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## Navigating Multicultural Education in Japan: An Ecological Exploration of Teacher Agency through a Multi-Layered Perspective

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### Abstract

In light of globalization, the demands for multicultural coexistence within Japan's public education system have become increasingly prominent. Drawing on the teacher's profound insights derived from her distinct roles as an educator, former learner, and parent, this study transcends a conventional case study by revealing how these unique perspectives enrich and redefine teacher agency. Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a theoretical framework, the study analyzes the dynamic interplay between individual efforts and institutional support across micro, meso, and macro levels. The findings reveal that the teacher's reflective practices and proactive curriculum and language support initiatives significantly contribute to fostering multicultural coexistence and improving the learning environment within the international class. Furthermore, the study underscores the capacity of educators to leverage their diverse experiences to implement flexible and effective teaching practices, even amid inadequate institutional frameworks. By highlighting these insights, the research offers valuable implications for future educational policies to accommodate cultural and linguistic diversity and promote intercultural competence in Japan's evolving public education landscape.

**Keywords:** *Teacher Agency, Multicultural Education, Ecological Systems Theory, Japanese Elementary Education, Teacher Reflexivity*

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### Introduction

In recent decades, the global movement of people has accelerated dramatically, with an increasing number of accompanying children. This trend has prompted an urgent need to address how children adapt to public education systems in unfamiliar linguistic and educational

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environments. Extensive research in Western contexts has explored the psychological challenges and systematic policies required for the successful integration of migrant children (e.g., Berry, 1997; Ogbu, 1991; Pollock & Van Reken, 2017; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001) and educational policies (e.g., Byram & Parmenter, 2012; Enever, 2011; Hult & Johnson, 2015). However, Japan has been notably slow in developing a comparable framework, especially in formal elementary school education.

The CEFR (Council of Europe, CoE hereafter, 2001, 2020) emphasized plurilingual education and multicultural coexistence to cultivate students' *intercultural communicative competence* that forms *intercultural citizenship* as a society (e.g., Byram, 2008, 2021). In terms of municipal society, the *intercultural cities programme* was established in 2008. More than 160 cities worldwide have been recognized for their efforts to build multicultural societies, whereas Japan's engagement remains minimal, with only Hamamatsu City currently certified (CoE, 2025). This discrepancy highlights Japan's limited foundational understanding of coexistence in an increasingly diverse educational context (Yamawaki & Ueno, 2021).

Moreover, in Japan, there is a disparity in efforts toward multicultural coexistence between areas where foreign populations are concentrated and those where they are not. For instance, in metropolitan areas such as Shinjuku Ward in Tokyo, foreign residents account for 12% of the population, and in regions with high concentrations of foreign workers, such as Oizumi City in Guma Prefecture, the rate is 18–19%, which stands out from the national average of 2.5% (Ministry of Justice, 2022). Despite active local measures such as interpreter services and community support, nationwide institutionalization of these initiatives remains limited. Furthermore, at the school level, support often depends on individual initiatives or the proactive efforts of teachers. Consequently, comprehensive policies are necessary to provide linguistic support and create inclusive environments where foreign-related children can feel secure and receive education that fosters their growth. The term “foreign-related children” encompasses foreign nationals, immigrants, and short-term residents with diverse statuses.

This study focuses on how teachers in areas with high concentrations of foreign-related students mobilize their professional resources. Thus, it underscores the urgent need to build culturally responsive public education systems where all learners learn together.

### **Formal Elementary School Education in Japan**

In Japan, elementary schools start in April for six-year-olds and span six grades, with each school typically enrolling approximately 250–500 local children. These formal schools are governed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, which issues the national curriculum guidelines as the *Course of Study*. Before elementary school enrollment, school readiness is fostered in pre-primary education, which 98% of children attend in Japan (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024). However, Japanese elementary schools are known for their unique culture, necessitating significant preparation. A documentary movie on this subject has gained international acclaim (Yamazaki, 2023). Adapting to these customs and acquiring the Japanese language pose a significant challenge to children from abroad.

Language support in public schools is provided by regular licensed teachers rather than multicultural experts or Japanese foreign language specialists (Nishikawa, 2022). Sato et al. (2024) described the evolution of Japanese language support in urban areas through three

phases, outlining a chronological progression that reflects how policies and practices have adapted over time to meet the needs of foreign-related children.

- 1970s: Instruction focused on returnee children, emphasizing vocabulary development.
- 1990s: An influx of labor migration from Southeast Asian shifted the priority to helping accompanying children adapt to Japanese schools.
- 2000s: Efforts became more systematic with dedicated materials, teacher training, and methodologies. During this period, policy initiatives were introduced, such as the *Rainbow Bridge Project* to support the children of long-term foreign residents and the *Act on the Promotion of Japanese Language Education*.

An organized support system gradually emerged in response to the field's needs. Against this backdrop, examining teacher agency, such as how teachers reconcile individual efforts with institutional structures, offers valuable insights, especially in the context of limited resources and a lack of specialized expertise.

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical Background: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory*

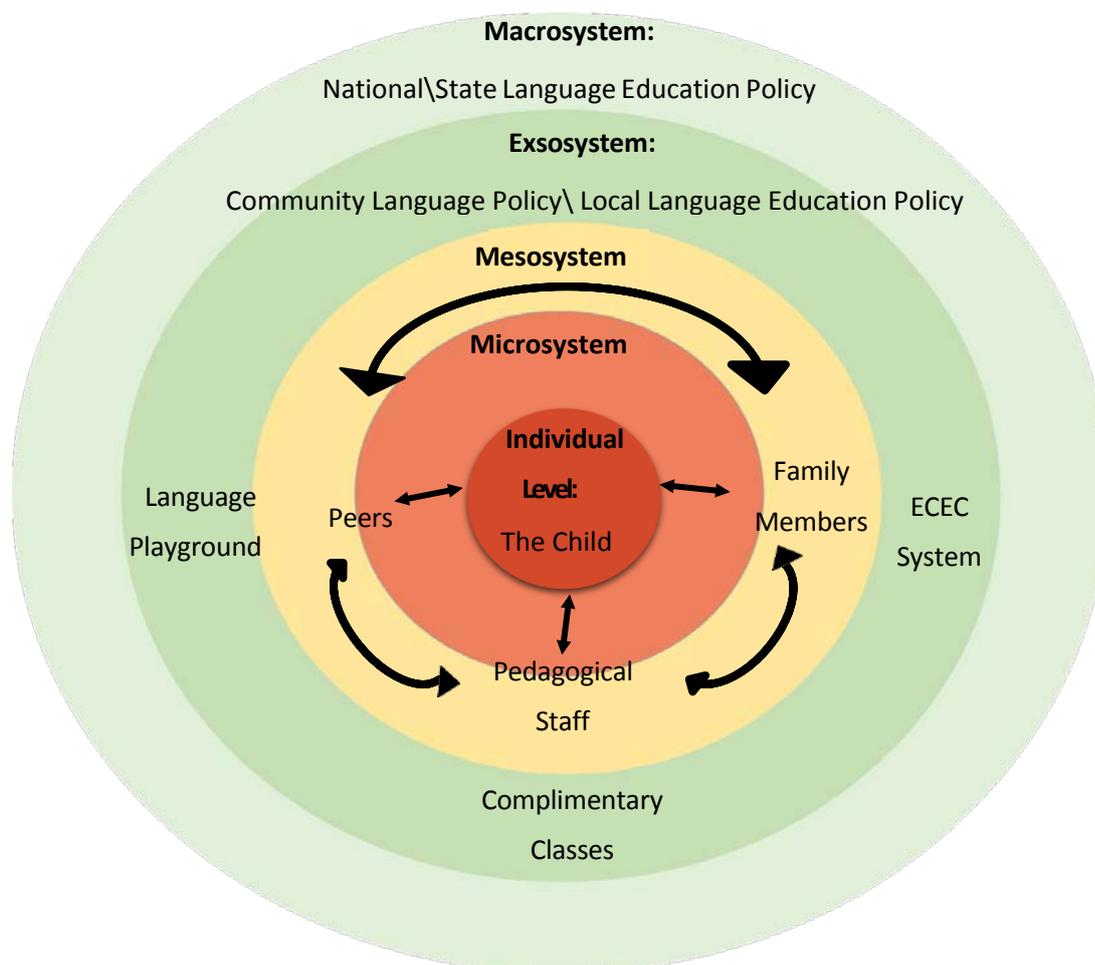
Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed a theory that systematically captures the growth emerging from interactions within various social systems. He argued that development is not solely a biological phenomenon but a dynamic process that unfolds through interactions with one's environment. Conceptualized initially as the "Person-Process-Context Model," time was later incorporated into what is known as the PPCT model. Shelton (2019) described Bronfenbrenner's (1979) concept of the developmental environment as a dynamic, living system where continual interactions mutually influence activities, emphasizing the fluidity inherent in educational contexts.

Recent scholarship has expanded upon Bronfenbrenner's model, stressing the importance of fully utilizing the PPCT model, particularly the role of proximal processes, in contemporary multicultural education contexts (Tong & An, 2024). This contemporary focus highlights interactions between educators and students as fundamental in shaping educational outcomes, thus underscoring the necessity for understanding how these interactions unfold within and across micro, meso, and macro contexts over time.

The key concept of this theory is the microsystem, the smallest system, which exists in multiple forms and is embedded within the surrounding mesosystems and macrosystems that share cultural or social characteristics. Additionally, the exosystem, which indirectly influences the individual, and the chronosystem, which accounts for the effects of time, are integral components of this framework. Figure 1 illustrates this ecological system theory, reprinted with permission from Schwartz (2024a).

**Figure 1**

*Ecological Model of the Language Education Environment*



*Note. Adapted from Schwartz (2024a), used with permission.  
ECEC=Early childhood education and care.*

In the current study, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides the theoretical framework to analyze narratives shared by Teacher A, an elementary school teacher with multifaceted roles as an educator, learner, and parent. Her experiences are explored within distinct microsystems, such as her classroom, family, and educational background. This analytical approach illuminates intricate dynamics operating within the mesosystem of a multicultural elementary school. Additionally, exsystem influences, including Teacher A's family background and broader educational experiences, ground the research deeply within ecological systems theory. Employing the chronosystem perspective enables examination of how Teacher A's agency evolves through sustained reflective practice, highlighting temporal shifts influencing educational experiences and interactions.

### *Teacher Agency in Multicultural Contexts*

Teacher agency, as described by Priestley et al. (2015b), emerges dynamically from the interplay among personal beliefs, professional contexts, and broader socio-political influences. Recent research clarifies that teacher agency is significantly shaped by identity and reflective capacities, particularly within multilingual and multicultural classrooms (Schwartz & Dror,

2024c). Schwartz and Dror emphasized that educators' personal experiences, especially linguistic and cultural backgrounds, significantly enhance classroom interactions, fostering responsive and inclusive learning environments.

Applying these insights, Teacher A demonstrates that teacher agency is not an inherent trait but a realized outcome of active engagement within specific temporal and relational contexts (Priestley et al., 2015a, 2015b). Recent studies also highlight the critical role of mesosystem interactions, notably between educators and families, in multicultural settings (Kawashima, 2025; Schwartz et al., 2024b). Kawashima's (2025) study in Hiroshima, Japan identified a frequent lack of adequate training and resources for multicultural education, underscoring the necessity of strengthened mesosystem connections, such as collaborative parent-teacher partnerships and specialized professional development. Schwartz et al. (2024b) similarly stressed that viewing parents as active collaborators significantly enhances educational outcomes for multilingual children. This study aligns these insights with Teacher A's experiences, emphasizing her efforts to integrate community and familial perspectives into classroom teaching.

Through proactive curriculum adjustments and targeted language support, Teacher A leverages her multiple roles to transform the classroom into an inclusive space that values multicultural coexistence.

#### *Teacher's Multi-Layered Agency in an International Class Context*

Drawing from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study situates Teacher A's agency within interconnected system levels, illustrating how agency emerges through personal reflection, institutional collaboration, and adaptive pedagogical practices. Recent ecological frameworks addressing teacher agency underscore purposeful, competent, autonomous, and reflective dimensions shaped by micro, meso, and macro contexts (Peña-Pincheira & De Costa, 2020). Teacher A's practices exemplify this model through her strategic curricular reforms, consistent reflective approaches, and culturally responsive teaching strategies within institutional boundaries.

Furthermore, recent literature emphasizes the influential roles of societal attitudes and institutional policies at macrosystem and exosystem levels in multicultural education (Kawashima, 2025; Sookermany et al., 2025). Teacher A navigates these complex layers by proactively shaping her immediate teaching environment, critically evaluating educational policies, and fostering collaborative relationships within the school community. The chronosystem dimension further highlights how temporal shifts, such as demographic changes and policy developments, inform her ongoing reflective practices and instructional innovations.

Integrating these contemporary insights bridges Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory with Teacher A's agency. The current study explores how multilayered ecological interactions influence educator agency, reflective practices, and curriculum innovation within a multicultural educational context.

#### **Research Questions**

Based on the reviewed literature and theoretical framework, the following research questions guide this study:

**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** How did the school establish an institutional framework to accommodate and integrate

foreign-related children?

**RQ<sub>2</sub>:** What challenges did Teacher A encounter, and what strategies did she use to address them?

**RQ<sub>3</sub>:** How did Teacher A's multi-layered perspective shape her sense of agency in the classroom?

## **Research Methodology**

### *Research Design and Study Site*

This descriptive case study is designed within an interpretive framework. It considers teachers' perspectives, experiences, and specific contexts to understand the phenomenon. By documenting the teachers' efforts, this study provides a detailed understanding of the context consistent with the principles of a descriptive case study.

The study site is a formal elementary school located in Yokohama City. The school has approximately 620 students, slightly above the national average, and 21 classes from grades one to six. More than 56% of the students had ties to foreign countries and may have lacked foundational knowledge of Japanese background. Additionally, over 100 students were transferred in and out of school annually.

### *Participant*

Teacher A is a female elementary school teacher in her 40s, whose multifaceted background significantly informs her educational practice. She serves as a Japanese language teacher and draws from her experiences as a learner at a Chinese private school and as a parent whose son has recently enrolled in a Chinese school.

- **As a Teacher (Professional Role):** She is required to fulfill classroom duties, adapt to a new international curriculum, and collaborate with colleagues. This necessitates an exercising agency in instructional decisions and classroom management within a novel program.
- **As a Learner:** A third-generation member of the Chinese diaspora who spoke Japanese at home, she began receiving intensive Chinese instruction beyond the familial context, starting with private Chinese schooling. Her personal learning experiences contributed to a reflective and open-minded approach, similar to the challenges faced by her students.
- **As a Mother of a Learner:** Her Japanese-born son, whose first language is Japanese, attends a Chinese-based private elementary school, further enriching her insights into the educational needs and experiences of foreign-related students and their families.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Two complementary datasets were used to capture Teacher A's broader institutional context and individual experiences. The first dataset comprised field studies conducted on six occasions between 2017 and 2018, involving visits and interviews at related institutions, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1***Data Collection Details Overview*

	Activity/Visit Description	Method	Date and Time
1	Visit to Minami Yoshida Elementary School and its school adaptation support facility “Himawari”	Observation	November 14, 2017
2	Visit to Minami Civic Activity and Multicultural Lounge	Observation, Interview	November 28, 2017, 17:30–19:00
3	Observation of the “MY Kids Smile Festival” at Minami Yoshida Elementary School	Observation	December 2, 2017
4	Structured interview with the Principal of Minami Yoshida Elementary School	Interview	December 14, 2017, 9:00–10:40
5	Visit to the NPO “Zainichi Foreigners Education and Life Consultation Center ‘Shin-Ai Juku’”	Interview	January 12, 2018, 14:45–15:15
6	Open-ended interview with international classroom teachers at Minami Yoshida Elementary School	Interview	January 12, 2018, 15:30–16:30

The second data set comprised classroom observations of Teacher A and a semi-structured interview conducted in December 2024. The interview addressed (a) a comparison between the 2024 international class and the 2017–2018 international class and (b) Teacher A’s personal reflections on the current international classroom.

For the first dataset, the analysis focused primarily on structured and open-ended interviews (Items 4 and 6), which provided insights into establishing the international classroom. The data from these interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke (2022), exploring reciprocal influences among ecological structures.

The second dataset was transcribed and analyzed narratively. In the subsequent chapter, the school’s transformation is discussed as part of the mesosystem and chronosystem, complementing the microsystem perspective provided by Teacher A’s data.

**Results***Mesosystem and Chronosystem Dynamics*

The principal’s initiatives were organized into three key themes: understanding, support, and learning together. This illustrates how school efforts have evolved over time and have been strengthened by interconnected relationships within the school and community. The following is a brief overview of these three phases:

- **Understanding Phase:** Upon the appointment of the principal in 2012, the entire faculty collaboratively identified the challenges facing their students and launched projects to address these issues.
- **Support Phase:** In 2014, building on the initial projects, the school introduced a targeted approach by establishing a specialized international class focused on Japanese language instruction and school adaptation, alongside a vigorous exploration of community partnerships. During this phase, teachers in regular classrooms identified students requiring additional support. Rather than relying solely on in-class remediation, these students were temporarily transferred to an international class to receive focused assistance without disrupting the standard curriculum. Support at this school was called “pull-out support.”

- **Learning Together Phase:** Beyond merely supporting children from foreign countries, the school expanded its approach to fostering reciprocal learning. To promote mutual learning within the community, the school introduced both support programs involving parents and cultural exchange activities such as cooking classes led by parents. Over time, ongoing teacher training in intercultural education and family support have enabled these measures to adapt and expand. This dynamic interplay between temporal change (the chronosystem) and interconnected support systems (the mesosystem) is essential for helping students navigate academic challenges and cultural transitions. This integrated approach demonstrates that effective educational support is dynamic and evolves through sustained and active organizational interactions.

#### *Narrative of Teacher A's Practice: Microsystems*

Against a broader institutional backdrop, Teacher A's narrative provides a micro-level perspective on the evolution of the international class. Initially, the system relied on regular classroom teachers to identify students who required additional support for Japanese language acquisition and school adaptation. Teacher A pointed out two major issues with this approach:

1. **Scheduling Complexities:** The ad hoc organization of support sessions created a highly complex and inefficient system.
2. **Systematic Linguistic and Academic Support:** The absence of clear, generalizable criteria for identifying and supporting students resulted in inconsistent support.

In response, Teacher A conducted two key reforms:

- She integrated a regular Japanese-language class as a dedicated session for pull-out support.
- She adopted the textbooks used in regular classes for instruction, ensuring curriculum consistency.

Since 2020, these measures have helped improve students' Japanese language proficiency and established a fairer, more systematic support system that facilitates smoother teacher collaboration.

Teacher A emphasized that effective language development in school settings hinges on an integrative approach that concurrently promotes cognitive growth in academic subjects and fosters affective engagement with society and peers.

#### *Fostering Deep Learning: Practices for Preventing Language Barriers in Academic Inquiry*

Teacher A contended that language support should transcend mere remedial measures or efforts to boost test scores. She stressed that it should nurture students' critical thinking and reinforce their cultural and linguistic identities and that effective support requires a careful balance between academic rigor and emotional and cultural sensitivities. For example, while younger students benefit from concrete and easily accessible materials, older students struggle to grapple with abstract content, which demands deeper cognitive engagement. This nuanced insight highlights the need for curricula thoughtfully adapted to foster cognitive development without compromising students' native language foundations.

*Illustrative Classroom Example (Observed November 11, 2024)*

During a lesson on adjectives describing texture, a first-year student mixed his native language (L1) with Japanese. Rather than correcting his L1, Teacher A asked the class, “Do we pronounce this the same way in your language?” Thus, she validated the student’s linguistic background and created a learning opportunity that bridged his L1 with Japanese. This deliberate moment of reflection allowed students to connect their prior linguistic knowledge with the new Japanese vocabulary, enhancing their deeper cognitive engagement with the subject content.

*Cultivating Affective and Social Engagement through Peer Communication*

Teacher A believed practical language learning should empower students to express themselves naturally through daily peer interaction. Drawing on her experiences as a learner, she recalled, “There was a moment when I truly felt that acquiring a second language through real-life survival in context came naturally.”

For Teacher A, this experience reflects the invaluable gift of cultural and linguistic self-confidence that she received from her parents, a gift that instilled her strong identity. She believes that language support should not merely facilitate communication but empower students to take pride in their cultural and linguistic heritage. Teacher A envisioned an environment where students naturally interact with peers who value diversity, regardless of whether the classes are international or regular. In this context, she hopes that international students will recognize the essential role of language in building social connections and develop deep self-confidence in their cultural and linguistic identities. She concluded with the words, “I want them to love Japan, as much as they cherish their own cultural roots.”

**Discussion**

This study reveals that the school established an institutional framework to support foreign-related children. Addressing RQ1, the school retrospectively set distinct objectives across the three phases and enacted collaborative actions accordingly.

The understanding phase, in which the faculty collaboratively identified student challenges, reflects a dynamic microsystem where shared teacher experiences and observations shaped their awareness of emerging needs. This laid the groundwork for the support phase, during which structural reforms were implemented. These included the establishment of international classes for Japanese language instruction and school adaptation, reflecting mesosystemic coordination in which multiple microsystems were intentionally connected.

The learning together phase reflects a transition toward a more integrated school culture. This phase also illustrates the influence of macrosystemic values, such as multicultural coexistence and inclusive education, which have gained increasing prominence in national discourse and policy initiatives in Japan. These developments coincided with broader chronosystemic shifts in Japan, including increased public awareness of diversity and the increasing presence of children with foreign-related backgrounds. Notably, the school is now led by a principal who formerly worked in the international class described in *Creating Multicultural Coexistence School* (Yamawaki, 2005; Yamawaki & Hattori, 2019), published in 2005. Under this leadership, the school’s developmental efforts have continued to advance. This progressive development has facilitated the integration of diverse student populations and

enhanced overall school functioning. Moreover, these developments suggest that sustainable support systems require not only top-down policy but also bottom-up, sustained internal transformation led by key actors within the school.

Regarding RQ2, Teacher A's strategic response to systemic challenges, such as the complexity of scheduling pull-out support and the absence of clear identification criteria, illustrate how teacher agency can mediate structural constraints. Rather than relying on existing fragmented systems, she proactively restructured the support framework to offer more consistent and equitable assistance to foreign-related students.

One of her key innovations was integrating a fixed-time Japanese language lesson into the regular timetable, effectively designating a consistent period for pull-out support. By anchoring the support to a fixed class time, particularly during the national language, Japanese (Kokugo), period, she not only alleviated scheduling conflicts but also established a structure that could be understood and support throughout the school. This system allowed for better monitoring of students' movements and facilitated smoother collaboration among teachers, reinforcing a shared sense of responsibility.

Moreover, this scheduling choice reflects a deeper pedagogical rationale. Teacher A intentionally selected "Kokugo" period because she recognized, through her own experiences, that language proficiency in this subject plays a pivotal role in enabling students to eventually reintegrate into mainstream classes. She understood that academic language, especially that used in subject teaching, demands a higher level of cognitive and linguistic complexity than everyday communication. Thus, her goal was not only to support students in developing basic communicative skills, but also to ensure they acquired the academic Japanese proficiency necessary to comprehend content and succeed in the general curriculum.

To that end, she aligned instructional materials for the pull-out class with those used in the mainstream classroom, enabling a smoother transition and minimizing discontinuities in learning. Her approach reflects an understanding that meaningful language support must bridge the gap between language for social integration and language for academic achievement. In doing so, she emphasized the importance of "Kokugo" not only as a subject but also a vehicle for broader cognitive and social development.

These practices demonstrate multiple elements of teacher agency as conceptualized in Pantic's (2015) and Peña-Pincheira and De Costa's (2020) Teacher Agency Model. Teacher A exhibited a clear sense of purpose in supporting long-term integration, competence in aligning instruction across systems, autonomy in designing context-sensitive solutions, and reflexivity grounded in her personal and professional experience. Her case exemplifies how ecological responsiveness and multi-layered professional identity can empower educators to transform structural limitations into sustainable educational practices.

Addressing RQ3, and building upon the structural and pedagogical innovations discussed in RQ1 and RQ2, Teacher A's multi-layered identity, as an educator, former learner, and parent, enabled her to approach language support not simply as instructional delivery, but as a socially situated and emotionally resonate practice. Her reflection on the need to balance academic instruction with sociocultural affirmation demonstrates deep reflexivity and an understanding that language learning is closely connected with identity formation and social belonging. From an ecological perspective, her sense of agency was enacted across multiple microsystems, such as the classroom, home, parent-teacher networks, and in interaction with

exosystemic influences such as school policy and administrative decisions. This reinforces Bronfenbrenner's assertion that individual development, including teacher agency, emerges through ongoing engagement with surrounding systems.

Importantly, Teacher A's practice shows that meaningful and lasting change in education becomes possible when the teacher agency is both supported within institutional structures and grounded in a clear conceptual understanding.

### *Limitation*

Although the school established a collaborative system in which the teachers of international and general classes discuss student needs, clear and formalized criteria for selecting students for support had not been fully developed. Moreover, further examination is needed to distinguish between students' supportive needs and their transitional needs toward academic and social integration.

### *Practical Implications*

In addition to structural reforms and conceptual insights, this case provides several practical implications for schools serving culturally and linguistically diverse students. In the observed school, pull-out sessions were embedded within the national language, "Kokugo" period using the same textbooks as the mainstream class. This approach may offer a manageable framework for scheduling and curriculum alignment, making it easier to coordinate support within existing school structures.

Moreover, the classroom environment fostered openness and mutual respect across linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Students were encouraged to compare Japanese words and phrases with their home languages and cultures, and to share personal experiences confidently, which contributed to the creation of a supportive and inclusive learning space. Rather than offering immediate translation, teachers simplified and paraphrased Japanese expressions in multiple ways. These rephrasing behaviors were observed among students and were presumably influenced by the teacher's modeling of such strategies. When peers encountered misunderstandings, they often rephrased expressions in accessible Japanese to assist one another. This mediated, multilayered language environment, where multiple languages coexisted without being suppressed and simplified Japanese naturally enveloped learners, offers a model of international classroom practice that may serve as a reference for other schools aiming to cultivate inclusive, multilingual learning environments.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that the teacher agency is not an isolated personal trait but a contextually embedded and systemically enacted capacity. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory, the findings illustrate how one teacher's ability to act purposefully and reflectively emerged through interactions with microsystemic, mesosystemic, and exosystemic elements within her school environment.

Specifically, Teacher A's multi-layered identity, as an educator, former learner, and parent, enabled her to design and implement support structures that bridged students' sociocultural, emotional, and academic needs. Her case illustrates how ecological responsiveness and

personal reflexivity can foster classroom practices that are both inclusive and academically rigorous.

The study also offers insights into broader school-level transformation. It highlights how the school gradually developed an institutional framework to support culturally and linguistically diverse students by moving from isolated actions to collaborative, goal-oriented planning. These initiatives reflected not only the influence of local actors but also the shifting macrosystemic discourse around multicultural coexistence in Japan.

Although limited to a single case, this study underscores the importance of fostering teacher agency through supportive structures, conceptual grounding, and reflective practice. It further suggests that schools and teachers should work toward building environments that promote both cognitive development and sociocultural and emotional growth, enabling all learners to thrive in diverse and inclusive settings.

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## Ethics Declarations

## Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

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