo sōnandesuga*)—worry so much about the education options for their kids. Shall I send my kids to a Japanese school? If so, will they be safe? Hirano-san [the author] is here to study the uniqueness of this school, right? But there are some people who *have* to choose (*erabanakereba naranai*) this kind of place.

He also told me that many students who consider coming to School K, especially from high school, are school refusers, those who do not go to school for a certain period. As he went by a Japanese name, up until this conversation I did not know that he was actually a third-generation Zainichi Korean. He explained that he does this for the sake of his children's safety. Another mother of a student also indicated that “you are missing something if you just look at the educational content here.” One of the reasons why parents choose ethnic Korean schools, including School K, is the persistence of discrimination against Zainichi Koreans in mainstream Japanese schools. The value of School K is not only assessed in terms of its curriculum, but also in what kind of people it brings together and how interpersonal interactions can occur in the space it offers.

Some parents sense the negative aspects of sending their children to mainstream Japanese schools. One student's mother, who attended Korean schools along with her husband, told the author during an interview that “choosing a Korean school does not always overlap with one's ideology [referring to her support of North Korea].” She meant that even if they are not content with the education and policies offered at a Korean school, they appreciate the safe and close-knit community there. What made her decide to send her child to School K after attending a Japanese primary school was how mainstream schools have treated Zainichi Koreans.

Mother: One time, my son came home and said, ‘Japan did good things to Korea,’ including annexation. There were several times when I questioned the legitimacy of what they teach, but I also did not like (traditional) Korean schools' pedagogy and curriculum—it is outdated, and you cannot go to good Japanese universities after going there. I also worried about my son being bullied in Japanese schools because of his name, although he does not talk about much about it.

Author: Did you find some changes to your son after coming to School K?"

Mother: Well, I feel that my son became less gloomy (*kage no youna mono ga usukunatta*). For that, I am happy, but I am not content with their educational standards. They should be more internationalized and improve students' English."

For her, School K was an alternative to both traditional Korean schools and mainstream Japanese schools. Living in a middle-class neighborhood, she aspires to send her son to prestigious Japanese universities. At the same time, she knows that her son is vulnerable in mainstream Japanese schools. Her son was busy with college preparatory classes (*juku*) after school and eventually secured admission to one of the top private universities in the Osaka area.

Furthermore, how the school's affiliates are regarded by outsiders reminds them of what it means to be othered in mainstream Japanese society. One day, I went with students to the local community center for a physical education class after which a few of us stopped by a cafeteria in the center that offered cold barley tea. There was a friendly volunteer staff member assigned to the cafeteria, and we mentioned that we had been using the center for several years. The woman, who lives in the school neighborhood, said, "Your Japanese is excellent!" (*minasan nihongo ga totemo ojōzu nandesune*). On the way back, I complained about her ignorance of Zainichi Koreans despite living nearby and working at the center. One high school student nonchalantly replied, "Well, a regular person would be like that" (*mā futsū no hito wa sonna kanji ja nainsuka*). When School K was being built, some of its neighbors protested because they thought having a Korean school in their neighborhood would reduce the value of their land. Although the school experienced a massive protest from the local community when it first opened, ten years of operation have decreased people's interest in it. Once inside the school, I observed that School K resembles mainstream Japanese schools more than Korean schools. However, those outside its community still regard it as something unknown or even a potential threat, which underscores how Zainichi Koreans still face discrimination in Japanese society. While the school's cultural festivals (*bunka-sai*) in 2018

and 2019 did not mention any negative experiences of being Korean in Japan, a sense of hardship among its Zainichi Korean students has persisted.

The experience of discrimination is not openly discussed, but it is tacitly ingrained in students' everyday lives. Overall, although some students did not recall having negative encounters with the Japanese community, the stigma of being Korean in Japan remains. One student, who spends two hours traveling to school, said she came to School K partly because she could not stay in the public elementary school in her region when people learned that she was part Korean, and it became a bit difficult for her to have a peaceful school life. She said she was not interested in South Korea or K-pop, let alone studying the Korean language. However, her Korean heritage forced her to seek an alternative place to learn, requiring a long commute and higher tuition fees. Another student confessed during class that he would have preferred to be "pure Japanese" (*jun nihonjin*), observing that people cannot choose their parents. One alumna told me that she tells herself to try twice as hard as others to be successful given her minority status.

The story of Kōsuke: "I'm glad that I'm here"

A safe space is essential for productive learning. Although discrimination in mainstream Japanese society is not a common aspect of the daily conversation of students and teachers, once students leave school, they face its harsh reality. For the majority of its students, School K may allow them to avoid thinking about these issues. For many Zainichi Korean students, the school offers a temporary safe haven for them from the discrimination found in mainstream society.

One student's lived experience embodies the value of School K as a safe space. One day, it started pouring heavily, and Kōsuke and I were stuck in the discount store where we had stopped to get snacks after school. It was during the rainy season in June, and once you stepped out of the store, you would be drenched to the skin. After waiting for a while, we decided to ask for help; there was a dormitory nearby, and a friend of ours, Jun, lived there. I

felt hesitant because, even with an umbrella, the rain was too heavy to avoid completely, and I worried that it might be presumptuous to ask him to come all the way here. But Kōsuke made a phone call via LINE. I could hear Jun teasing, pretending he would not come and meet us. He relented when Kōsuke added that I was there too and showed up a few minutes later with an umbrella in his hand. While we appreciated his help, Kōsuke jokingly grumbled that Jun had only brought one extra umbrella for two people. The two of them ended up sharing one umbrella, leaving the other for me. After arriving at the dormitory, we played card games while eating snacks. Then Kōsuke said, “I like the way things are, like this, I’m glad that I’m here (*kō iu noga inatte omou. Kokoni kite*).” Kōsuke’s experience at a public school had not been pleasant, as his classmates and even his teacher had teased him for being chubby and having a non-Japanese name. He did not like everyone calling him by the name of the leader of North Korea. His parents, worried about him being quiet and depressed, had sent him to School K from junior high school onwards. While he was not particularly aware of this school’s unique characteristics, he enjoys his school life surrounded by good friends and friendly teachers, takes classes seriously, and volunteers for a student organization. He is a now student who is widely beloved in this community.

Conclusion

Students at School K have various reasons for attending this specialized school. School K aims to empower people to transcend their ethnicity and be successful in Japan or abroad through trilingual education. The school does not require students to perform “being Korean” at school. This differs significantly from traditional Korean schools where students internalize the distinct linguistic and behavioral codes of Zainichi Koreans. However, many students value their relationships with peers and teachers more than the curriculum and quality of education at school. This is similar to what Song (2012) found in traditional Korean schools. They allow students to imagine their boundaries with their peers at school and in Korea, Japan, East Asia and the West. After considering these multiple boundaries, they seek what

they think is best for themselves, based on their experiences. Even if students do not feel confident in their abilities, good relationships with peers and teachers could potentially benefit them as they navigate their advanced schooling options, especially via recommendation systems.

As discussed here, some Zainichi Korean parents and students avoid mainstream Japanese schools due to the concern of being bullied. Ethnicity still heavily determines the form of their everyday lives in Japan and their school choice. However, once in a school where most students are Zainichi Korean, students and teachers at School K do not actively seek the “diasporic Koreans’ affective transnational longing” (Bell 2019) that is a core cultural representation of traditional Korean schools. At the same time, School K shows some similar features of international schools in Japan where the primary language of interaction is Japanese and many students are born and raised in Japan, with a small number of foreign-born students. Trilingual education did not make English a powerful instructional language at school, and students feel more intimate with Korean. This hybridity makes School K a rich place to produce an alternative knowledge and school culture for Zainichi Koreans and others.

When one tries to cross linguistic and cultural borders, each border requires the transcendence of various challenges. People’s aspirations are heavily influenced by where they come from. Students and parents are conscious that what they can aspire to is affected by their nationality or upbringing. While old-comer Zainichi students are more laid-back regarding their future, more recent immigrant students show more aspirations for success, including admission to famous colleges. However, these distinctions are negotiated as students interact with each other over time. Students imagine their future based on who they know in their everyday lives. While students reported crossing the linguistic and cultural borders between Japanese/Korean relatively easily, English/the West was described as being “far.” The concept of a border-crossing education allows School K to provide hope for a new educational vision, but that has also led people to express their dissatisfaction with the

realities of opportunities available following study at School K. Yet, the students are versatile enough to cross many borders depending on their individual aspirations and circumstances. Regardless of where students come from, people at School K all value the school being a safe space. While School K cannot yet offer enough resources to students with diverse backgrounds and aspirations, it provides Zainichi Korean students with a safe space, and sometimes that is seen as a higher priority than the unique curriculum of the school. Considering how many students have experienced exclusion in mainstream Japanese schools, an institution with mostly Zainichi Korean students, but which is not bound to a monolithic notion of ethnic identity, provides a valuable space for this minority, an accomplishment that speaks to the dedication of many teachers at School K.

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Tables and Figures

Figure 1. A scene from a Korean class. Student playfully draw anime characters when writing down their answers on the blackboard. Taken by the author.



Figure 2. Miso pork stew made by mothers. This is a typical Japanese homemade dish (photo taken by the author). Taken by the author.

