

## Separate and Unequal: The Remedial Japanese Language Classroom

### as an Ethnic Project 日本の補習言語教育と市民権 民族的課題としての第二言語教室

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The economic downturn of the Great Recession has largely brought an end to the wave of ethnic return migration of Japanese South Americans to Japan, a wave that began in the late 1980s. By 2012, the number of South American residents in Japan had dropped by more than a third, contributing to the shrinking of the foreign resident population in Japan to the lowest level since 2005 (Ministry of Justice 2013). This emigration wave from Japan has been encouraged by growth in the Brazilian economy and by financial incentives from the Japanese government for Japanese South Americans and their family members to leave the country. However, despite these changes, the number of non-Japanese children in Japanese public schools who require remedial help in Japanese remains high. While the number of Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking children in Japanese-as-a-second-language (JSL) classes has dropped, the number of Chinese- and Tagalog-speaking children receiving these classes has increased (MEXT 2013).

Thus, Japanese public schools, like their counterparts in other countries, continue to face the responsibility of preparing immigrant children for their futures in Japan. This project of citizen-building is occurring in a Japanese classroom setting that emphasizes the equality of all students, and a strong sense of collectivity and mutual interdependence (Tsuneyoshi 2001). Professional norms in Japanese education further dictate that schools must provide all students with similar education until they enter high school, at which time students are sorted into academic and vocational schools with differing curricular emphases and degrees of prestige (LeTendre, Hofer, and Shimizu 2003; Shimizu 1992, 2001; Shimizu et al. 1999; Tsuneyoshi 1996, 2001). However, the presence of immigrant children is challenging this Japanese educational model of equality and inclusion.

To meet the needs of immigrant children, Japanese public schools have created separate JSL classrooms for students who require remedial language training. These classrooms break with Japanese educational practices by pulling

students out of their homeroom classes for remedial lessons, instead of having all students complete the same lessons together. Teachers contend that the JSL classrooms provide more than remedial instruction—they also serve as sites of refuge for immigrant children, providing them places to relax from the challenges of adapting to the Japanese language and culture.

I examine the JSL classroom at Shiroyama Elementary School,<sup>1</sup> a public school in central Japan that has more than 50 immigrant students. The great majority of the school's immigrant families come from Peru, with smaller numbers from Bolivia, Brazil, China, and the Philippines. The school's Peruvian, Bolivian, and Brazilian students are the third- and fourth-generation descendants of Japanese emigrants who settled in South America in the early twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 60 percent of the immigrant students at Shiroyama Elementary attend remedial JSL classes, while the other 40 percent are deemed to have sufficient Japanese language capacity to be mainstreamed. Asking how the JSL room has been integrated into the educational and social fabric of the school, I examine the connection between the JSL room and the school's homeroom classes, and the school's plan for, and delivery of, JSL instruction, including the preparation of JSL teachers, the content of JSL lessons, and teachers' reactions to the JSL program. I also analyze the impact of the school's JSL instruction on immigrant students' academic

development, and the implications for their future ability to integrate into Japanese society.

My analysis reveals that the dominant practice of Japanese public education and the new (since 1992) practice of the JSL classroom are competing *ethnic projects* that reflect particular conceptualizations of the children's future lives as members of Japanese society. I am thus amending Omi and Winant's (1994) concept of the *racial project* which they define as "an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along ... racial lines" (p. 56). I substitute the term *ethnicity for race* to better fit the Japanese context, where notions of group membership extend beyond race, to include shared ancestry, culture, and nationality. In so doing, I am foregrounding the role of ethnicity in the distribution of school resources and in teachers' explanations of group dynamics (cf. Omi and Winant 1994:56). I also highlight the classroom's role in the construction of Japanese citizenship and the co-construction of Japan's ethnic others.

This analysis serves as a cautionary tale of the risks of failing to educate Japan's immigrant children. The outcomes of the school's JSL program likely foretell the future lives of the JSL students who choose to remain in Japan as adults, since the school is the primary site where these children learn to read and write in Japanese. Success could enable the students to be

mainstreamed into their homeroom classes, where they could participate more fully in the school's citizen-building project. However, failure could isolate the students in the JSL classrooms, limiting their ability to improve their command of the Japanese language and to close the academic gap between them and their Japanese classmates. Such a project would prepare these immigrant children for life on Japan's social and economic margins, where the children's parents are already firmly entrenched.

In the following section, I provide an overview of my field site, including details on Shiroyama's foreign population and on my research methods. In subsequent sections, I examine the ethnic projects of Japanese public education and the JSL classroom, and provide a summary analysis.

## BACKGROUND

Shiroyama is a working-class district of a city of 75,000 people in central Japan. The district's primary industry consists of auto parts and electronics factories, which employ thousands of workers, including Shiroyama's immigrant population of roughly 700 people. Many of these immigrant workers are Nikkei,<sup>3</sup> or foreign nationals of Japanese descent. Nikkei immigration to Japan was made possible by the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act of 1990. This law created a long-term resident visa specifically for the Japanese diaspora, with whom the Japanese state has sustained ties

through decades of support for ethnic associations and cultural institutions (Takenaka 2004, 2008). Since the law's passage, hundreds of thousands of Nikkei have migrated to Japan from South America. By 2007, the number had peaked at nearly 394,000 residents, up from only 3,600 in 1985 (Statistical Research and Training Institute 2010).

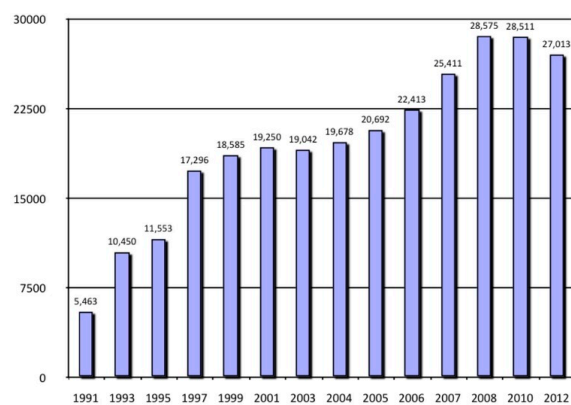
In Shiroyama, the Nikkei population is predominantly from Peru. It is estimated that roughly 70 percent of the Peruvian Nikkei in Japan are entirely of Japanese descent, and 30 percent are of mixed ancestry (Japan International Cooperation Agency 1992). Japanese emigration to Peru started in 1898 and lasted until World War II, with reduced levels of migration in the postwar era. Some Nikkei can directly trace their Japanese ancestry back through multiple generations, with no history of out-marriage since their family's migration to South America. This population is phenotypically indistinguishable from native-born Japanese, however, when they speak, their non-native accents quickly reveal their foreign status. Other Nikkei have weaker ties to Japan, with only one spouse having Japanese ancestry, at times through a single grandparent—the minimum degree of Japanese descent required for a long-term resident visa. Whatever their ancestral ties to Japan, many Nikkei find that Japanese treat them as complete foreigners, or *gaijin*, a largely unassimilable other who is a

permanent outsider to Japanese society (Takenaka 1999).

Many of Shiroyama's Peruvian families migrated in 1990 with plans to return to Peru after several years of work. They have since decided to settle in Shiroyama for the foreseeable future, attracted by low-cost public housing and the presence of other Peruvian family members. The fact that the children have acculturated to life in Japan, and often speak Japanese better than Spanish, further encourages the families to remain. However, the current global economic recession has reminded the Nikkei of their precarious position in Japan, as their contract positions were among the first terminated at the start of the recession in 2008 (Higuchi 2010). By the end of 2012, the recession had prompted more than 140,000 South Americans to leave Japan, reducing the population of South American residents in Japan to 253,000 (Ministry of Justice 2013). This mass exodus was accelerated by growth in the Brazilian economy, and by a Japanese government offer of ¥300,000 (approximately US\$3,000 at the time) for each Nikkei adult and ¥200,000 (US\$2,000) for each spouse or dependent to return to South America (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare 2009; Ministry of Justice 2010). Those who received this payment became ineligible for long-term resident visas for a period of three years (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare 2009). When able to find employment in Japan, the Nikkei are often in

low-skilled positions with no opportunities for advancement (Higuchi and Tanno 2003; Takenoshita 2006; Tsuda, Valdez, and Cornelius 2003). Like labor migrants in many countries, the Nikkei also have few opportunities to transfer their skills to the broader labor market, as they are held back by their limited command of the language and by discrimination, from which Japanese law offers few protections (Gurowitz 2006).

**Chart 1.1 Number of children requiring remedial JSL instruction in public schools**



Sources: Kanno 2008a; MEXT 2013.

Alongside the rise of Nikkei immigration, the number of foreign children officially tallied as needing remedial JSL instruction has also increased. From 1991 to its peak in 2008, this number grew by more than 400 percent, from 5,463 to 28,575 (Kanno 2008a; MEXT 2009) (See Chart 1.1).<sup>4</sup> Thus, in 2008, 38 percent of the 75,043 foreign students in Japanese public schools, including Nikkei and other foreign children, had a sufficiently poor command of the Japanese language as to require remedial instruction

(MEXT 2009).<sup>5</sup> At Shiroyama Elementary, the number of foreign students has increased steadily in recent years, including during my fieldwork, when it rose from 43 students in 2005, to 48 in 2006, to 56 in 2007.<sup>6</sup> (See Table 1.1.) Nearly all of these children were born in Japan, and all but a few attended Japanese preschool or kindergarten prior to starting elementary school. Nonetheless, in the 2006-07 academic year, 28 out of the 48 immigrant students were scheduled to leave their homeroom classes to attend pullout JSL classes for at least one class period each week.

**Table 1.1. Japanese and foreign children at Shiroyama Elementary School (2005-2007) by parents' countries of origin**

Parents' Country of Origin	2005	2006	2007
Total Foreign	43	48	56
Peru	33	34	38
Bolivia	5	5	7
Brazil	3	5	5
Philippines <sup>a</sup>	2	1	4
China	0	3	2
Japan	749	772	804

<sup>a</sup> These totals include two children who have one Filipino and one Japanese parent and who possess Japanese citizenship.

From November 2005 to April 2007, I conducted participant observation at the school. Funded by a Fulbright fellowship, I volunteered full-time as a Japanese-Spanish interpreter, translator, and assistant teacher. I interpreted during parent-

teacher meetings, translated messages between teachers and parents, and fielded direct calls to my cell phone from parents who needed to contact the school. I also taught remedial Japanese and mathematics, led free Spanish classes on Saturdays, and accompanied immigrant families in social gatherings. I also conducted intensive interviews with 31 Peruvian and Bolivian parents, and informal interviews with 16 teachers and administrators. I recorded and later transcribed these interviews, with a research assistant performing the Japanese transcriptions.

In the following section, I first examine Japanese public education, and then the JSL classroom, as competing ethnic projects. I explore Shiroyama Elementary's JSL program in detail, including the use of the JSL room as a place to relax, the implementation of JSL instruction, and teacher resistance to the program, before concluding with a summary analysis.

## TEACHING JAPANESE AND IMMIGRANT CHILDREN

The principles of egalitarianism (*byōdōshugi*) and collective communalism (*issei kyōdotai shugi*) guide Japanese public education. Egalitarianism directs teachers to treat all children equally and to instill the same desire to learn in each of them (Shimizu 1992; Shimizu et al. 1999; Shimizu and Shimizu 2001; Tsuneyoshi 1996, 2001). This approach conceptualizes all students as equal

members of the classroom, entitled to a similar education, with little distinction for students' individual needs or desires. Inherent to this ethnic education project is a connection to the children's imagined futures as Japanese citizens who are equal members of the nation-state, and who possess similar rights and responsibilities. Thus, the school seeks to both provide children with human and cultural capital (Becker 1964; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Schultz 1961) and inform their sense of membership in the larger society.

Following the principle that all students are to receive the same education, Japanese public schools offer no separate courses for gifted students and little remediation for students who are not performing at grade level.<sup>7</sup> Two exceptions to the rule of no separate courses exist, as students with developmental disabilities attend classes in a separate classroom, and immigrant students who need remedial JSL instruction leave their homeroom classes for JSL lessons. All homeroom classes in each grade progress at the same rate, and from elementary school through junior high, schools automatically promote all students to the next grade, regardless of the students' academic progress.

The second principle, coordinated communalism, conceptualizes each class as a single, comprehensive, cooperative body (Cave 2007; Takato 2006; Tsuneyoshi 1996, 2001). As Tsuneyoshi (2001:45) notes:

This communalism is at the foundation of the "Japanese school model." Coordinated communalism assumes a tight-knit, self-sufficient, and homogeneous type of classroom/school community, and places central importance on the sharing of communal experience, empathy, mutual interdependence, and other communal values ... It dictates, moreover, ... that everyone engage in the same kind of communal activity together.

Pulling students out of class for JSL lessons challenges this sense of collectivity. However, teachers justify this practice by claiming that the JSL students cannot fully participate in classroom activities, and, as I discuss later, that the students need a break from attending class.

The focus on class cohesion encourages immigrant students to assimilate, as it leaves no space for classroom discussions of respecting or retaining students' ethnic differences (Ōta 1996, 2005; Sakuma 2006; Satō 1998; Shimizu 2006). Instead, students try to advance at the same time that they avoid appearing different by learning the Japanese language and culture. This silence regarding ethnic differences reveals a hidden curriculum (Jackson 1968) in Japanese public education: to fully integrate, students must either be ethnically Japanese or act as if they were

(Kanno 2008a; Sakuma 2006).<sup>8</sup>

### The Amigos Room

The JSL classroom appeared in Japanese schools following a 1992 Ministry of Education edict that allocated funding for JSL classes in schools with large numbers of immigrant students (Kanno 2008a; Ōta 2002). Under this system, teachers identify students who are in need of remedial JSL instruction, and then obtain the parents' consent for the children to leave class for the JSL lessons. So that JSL students may participate in as many homeroom activities as possible, the students remain in their homerooms during lessons that require less Japanese language skill, such as music and art, and leave during core subjects including language, mathematics and social studies. This approach puts much of the students' academic learning on hold until they have gained a sufficient command of the language to rejoin their classes, as the students receive fewer lessons in the core subjects (Kanno 2004, 2008b; Ōta 2000; Sakuma 2006; Satō 1998; Vaipae 2001). While their classmates learn new material and develop new skills, JSL students face the daunting task of catching up to them while receiving remedial JSL education (Cummins 2000).<sup>9</sup>

Like JSL rooms at other schools in the region, Shiroyama Elementary's JSL room is given a name in the JSL students' native language. In this case, the school uses the Spanish word *Amigos*

(Friends), written *Amiigosiān* Japanese *katakana*<sup>10</sup> The Amigos Room occupies a vacant classroom on the third floor, and is staffed full-time by one teacher, and part-time by another teacher and by the school's language counselor (*gogaku shidōi*) who is also responsible for interpreting and translating. Homeroom and assistant teachers also provide occasional one-on-one lessons. The room is sparsely decorated with charts of *hiragana* and *kanji* characters, faded tourist posters and maps of Peru, Brazil, and Bolivia, and inspirational poems in Japanese. Despite these decorations, the room feels empty and unused. Other classrooms of the same size hold more than 30 students, while the Amigos Room has only ten desks and a few tables to accommodate the one to five students who attend classes there each period. Bare shelves line two walls, holding only a few stacks of worksheets, in contrast to regular classroom shelves which are brimming with books, teaching materials, and students' artwork.

The homeroom classes are at the center of the social world of the school, with the Amigos Room on the periphery. Homeroom teachers retain their authority over the JSL students in their classes, including deciding when the students will attend JSL lessons. Thus the position of JSL teacher is subordinate to the homeroom teachers, and holds a correspondingly lower status within the school (Gordon 2006). The school principal assigns teachers to the

Amigos Room, at times against their wishes. These assignments lead to much grumbling, as in the case of Ms. Tanabe, a teacher who complains for the first two weeks of the school year that she is a music teacher, not a Japanese-language teacher, and that she has no idea how to teach JSL.



**Peruvian student Ricardo relaxes in the Amigos Room.**

### Giving Immigrant Students a Place to Relax

Notwithstanding Ms. Tanabe's concerns over her ability to teach Japanese as a second language, JSL and homeroom teachers contend that instruction is only one goal of the Amigos Room. Another, more primary goal is to give immigrant students a place to relax so they can overcome the stress of feeling like outsiders in their homeroom classes. A sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Mori, describes the role of the Amigos Room in terms of this emotional support:

The work they (the JSL students) can't do in the regular class, they

can do in the Amigos Room. But another point is *hāto* (heart), the emotional aspect. For ... children who really can't speak Japanese, being in the [regular] classroom is painful, painful, difficult, difficult. But, if they go to Amigos, they can ... relax. In that sense, Amigos is important. That's an important role for the Amigos Room to play. It's not just studies, but also the child's feelings, so the children can relax. A classroom where they can speak in their mother language with other children, and can communicate, that's good, I think.

This view interprets the children's needs through both ethnic and linguistic lenses, as the need to address students' feeling of isolation and marginalization supersedes their need for linguistic remediation. Like other teachers, Mr. Mori does not describe any curricular connection between his class and the Amigos Room. He says his students *can* complete homeroom work in the Amigos Room, but in practice they do not do so.

Teachers also explain that, in the Amigos Room, JSL students lose the identity of pitiful (*kawaisō*) foreign children who are unable to complete their work (Kanno 2008b; Ōta 2005). Often silent and detached in their homeroom classes, the students perk up before their JSL lessons, quickly



grabbing their materials and hurrying to the Amigos Room, where they are reborn, smiling, laughing, and playing with their friends in a mix of Spanish and Japanese. Ms. Satō, a fourth-grade teacher, notes of her JSL student, Rafael, who is from Peru:

When he goes to Amigos, his attitude changes completely. When he goes to Amigos, he can relax and speak in Spanish. He can relax, talk to his friends, the atmosphere is completely different. And when he comes to class, he falls silent and doesn't say anything.

In the Amigos Room, Rafael opens up, frequently inventing stories of monsters and boasting of his ability to speak three languages: Japanese, Spanish, and Portuguese, which he claims to have learned at the airport during a stop-over in Brazil. Thus, students “come to the Japanese Language classroom not so much to learn Japanese as to regain their sense of self” (Ōta 2000:176, as quoted in Kanno 2004).

In the Amigos Room, the students spend much of their time playing, while the teachers offer little supervision or direction. An entry in my fieldnotes captures this pattern, as I describe the actions of Yuka, a Brazilian girl in the sixth grade, and Ms. Maeda, an Amigos teacher:

I enter the Amigos Room partway through the period, and find ... Yuka sitting at her desk folding papers. The papers have pre-printed drawings on them, drawings of a toilet, “*unchi man*” (poo man), and toilet paper. Yuka is folding the papers so that when you lift up the toilet seat, you see “*unchi man*” sitting in the bowl. She asks me to help her fold the toilet paper roll but I refuse.

While the children play around, walking around the room and not studying, Maeda ... draws 4x6” portraits of the children, asking them to stand still for a minute while she sketches a basic outline of their faces. Below her finished drawings, she writes each child's first name, in cursive script.

When I attempt to engage the children in a language lesson, or inquire about their work in their homeroom classes, the children dismiss my concerns as out of place, since they have followed the teachers' lead in defining the Amigos Room as a place to play and not to study.

### **JSL Instruction**

Like the vast majority of teachers in Japan, Shiroyama's teachers, in both the regular and JSL

classrooms, have no training in JSL. Japanese teacher credentialing programs do not include lessons on second-language acquisition or cross-cultural communication (Gordon 2006; Kanno 2008a; Okano and Tsuchiya 1999; Ōta 2002; Tsuneyoshi 2001; Vaipae 2001). Teachers also report that at prior schools, they rarely had any immigrant students in their classes. This lack of training and experience forces teachers to learn to work with JSL students on the job, with few resources to support them. One of the JSL teachers further lacks any teacher training, as his primary responsibility is to serve as an interpreter and translator.

Each JSL student carries an “Amigos File,” a binder of notes on the child’s daily JSL work. However, this file provides homeroom teachers little information on students’ work, beyond vague references to “*kanji* review.” Many homeroom teachers admit to not reading the file and to not using it to request specific lessons, even though the file has space for such requests. Homeroom teachers actually know little of what happens in the Amigos Room, prompting some to ask me what their students actually do there. This disconnect also negatively impacts parent-teacher conferences, as homeroom teachers explain that they can say little about the children’s language progress because they complete those lessons in the Amigos Room—and the Amigos teachers do not attend parent-teacher conferences.

Research in Japan and the United States has shown that collaboration between remedial and homeroom teachers holds the potential for improving students’ academic performance and easing their transition into regular classes (i.e., Calderón, Hertz-Lazarowitz, and Slavin 1998; Ishii 2006; Minicucci and Olsen 1992; Ozeki 2006; Short 2002; Sugahara 2009). Moreover, remedial programs that strongly connect second-language instruction with academic content are correlated with higher student outcomes (i.e., Crandall, Bernache, and Prager 1998; Lucas, Henze, and Donato 1990; Matsuda, Mitsumoto, and Yukawa 2009; Sato and Kubota 2012; Uzuhashi 2004; Wang 1998). However, despite the seemingly intuitive value of connecting the homeroom and JSL lessons, at Shiroyama Elementary little collaboration between those rooms exists.

The Amigos teachers also have developed almost no JSL lesson plans or materials, beyond photocopying worksheets. As in JSL rooms at other schools, the Amigos Room’s only written curriculum lists simple lessons for complete newcomers to the Japanese language (Ōta 2000; Vaipae 2001). These lessons are irrelevant for nearly all the JSL students, as they come to school already familiar with basic Japanese conversation, but lacking grade-level skills in spoken and particularly written Japanese. For these students, the Amigos teachers improvise ad hoc lessons that focus almost solely on basic reading and writing skills, and that ignore the

students' need for academic literacy in the spoken language (cf. August and Hakuta 1997; Vaipae 2001). Students receive virtually no grammar instruction beyond the construction of simple sentences, and instead spend their time mechanically completing worksheets on which they practice writing *hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji* characters. Thus, the students find themselves between a rock and a hard place, as they "are either placed in the regular classroom where they do not understand the instruction, or [are] pulled out for JSL instruction, in which they engage in cognitively undemanding, content-less language drills while their Japanese classmates march on with their academic learning" (Kanno 2008b:15).

On the rare occasions when the Amigos teachers provide the students a grammar lesson, the efforts are generally half-hearted and poorly coordinated, as the teachers also use class time to prepare for other classes and to share gossip and complaints. Sensing the teachers' focus on other matters, the students turn away from their studies and play. In this excerpt from my fieldnotes, Mr. Nakamura, a second-grade teacher, has come to the Amigos Room to provide one-on-one instruction to Yoshi, a Peruvian boy with autism, while Ms. Maeda works with three other students.

Maeda corrals the kids into their seats, calling Rafael to come ... to the front of the room. Rafael and

Takashi (a Peruvian boy in the fifth grade) sit next to each other, gabbing the entire class. Nakamura sits next to Yoshi at the front of the room, with a ... workbook on the desk in front of Yoshi. Sylvia (a Bolivian girl in the second grade) sits to the left, and Maeda starts drawing an apple and a tangerine on the board. She writes *ringo* (apple) and *mikan* (tangerine) under the pictures, and then asks the kids what they are in Spanish. The children reply, and Maeda then says that she can't write that in Spanish, and asks me to write the Spanish translations *manzana* and *mandarina* for her. She then starts writing a comparative sentence, "*Ringo wa mikan yori ōkii*" (The apple is bigger than the tangerine.)

She recites the sentence quickly, while Rafael and Takashi play around and talk loudly. The boys copy the sentence down, and when Maeda asks them how to say it in Spanish, the boys sense the opportunity to stop their Japanese lesson. They tell her the sentence in Spanish, repeating it over and over again, as if teaching it to [her]. ...

Sylvia remains lost, staring at the

blackboard, unsure of what the Japanese sentences mean. Maeda stops the lesson and walks over to Nakamura, and the two of them complain about other teachers ... Meanwhile, Yoshi sits and silently traces ... in his workbook. Nakamura does not look at Yoshi, instead focusing all his attention on Maeda.

Rafael and Takashi copy down my Spanish translation, ... laugh, talk about fruit, say silly things, and do anything but study. Sylvia speaks softly to me ... I walk over to her desk and ask her if she understands. She says no, so I explain, in a mix of Spanish and Japanese, the construction of the sentence.

My lesson is drowned out by the sound of the two teachers complaining to each other, and the two boys playing around. Maeda rejoins the lesson, to say to the boys in Japanese that I am taller than her, which merely redirects the boys' conversation to talking about who's taller than whom ... Maeda then withdraws and returns to her complaining with Nakamura.

At the end of the class period, Sylvia leaves the

Amigos Room still not understanding how to construct a comparative sentence in Japanese, and the lesson is not repeated the rest of the school year.

As the above excerpt reveals, the JSL classes are often Spanish lessons for Ms. Maeda, rather than Japanese lessons for the students, as she asks the students for the Spanish translations of Japanese words. Using student's native language can serve as a mechanism for imparting content and understanding (Calderón, Hertz-Lazarowitz, and Slavin 1998; Carter and Chatfield 1986; Hernández 1991; Lucas, Henze, and Donato 1990; Uzuhashi 2004). However, in this case Ms. Maeda uses Spanish because she is unsure how to teach JSL. Thus she focuses heavily on learning Spanish—despite the fact that the students' dominant language is Japanese. Many of the students have never studied Spanish beyond the free weekly classes I lead on weekends, have limited Spanish vocabularies, and are illiterate in the language. Prior to being assigned to the Amigos Room, Ms. Maeda spoke no Spanish, but during her two-year tenure in the room, her Spanish vocabulary expanded significantly to include most of the vocabulary taught in first and second grade as well as basic Spanish grammar. These language skills facilitate her communication with the Spanish-speaking parents; however, dedicating so much classroom time to her Spanish learning reduces the time available for the students to learn Japanese.

A rare exception to the pattern of ad hoc and incomplete JSL lessons occurs during formal observations by visitors such as university researchers, district administrators, and other school officials. Prior to these visits, the Amigos teachers freshly decorate the room and prepare detailed lesson plans for distribution to the visitors. However, the lessons are largely for show and offer little academic benefit, as the teachers prepare lessons that are far below their students' levels, for example teaching *kanji* for first graders to Japan-born students who are in the fifth and sixth grades and who had long since mastered that beginning-level work.

As a result of the limited efficacy of the Amigos lessons, JSL students struggle to catch up to their classmates and to perform at grade level. Kanno (2004) and Ōta (2000) note that many JSL students' *kanji* acquisition is limited not just by the increasing complexity of the characters or the number of characters taught in each grade, but the increasing cognitive complexity of the concepts underlying the characters. Without remedial language assistance to help JSL students gain the requisite language skills to process more complex concepts in Japanese, the students struggle to keep up their pace of *kanji* acquisition. This perpetual challenge frustrates students, and further encourages their being labeled as *kawaisō* (pitiful) and incapable (Kanno 2008b; Ōta 2005).

### Teacher Resistance

Over the course of the academic year, the various problems with JSL instruction fuel the homeroom teachers' skepticism and resistance, with the result that increasingly they choose not to send their JSL students to the Amigos Room. Supporting this resistance is the fact that some mainstreamed immigrant students are able to perform on a par with their Japanese classmates, while the JSL students make little progress. The immigrant children who are performing best tend to have started elementary school with a stronger command of Japanese than the JSL students', often gaining this greater command in Japanese preschool. In contrast, the JSL students start off behind their Japanese classmates and largely fail to close that gap, even after years of JSL lessons.

The homeroom teachers often do not inform the Amigos teachers of changes in students' schedules, and when students do not show up for their classes, Ms. Tanabe and Ms. Maeda take no action but idly sit and wait for them. As I write in my fieldnotes:

Before the end of the period, I head to the Amigos Room, where Tanabe and Maeda are talking. No students are in the room, although five students are scheduled to be there during this class period. As I step into the room, Tanabe turns to me and gestures, her hands up high,

palms up, expressing disbelief that no students came to the room. Maeda turns to me and says that Ogawa (a fifth-grade teacher) was very happy that I had been going into Takashi's class to help him. "You helped him a lot."

While the teacher praises my assisting the boy in his homeroom class, the Amigos teachers do not venture beyond their classroom to assist the children or encourage their attendance. Other teachers encourage them to take this step, however the Amigos teachers refuse as doing so would lower their status to that of a teacher's aide in another teacher's classroom. Thus the teachers remain in the Amigos Room, waiting and complaining, while retaining the authority of being in charge of their own classroom, albeit a classroom of lower status and one providing little instruction.

Teachers' resistance to sending their students to the JSL classroom challenges the new ethnic project, and reflects homeroom teachers' agency within the school setting. However, keeping the students in their homerooms fails to address their remedial language needs, as the students continue to struggle to complete their coursework. The principal does not publicly address teachers' concerns over the quality of JSL instruction, other than to offer his support for the teachers in the Amigos Room. However, the

frequency of teachers' complaints, the low status of the JSL position, and teachers' lack of JSL training, all raise questions about the criteria by which the principal selects teachers for the Amigos Room. One answer may be found in the social marginality of past and present Amigos teachers. In an environment in which teachers frequently chat and share jokes during breaks in the main office, the Amigos teachers often work alone. They are also conspicuously absent from faculty social events. This pattern raises the possibility that the principal selected these teachers, in part, because of their marginality, although it would not be appropriate for him to openly admit to such a practice.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In short, despite the fact that the *ethnic project* of Japanese public education is guided by the egalitarian norm that all students are to receive a similar education through junior high school, and that they are not to be sorted into different tracks until they reach high school (LeTendre, Hofer, and Shimizu 2003; Shimizu 1992, 2001; Shimizu et al. 1999; Tsuneyoshi 1996, 2001), this research reveals a competing ethnic project in which immigrant students are trapped in a low-performing track as early as the first grade of elementary school. Teachers explain the disparate treatment of these students in *ethnic terms*, claiming that more than rigorous remedial education, the students need a place to relax and ease the stress of being a foreigner in a Japanese

school. This explanation justifies providing ad hoc lessons that are disconnected from the students' homeroom curricula, and dedicating minimal resources to the JSL program.

The varied academic performance of immigrant students likely foretells divergent future outcomes. Continuing their education into high school is not guaranteed, as high school attendance is not compulsory.<sup>11</sup> Students must apply to high schools and pass an entrance examination to gain admission. School attendance rates for foreign youth drop dramatically at the high school level (Chitose 2008; Sakuma 2006; Takenoshita 2005). Korekawa (2012) estimates that of the youth in Japan aged 15-18, only 42 percent of Brazilians, and less than 60 percent of Filipinos, are in high school, contrasted with 97 percent of Japanese. Uzuhashi (2004) attributes these low rates in part to JSL students' struggles with junior high school's more rigorous academic content, its greater reliance on passive learning, and the pressure of the high school entrance exam. The immigrant students who are performing on par with their Japanese classmates may be on track to attend higher-ranked high schools and possibly some form of higher education. In contrast, the JSL students are performing far below grade level and are making little progress. These students will likely be limited to attending a lower-level academic or vocational school, like the ones Ms. Ishii, a fourth-grade teacher, describes:

The children who are really smart go to these [good] schools, and the children whose levels are lower go to other places. There's a range of schools to go to. At the different-level schools, the textbooks are different, these children use these [good] books, and those children, well, they use books that are like elementary school books. They have high school content, but it's written for children of a low academic level, so they can understand it. They go to that kind of high school.

Students from these schools, both those who graduate and those who do not, often move on to low-paying, temporary jobs as "freeters," not to stable, long-term employment (Slater 2010).

Despite the challenges JSL students face, some teachers and administrators predict positive futures in which hard-working students will be able to attend Japanese high schools and universities and integrate into Japanese society. As the principal describes it:

If the children work hard, they can get into high school. They have to choose to go to high school, it's not compulsory, but the foreign children, like the Japanese children, can work hard and make the effort

to get into high school. ... If the parents want it, the opportunity for the kids to go to high school is there, I think.

However, many teachers are less sanguine. As Mr. Mori notes of his student, Ricardo, who was born in Peru:

Children like Ricardo work hard, but if they can't read Japanese, even if they try hard, they will have trouble living in Japan and will have few opportunities. ... It's good to graduate from a Japanese school, but it's not good if you still can't read Japanese. If you're like that, then even if you have desire and work hard, I think it's unfortunate when you can't reach your goals.

Barring a dramatic improvement in the quality of JSL instruction, indeed, in the very concept of the program, these students' futures appear to be limited. Some immigrant children may choose, as adults, to acquire Japanese citizenship to further their integration into Japanese society, and to gain rights such as suffrage and easier access to public employment. However this research reveals that citizenship alone will not be enough to move them out of the margins of Japanese society. The mainstream Japanese labor market is

largely closed to immigrant workers, restricting them to contract laborer positions that are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns (Higuchi and Tanno 2003; Takenoshita 2006; Tsuda, Valdez, and Cornelius 2003). For the second generation to bypass these positions and enter the broader labor market, they will need Japanese human and cultural capital (Becker 1964; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Schultz 1961), and the primary source of that capital is the public school system that is failing them. Some immigrant parents attempt to address this problem by hiring a tutor, or sending their children to after-school study programs. Nonetheless, even with this assistance, for many JSL students closing the academic gap between them and their classmates remains a daunting challenge.

Japanese public education is predicated on an egalitarian and communal notion of citizenship, in which students become equal members of the nation-state and part of tightly knit, cohesive social groups. To this end, teachers strive to provide students the necessary skills. However, in the space between the school's ideals and reality, many immigrant children are left behind in the Amigos Room to idly complete worksheets and play, as the years until graduation pass them by.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All names in this chapter are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Drawing on Lowe (1996) and Espiritu (2003), I refer to this population as immigrants, and not foreigners, foreign migrants, or other more commonly used terms. This use of the term immigrant challenges the popular notion in Japan that this is a purely “foreign” population with little connection to the host society. It also highlights the complex historical relationship between Japan and the Japanese diaspora in South America. The diaspora’s return migration to Japan was preceded by decades of ties between the Japanese state and ethnic associations in South America. These ties provided the material support to sustain a Japanese identity in the diaspora, an identity that facilitated the ethnic return migration to Japan

(Takenaka 2004, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Nikkei is an abbreviated version of the Japanese term Nikkeijin, and is widely used in English, Spanish, and Portuguese to refer to members of the Japanese diaspora.

<sup>4</sup> An additional 4,895 children with Japanese citizenship also required remedial JSL instruction, including 2,997 students whose ethnic backgrounds the Ministry of Education did not disclose (MEXT 2009). These students may be immigrant Nikkei children who possess Japanese citizenship.

<sup>5</sup> These statistics likely underestimate the number of students who lack grade-level proficiency in Japanese, as they exclude students who do not attend public schools, and those in public schools who have been mainstreamed into Japanese classrooms but still lack grade-level proficiency in Japanese (Kanno 2008a).

<sup>6</sup> School officials report that they did not start officially tracking the number of foreign students until the 2005-06 academic year.

<sup>7</sup> Private schools in Japan, including international

schools and ethnic Brazilian schools, may operate on different principles; however, the cost of tuition makes private school inaccessible to many Nikkei families. Moreover, few private schools are available for Spanish-speaking Nikkei in Japan, including none in the Shiroyama area.

<sup>8</sup> Teachers struggle to explain how to include non-Japanese into this project, other than by having the children assimilate to Japanese social norms and by saying that the children's ethnic difference should not matter.

<sup>9</sup> Notably, some immigrant parents have requested that their children not attend JSL lessons, out of concern that the cost of missing homeroom lessons would exceed the benefit of the JSL lessons.

<sup>10</sup> Homeroom classes are not named, and are listed by grade and number. However, other classrooms such as the special education rooms also have names, albeit in Japanese.

<sup>11</sup> In Japan, education through junior high school is only compulsory for Japanese citizens; thus, immigrant children are not legally required to attend any schooling.