

Too many foreign kids falling through the cracks

The Asahi Shimbun January 20-21, 2007

One of the priorities of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's agenda is reform of the nation's education system. This is being undertaken at a time when the problem of bullying at schools has become increasingly serious.

Part of the background to the bullying phenomenon lies in the fact that schools and society in general put too much emphasis on uniformity and show little tolerance for diversity. Children who stick out from the student body seem to be natural targets. Among those are the increasing numbers of non-Japanese children growing up in this country.

The number of foreign residents in Japan has continuously increased and it now surpasses 2 million. As a consequence, an estimated 70,000 non-Japanese children now attend public schools in this country. An additional 24,000 are enrolled at schools set up for foreign children, which are authorized as "miscellaneous educational institutions." Also, more than 7,000 attend schools that lack any official recognition.

Public schools are grappling with a major educational challenge: teaching Japanese to foreign students. Schools with a good number of foreign students have teachers to provide Japanese language education at special classes. Unfortunately, few of these teachers have sufficient expertise or experience in teaching

Japanese to foreign children. For that matter, there is no established teaching method available for them to refer to.

Another important challenge facing Japanese public schools is how to create a multicultural environment where students of different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds learn to accept each other and study together.

Schools for foreign students are not without their own problems, either. Schools for Koreans and Chinese with permanent residence in Japan have a long history and are officially recognized, albeit as miscellaneous schools. But the situation is quite different for the 80 or so schools catering to Brazilians and Peruvians, whose numbers have grown rapidly in recent years. So far, only three have been recognized as miscellaneous schools. The rest are treated as unauthorized private schools. This means they are not eligible for government subsidies, leaving them financially strapped.

But even authorized miscellaneous schools enjoy far less public financial support than regular schools. Besides, miscellaneous schools are defined as "institutions that provide education similar to school education." They usually offer specialist courses and skills that are not taught at ordinary schools, such as cooking and driving. It doesn't make sense for schools for foreign children to be put into this category.

Even more serious is the problem

of foreign children who do not attend school at all. It is believed there are thousands of such children, mainly Brazilians. However, no reliable statistics are available.

There are two key factors for this problem: Foreign residents are not legally obliged to send their children to school, and many foreign parents have unstable employment status.

Foreign children not attending school often fail to attain sufficient proficiency in both Japanese and their native language and are prone to becoming delinquent.

Two key human rights treaties that Japan has ratified—the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child—stipulate that the right to education should be guaranteed for all children irrespective of their nationalities. To honor those treaties, the Japanese government is now obliged to address the concerns mentioned above.

As it happens, the government has belatedly started dealing with the issue. In a meeting of the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy in April last year, then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and then Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe pointed out the



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need to improve the living environment for foreign residents. Since then, the government has been weighing various issues in connection with the lives of foreign residents here.

The government's initiative has been backed up by the council of municipalities with a relatively large number of foreign residents. The council, established in 2001 by a group of cities with large Brazilian populations, has proposed a variety of policy measures to deal with the issues. It now counts 18 municipal governments as its members, mainly in Tokai region.

The council held a conference in Tokyo on Nov. 21 that was attended by officials of several ministries concerned, including the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, as well as the mayors of the 18 municipalities. It was a rare opportunity for the central and local governments to exchange views on issues related to the education of foreign children at public and other schools.

The government should capitalize on this opportunity to set basic principles for the education of foreign children and make serious efforts to improve the educational environment for them.

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