Cultural Identity Disequilibrium Experienced by Intercultural Parents During Their Children’s Elementary School Selection and Adaptation: A Qualitative Analysis of Interviews With Japanese Mothers Married to Non-Asian Fathers

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The present research explored experiences of Japanese mothers married to non-Asian fathers, during selection of an elementary school for their children and the mothers’ adaptation to that school, focusing on differences between those who chose public and those who chose international schools. Both groups of mothers reported experiencing issues regarding bilingual education, having mixed feelings toward the education that their children were receiving, and experiencing conflicts with their husbands, and that they had adopted strategies that they believed would best support their children. Those mothers who had chosen an international school reported more ambivalent feelings toward their children’s education than did the mothers who had chosen a public school. The findings suggested that children’s enrollment in elementary school could impact parents’ cultural identity by incorporating the parents into multi-layered cultural domains and could also incite tensions between marital partners. It was suggested that teachers and other experts should not impose traditional standards upon intercultural families; instead, they should try to foster closer communication with both parents and children in order to understand the range of issues and resources that these families have. Training about unique issues related to bilingual education and the inner ambivalence of many parents in intercultural marriages may be helpful for experts.

Key Words: selection of an elementary school, adaptation to elementary school, cultural identity, bilingual education, Japanese mothers in international marriages

Introduction

For all children, enrollment in elementary school is a significant life event, but this is particularly so for intercultural families because they live in multilayered cultural domains, which results in issues relating to language and identity development, as well as differences of opinion between parents. This is in addition to the pressure of normative academic achievement faced by all children. The present research examines experiences of mothers in intercultural families in Japan when their children were being enrolled in elementary school.

The cultural profile of Japanese families is becoming increasingly complex. In 2017, there were 21,457 international marriages in Japan, a large increase over the 5,546 reported in 1970 (Ministry of Health, Labour & Welfare, 2018a). In conjunction with this increase in the number of international marriages, the number of babies born to couples comprised of a Japanese and a non-Japanese person doubled from 10,022 in 1987, to 19,118 in 2016. Kuramoto, Koide, Yoshida, & Ogawa (2017) reported that public school is the most common school choice for intercultural families in Japan, followed by international schools and Japanese private schools, which have approximately identical levels of popularity. As enrollments by children from international marriages, returnees who have spent most of their time overseas, and immigrants have increased in Japanese schools, school settings have become increasingly multicultural. Examining this change in school settings, Adachi (2012) and Fuji & Son (2015) emphasized the need for more research on means of providing appropriate and direct benefits for children and families.
from various cultural backgrounds.

During transitions between certain stages of family life, family members experience unique challenges that require them to reconstrcut their realities and reorganize their lifestyles (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). One particularly crucial stage, a child’s entry into elementary school, represents a major developmental milestone (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Sameroff & Haith (1996) contend that the commencement of formal schooling is one of the most significant events in one’s life. The first years of school impose new demands upon children, such as sitting still for long periods, adjusting to full-scale schoolwork, and establishing friendships in a larger group. Major values and elements of one’s life philosophy are shaped during social development in school (Tsuneyoshi & Boocock, 1997); in particular, elementary school significantly affects the development of a child’s cultural identity. According to Suzuki (2011), cultural identity forms part of the entire identity of the ego, and is shaped as a child begins to identify with a certain cultural group. Cultural identity then determines the social group with which children will later feel most comfortable, and influences how they interpret the world.

What impact does children’s entry into elementary school have upon their parents when both are from the same culture? Kanda & Yamamoto (2007) found that although most parents are satisfied with their children’s social and educational growth during the earliest years of elementary school, they become frustrated later as the reality of their level of communication with teachers and their children’s academic performance diverges from their expectations. Moreover, children’s enrollment in elementary school has also been found to affect parents’ relationship with each other. For example, Cowan & Cowan (2012) reported that children’s elementary school enrollment reawakens parents’ unresolved emotional issues regarding how their own parents raised them, or may instigate disagreements between parents about role sharing. Similarly, Cowan & Heming (2005) reported that parents can engage in power struggles and develop significant differences of opinion in relation to their perceptions of parental roles. They also reported finding a higher level of depression and significantly greater dissatisfaction among wives than among husbands in relation to the division of both household and child-rearing tasks. In sum, enrollment in and commencement of elementary school can create notable difficulties for both children and their parents, even when the parents share a common culture.

Several studies conducted in various countries have shown that cultural differences may create challenges in intercultural marriages (e.g., Crohn, 1995; Perel, 2000). Although some research has been done on intercultural couples and their children in Japan, fewer studies done in Japan have been published compared to those reporting research done in other countries.

Those studies that have been done in Japan have shown that intercultural couples in Japan tend to experience conflict due to differences in language and communication style (Kohagura, 2010; Shi, 1999; Takigawa, 2006). Furthermore, when an intercultural couple become parents, an additional layer of complexity is added to their lives. Abundant research has demonstrated that the level of tension in intercultural relationships increases with the arrival of children (e.g., Mann & Waldron, 1977; Perel, 2000). Takeshita (2000) reported that when a non-Asian husband and a Japanese wife have children in Japan, their level of intimacy decreases, one cause of which may be their differing views regarding how to discipline children. Similarly, Yamamoto (2010) noted that Japanese mothers tend to manage their children’s education closely, whereas non-Japanese fathers find their children’s after-school activities and holiday routines burdensome. On the basis of the results of interviews with eight couples (Japanese wives and American husbands) and eight all-Japanese couples, Yabuki (1998) reported finding some cultural differences in parenting (e.g., American fathers were more involved in childrearing practices and expressed their opinion more often than Japanese fathers did), and also that the intercultural couples experienced more intra-couple issues than the Japanese couples did.

Sato (1989) contended that the primary problem facing intercultural parents is educating their children, because children are implicitly perceived as an extension of each parent’s identity. Many intercultural couples tend to experience friction as a result of differences in their expectations regarding education for their children, because the parents themselves had been exposed to entirely different education systems (e.g., Gonzales &
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Harris, 2013; Perel, 2000). In other words, behind other issues lies the central conflict of differing cultural identities in intercultural families (Cronin, 1995; Suzuki, 2012).

Berry (2001) defined cultural identity as “a complex set of beliefs and attitudes that people have about themselves in relation to their cultural group membership; usually they come to the fore when people are in contact with another culture, rather than when they live entirely within a single culture” (p. 620). The existing literature on cultural identity has mostly focused on immigrants (e.g., Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Neto, 2002), or on the development of identity among multicultural individuals (e.g., Murphy-Shigematsu, 2000). For example, Berry et al. (2006), in a study of immigrant youths, found a positive relationship between maintaining one’s cultural identity while conforming with the practices of the host culture and positive psychological aspects. Suzuki (2012) studied Japanese women, married to Indonesian men and living in Indonesia, and reported that the women experienced resocialization and a redefinition of their cultural identity. Further, Kuramoto (2016) reported that non-Japanese men with Japanese wives and young children achieved a “cultural identity equilibrium” (p. 34) through their joint child-rearing practices and by building a partnership with their wives while concurrently endeavoring to achieve a balance between their culture of origin and that of their host country. However, there is a paucity of research on the cultural identity of intercultural parents.

How does enrolling a child in elementary school impact intercultural parents? School selection is a major decision-making event for intercultural parents (Nitta, 1992). Moreover, even after their child’s admission, parents continue to face challenges relating to supporting their child’s education in the first and second languages and in socialization, while also having to address tasks common to all families, such as adapting to the educational demands of the child’s school.

The education system of all countries instills a unique form of socialization, equipping children with the social skills, standards, and values of that society. Japanese schools generally place a high level of importance on literacy in Japanese and on teaching children the social values needed to become functional members of Japanese society (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan, 2018), whereas international schools implement curricula based on the public-education approach of their associated countries, using those countries’ languages (Nakamura, 2004). For example, Lycée Français International de Tokyo (2018) has a curriculum based on the French education system, teaches French culture and history, and trains students so that they can achieve a baccalauréat (a French academic qualification required to pursue university studies), with most of the teaching done in French.

Nitta (1992) contended that if there is a cultural discontinuity between family and school, the family will experience adaptation issues. When children enter elementary school, parents are reminded of the educational methods that they experienced during their own youth. This may widen the inter-parent gap regarding their concept of an ideal education, which may, in turn, result in their having different opinions regarding the societal and cultural values that their children should identify with. Therefore, in the selection of an elementary school, it is important for families to consider school type, and which parent is from the host country and is familiar with its educational system and which parent is not, because immersing a parent in an unfamiliar education system can trigger disequilibrium in terms of the parent’s cultural identity, leading to anxiety and precipitating friction with the spouse. Very little published research done in Japan or in other countries has examined the experiences of intercultural parents and their adaptation when their children enter elementary school. This study seeks to fill this gap.

Research Questions

The present study took a bottom-up approach to examining the experiences of intercultural parents during the process of selecting an elementary school for their children and how they navigate this process. The study focused on Japanese mothers, endeavoring to determine answers to the following questions: (a) What is the elementary-school selection process in intercultural families? (b) What are the experiences and strategies of Japanese mothers when supporting their intercultural children’s adaptation to elementary school? and (c) Based on the idea that, within a couple, parents can have differing perspectives on education, how do experiences with local public schools (the most common
choice) and international schools differ?

The present research focuses on women who have husbands from Western countries, first, because 58.6% of the non-Japanese men married to Japanese women in Japan are non-Asian (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2018a), with the largest proportion originating from the US, UK, and other European countries (Kamoto, 2008); second, because, despite a growing trend for Japanese women to marry non-Japanese men, very little research has been done with these women (Kuramoto, 2017a); and, third, because the cultural distance between a Western husband and a Japanese wife is larger than that within couples in which both partners are Asian (e.g., Nisbett, 2003).

Method

Qualitative Approach and the Researcher’s Experience

In order to achieve a better understanding of the experiences of international parents, interviews with 29 Japanese women married to non-Asian men were conducted, after which a qualitative analysis was done of the interview protocols. For this analysis, the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) was employed, as it was considered to be the most suitable method for reconstructing participants’ various realities during the school-selection process and the multi-layered process of adapting to elementary school. To establish dependability, the procedures were documented in as much detail as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The researcher, who is a Japanese married to a European and the mother of two children, has had experience investigating the adaptation process of international couples who are raising children. Her background and the knowledge that she could share with the participants helped her to develop a rapport with them and may have encouraged them to share their experiences.

The identity of the participants was protected by omitting identifiable details from the reports of the interviews, and by giving all participants pseudonyms in this report.

Participants

The participants were originally recruited through the researcher’s acquaintances, and subsequently through snowball sampling (see Table 1). Among the 29 Japanese mothers who participated, the eldest child of 14 of them was attending a public school (Public Group), whereas the eldest child of the other 15 was attending an international school1 (International Group). The participants were asked to base their answers on their experiences relating to their eldest child, as families tend to experience the strongest emotions when preparing their first child for school.

The average age of the mothers was 41.7 years (SD = 3.84), and the average age of their eldest child was 8.2 (SD = 1.75). The average duration of the semi-structured interviews was 82 minutes (SD = 8.01). Twenty of the 29 mothers were full-time homemakers; the rest were in either part-time or full-time employment. All of their husbands were employed full-time. The researcher did not ask participants to disclose their income, because of concern about violating their privacy and the possibility that asking that question would result in their refusing to participate. However, according to the information that was volunteered by the participants, the Public Group had a larger variability in financial status than the International Group. This was likely due to differences in the occupational status of the participants or their partners; however, in the researcher’s opinion, all of them seemed to have a relatively high income.

When asked to rate their level of confidence in their second language as either low, middle, or high, six mothers of the Public Group and seven in the International Group reported either a middle or high level of confidence, which suggested that there was little language-level difference between the Public Group and the International Group.

At the time of recruitment and in the interviews, all participants reported a high level of marital satisfaction.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted from July 2016 to March 2017. The participants and the researcher signed a research agreement and confidentiality forms; both parties retained copies. The participants were

1 The international schools mentioned in this study include two American schools, one British school, one German school, and one French school.
informed that the data would be used only for research purposes and that, although some narratives might be quoted in the article, privacy would be strictly protected. All interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. The study was approved by the researcher's doctoral institution.

The interview guide included questions on the following topics: (a) the language(s) used within the family, the parents' educational history, and future residency plans, (b) the process by which they had selected their child's elementary school and any conflicts between the parents regarding this choice, (c) the mothers' experiences and emotions after their child had been enrolled in elementary school, (d) education of their child in the second language and/or culture, (e) role-sharing between the parents, and (f) challenges that had been experienced and how they had been addressed. Later, the researcher translated the interviews from Japanese to English.

### Procedure

The researcher began by interviewing the Public Group and performing initial open coding on the obtained data, ensuring that the labels attributed to the segmented data appropriately represented the respective meanings. When coding, the researcher followed the recommendations of Charmaz (2014), who encouraged coding with gerunds that give a “strong sense of action and sequence... [and preserve] the fluidity of their experience” (p. 120). Only codes pertinent to the research questions were screened (Murai, 2012).

Initial codes were then grouped and refined to create larger conceptual categories, which is called “focused coding” (Charmaz, 2014). To ensure the reliability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the researcher continuously

### Table 1 Participant information

| No. | Pseudonym | Age     | Occupation    | Husband’s origin | Future plan                      | Number of children | Age of 1st child |
|-----|-----------|---------|---------------|------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
|     |           |         |               |                  |                                  |                    |                  |
| 1   | Rumi      | Forties | Full time     | France           | Basically stay in Japan          | 1                  | 11 (female)      |
| 2   | Sayaka    | Thirties| Full time     | France           | 50% chance to move to France     | 2                  | 8 (male)         |
| 3   | Aya       | Forties | Full time     | New Zealand      | Basically stay in Japan          | 2                  | 7 (male)         |
| 4   | Natsuko   | Thirties| Full time     | France           | Basically stay in Japan          | 2                  | 10 (female)      |
| 5   | Yoko      | Forties | Full time     | US               | Basically stay in Japan          | 2                  | 7 (female)       |
| 6   | Sachiko   | Thirties| Full time     | UK               | Basically stay in Japan          | 3                  | 7 (female)       |
| 7   | Yuri      | Forties | Full time     | US               | Basically stay in Japan          | 2                  | 11 (male)        |
| 8   | Kiyomi    | Thirties| Full time     | France           | Basically stay in Japan          | 1                  | 9 (female)       |
| 9   | Akiko     | Forties | Full time Employment | Canada        | Basically stay in Japan          | 2                  | 12 (female)      |
| 10  | Miki      | Forties | Full time     | US               | Basically stay in Japan          | 2                  | 9 (male)         |
| 11  | Rie       | Forties | Part time     | Italy            | Basically stay in Japan          | 1                  | 7 (male)         |
| 12  | Ayumi     | Forties | Full time     | Ireland          | Basically stay in Japan          | 2                  | 12 (male)        |
| 13  | Ryoko     | Forties | Full time     | UK               | Basically stay in Japan          | 2                  | 9 (female)       |
| 14  | Rika      | Forties | Full time     | US               | Basically stay in Japan          | 1                  | 6 (female)       |
|     |           |         |               |                  |                                  |                    |                  |
|     |           |         |               |                  |                                  |                    |                  |
| 1   | Sanae     | Forties | Part time     | UK               | Moving to UK                     | 1                  | 7 (female)       |
| 2   | Junko     | Forties | Full time     | France           | Don’t know yet                   | 2                  | 7 (female)       |
| 3   | Kyoko     | Thirties| Full time     | France           | Don’t know yet                   | 2                  | 7 (female)       |
| 4   | Kaede     | Thirties| Full time     | France           | Probably staying in Japan         | 2                  | 7 (male)         |
| 5   | Naomi     | Forties | Full time     | France           | Probably staying in Japan         | 2                  | 7 (male)         |
| 6   | Shiori    | Thirties| Full time     | France           | Don’t know yet                   | 2                  | 6 (female)       |
| 7   | Masami    | Forties | Full time     | Tunisia          | Don’t know yet                   | 2                  | 7 (male)         |
| 8   | Sumiko    | Forties | Full time     | France           | Probably staying in Japan         | 3                  | 11 (male)        |
| 9   | Emi       | Forties | Full time     | Germany          | Probably staying in Japan         | 2                  | 8 (male)         |
| 10  | Noriko    | Thirties| Full time     | France           | Don’t know yet                   | 2                  | 9 (female)       |
| 11  | Harumi    | Thirties| Full time     | Australia        | High chance to go back to Australia | 2                  | 8 (male)         |
| 12  | Chikako   | Forties | Part time     | Switzerland      | Moving to Switzerland            | 2                  | 10 (male)        |
| 13  | Keiko     | Forties | Full time     | France           | High chance to move to France     | 2                  | 10 (male)        |
| 14  | Megumi    | Forties | Full time     | US               | High chance to move overseas      | 2                  | 7 (female)       |
| 15  | Sayuri    | Forties | Full time     | France           | May move to France               | 2                  | 8 (female)       |
performed comparisons between the data, codes, and categories, in addition to making notes throughout the process. As Charmaz (2014) wrote, such notes help researchers develop ideas for codes, compare data, elaborate categories, and study relationships between categories, all of which direct further data collection. For example, the researcher initially interviewed full-time mothers, but later decided to add interviews with working mothers. This change was inspired by her note that questioned potential differences between the conflicts experienced, depending on occupational status. Later coding suggested that no major differences had been found between the experiences of full-time mothers and those of working mothers. For instance, one of the sub-categories, difficulty motivating the child to study the second language, was mentioned by two full-time mothers and two working mothers. Similarly, another category, whether the decision regarding school choice was a good one, was mentioned by five full-time mothers and three working mothers.

As the data accumulated and the researcher’s continued comparisons of data and codes proceeded, the names of the categories were refined. After interviewing the last of the participants in the Public Group, the researcher then commenced interviews with the International Group and began initial coding. Where applicable, the codes used for the Public Group were also used for coding the interviews with the International Group; otherwise, new codes were created. Categories mentioned by only a small number of the participants were omitted.

As a final step, the researcher verified that all categories matched the participants’ data, and then between-category relationships were analyzed. From an integration of the notes taken throughout the process and an in-depth comparison between the two groups, a tentative theory was then proposed.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Two measures were taken to ensure the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the results of the study. All coding was conducted by the researcher; however, the researcher engaged in regular peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in which her analyses were discussed with her seminar group, which included four undergraduate students, three graduate students, and also the researcher’s supervisor, who is an expert in qualitative research. Furthermore, member validation (King & Horrocks, 2010; Willig, 2013) was also conducted, in which two participants from each group were presented with the researcher’s interpretations and were asked to indicate whether their experiences matched the findings. They agreed in general with the interpretations and expressed satisfaction, reporting that they were now able to understand that their mixed feelings had stemmed from internal ambivalence. Before, they had not given that much thought, however, after reading what the researcher had written, it became clear to them.

Results

First, the results relating to the school-selection process will be presented, followed by the results relating to the parents’ experiences after their child’s enrollment.

Prior to Enrollment in Elementary School

The categories and sub-categories in relation to the school-selection process that parents undertook were as follows (See Table 2).

Public Group

(1) Elements leading to the decision: This category was comprised of four sub-categories. (a) A high chance of staying in Japan: Because almost all participants mentioned this, this sub-category served as a base for the other sub-categories in this category. (b) Prioritizing acquiring Japanese cultural norms was mentioned by 11 of the 14 mothers. One mother, Rumi, explained, “If my daughter were suddenly immersed in Japanese culture, she would become confused.” The mothers believed that Japanese culture is unique, mentioning the common saying that “a nail that sticks out will be hammered down” (Rumi), and said that they had decided that it was important to teach their child Japanese cultural norms because such knowledge is often a prerequisite for survival in Japanese society. (c) Maintaining literacy in Japanese was referred to by nine mothers. Sachiko said, “we had a choice between a Japanese public school and the British school, and figured that if my daughter attended the British school, she would not learn to read and write the complicated Japanese language.” (d) Adaptation to living in a
Table 2  Categories and Sub-Categories

| Topic                                      | Participant Group | Category                | Sub-category                                      | No. of participants |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Prior to enrollment in elementary school   |                   | School selection        | Elements leading to the decision                 |                    |
|                                            | Public            |                         | High chance of staying in Japan                  | 14                 |
|                                            |                   |                         | Prioritizing acquiring Japanese cultural norms   | 11                 |
|                                            |                   |                         | Maintaining literacy in Japanese                 | 9                  |
|                                            |                   |                         | Adaptation to living in a Japanese community     | 8                  |
|                                            | International     |                         | Constraints of choosing an international school  | 4                  |
|                                            |                   |                         | Torn between choosing a Japanese public or private school | 4               |
|                                            |                   | Elements leading to the decision | Maintenance/Improving the child’s second language ability | 13               |
|                                            |                   |                         | Preparation for living overseas                  | 8                  |
|                                            |                   |                         | Pressure from husbands                           | 6                  |
|                                            |                   |                         | Avoiding the risk of the child being bullied     | 3                  |
|                                            |                   | Elements causing ambivalence | Deterioration of their child’s skill in Japanese | 6                  |
|                                            |                   |                         | Anxiety that the child would lose a Japanese identity | 4               |
|                                            |                   |                         | The mother’s unfamiliarity with international schools | 4               |
|                                            |                   | Positive evaluation of school | Balanced education that fosters the child’s development | 9               |
|                                            |                   |                         | Acquiring specific Japanese cultural values and rules that can help the child maintain harmony with others | 7               |
|                                            |                   | Anxiety regarding bilingual education | “Was it a good decision?” | 8               |
|                                            |                   |                         | Difficulty motivating the child to study their second language | 4               |
|                                            |                   | Sense of distrust toward the school | Feeling angry with the school for eliminating the child’s uniqueness | 8               |
|                                            |                   |                         | Frustration over exams wars                      | 5                  |
|                                            |                   | Conflicts with husbands | General educational policies                      | 13                 |
|                                            |                   |                         | Sense of unfairness in role sharing              | 10                 |
|                                            |                   |                         | Bilingual education methodology                  | 6                  |
|                                            |                   | Positive evaluation of school | Bilingual education will broaden the child’s future opportunities | 8               |
|                                            |                   |                         | Encouraging the child’s uniqueness               | 4                  |
|                                            |                   | Fear of the child losing Japanese-ness | Fear of the child losing Japanese identity | 10                 |
|                                            |                   |                         | Frustration over difficulty maintaining literacy in Japanese | 10               |
|                                            |                   | Sense of distrust toward the school | International school is a closed world | 13                 |
|                                            |                   |                         | Puzzled at differences between the international school and the Japanese school that they had attended | 11               |
|                                            |                   | Conflicts with husbands | General educational policy or maintaining skill in Japanese | 12               |
|                                            |                   |                         | “Why me?”                                        | 10                 |
|                                            |                   |                         | Increased conflict                               | 4                  |
|                                            |                   | Following elementary school enrollment | Active involvement of husbands | 6               |
|                                            | Public            |                         | Sharing information with husbands about school and child’s issues | 6               |
|                                            |                   |                         | Involving husbands in school activities          | 6                  |
|                                            |                   | Bilingual education     | Book, media, lessons, and assistance from husbands | 9               |
|                                            |                   |                         | Visiting their extended family overseas          | 5                  |
|                                            |                   | Expansion of resources  | Other mothers                                     | 12                 |
|                                            |                   |                         | Their child’s friends                             | 12                 |
|                                            |                   |                         | Community                                        | 12                 |
|                                            |                   |                         | Extended families                                 | 8                  |
|                                            |                   |                         | School                                           | 4                  |
|                                            |                   | Following up Japanese language skills | At home study | 13               |
|                                            |                   |                         | Lessons outside                                   | 9                  |
|                                            | International     | Expansion of resources  | Other mothers                                     | 9                  |
|                                            |                   |                         | Community                                        | 9                  |
|                                            |                   |                         | Their child’s friends                             | 7                  |
|                                            |                   |                         | School                                           | 5                  |
Japanese community was mentioned by others. For example:

Having a sense of coexistence with neighbors is important. We thought that going to school with friends, coming back with friends, and regularly playing with them would be important for my daughter. Here, the local community association provides lots of fun occasions like festivals and movie shows. (Ryoko)

(2) Elements causing ambivalence: This category was comprised of two sub-categories. (a) constraints of choosing an international school; eight mothers mentioned this in relation to school selection, of whom four mentioned financial or geographical constraints. Yoko recalled, “We needed to discuss the choice between the American school, public school, and private school; each had benefits and drawbacks. For example, the American school was expensive, but provided an English-language education. We put everything on the table and made a final decision.” (b) Torn between choosing a Japanese public or private school: four of the mothers reported that this was the source of difficulty.

The basic selection process followed this pattern: the parents determined that they had a high chance of staying in Japan; they then experienced ambivalence and constraints when comparing the benefits and drawbacks of each school; after that, they chose a public school. All the mothers reported that they had made their decisions through discussions with their husbands (see Yoko’s statement above, 2a).

**International Group**

(1) Elements leading to the decision: This category was comprised of four sub-categories: (a) maintaining/improving the child’s second-language ability, (b) preparation for living overseas, (c) pressure from husbands, and (d) avoiding the risk of the child being bullied.

For this group, their child’s second-language education was the most influential selection factor. Kaede recalled, “This is Japan, so we were not worried about him learning Japanese, but we feared that he would not learn to speak French.” Eleven of the 15 participants in this group mentioned that they might move away from Japan or that they did not yet have any specific future plans (see Table 1), so that they felt that preparation for living overseas was important. Masami, whose son attended a French school, explained, “We are here only temporarily and will move back to France eventually, so we needed to help my son gain a French mentality.” Selection of an international school was often demanded by the husbands (which relates to sub-category (c) pressure from husbands, which was reported by six participants). Junko said, “My husband strongly demanded it. I had no choice.” Additionally, some worried that, if their children attended Japanese schools, they would be bullied as a result of their non-typical Japanese appearance or name, which related to sub-category (d) avoiding the risk of the child being bullied.

(2) Elements causing ambivalence: Like the mothers in the Public Group, several of the mothers in the International Group had spent several months considering the choice of an appropriate school, as a result of three elements that caused ambivalence. (a) Deterioration of their child’s skill in Japanese: This was their biggest concern, followed by (b) anxiety that the child would lose a Japanese identity and (c) the mother’s unfamiliarity with international schools.

For instance, many expressed the fear that their children would lose an opportunity to improve their literacy in Japanese and would also fail to acquire Japanese values and behaviors.

I was mostly concerned that my daughter would eventually stop speaking my language, would not read Japanese newspapers, and so on. Also, Japanese schools teach children manners and good values that help them live in harmony with others, but I still don’t know if international schools teach this. I feared that my daughter and I would grow further and further apart. (Sayuri)

The basic decision process of the International Group seemed to include allowing the possibility of moving overseas in the future to play a role in their decision, as many considered it important to prepare their children for life overseas; further, although all participants eventually agreed that improving the child’s facility in their husband’s language deserved priority, their husband
played the primary role in the process of selecting the school, leaving the mothers with concerns. Notable points regarding this group, as judged by the researcher, are that the number of references to elements causing ambivalence was greater than that reported in the Public Group (8 and 14, respectively), and the International Group contained more internal ambivalence (e.g., anxiety that the child would lose a Japanese identity) than the Public Group, whose concerns were more pragmatic (e.g., torn between choosing a Japanese public or private school) and were shared by their husbands.

Following Elementary School Enrollment

This section overviews experiences of the mothers in each group after their children were enrolled in elementary school, and the strategies that the mothers took. Both groups felt simultaneously positive and ambivalent toward their chosen schools, and also experienced conflicts with their husbands. Their ambivalent feelings were categorized in relation to the expectations and anxieties stemming from two cultural domains.

Public Group

(1) Positive evaluation of school: This category was comprised of two sub-categories: (a) a balanced education that fosters the child’s development, and (b) acquiring specific Japanese cultural values and rules that could help the child maintain harmony with others.

In relation to a balanced education, nine mothers mentioned appreciating that their children were learning various subjects as well as important human values through their everyday routines at school, which they believed would nurture a balanced person. For instance, Aya explained:

> What I like is that the school not only teaches children math and science, but all important aspects of life. It is nice that children learn to do everything by themselves. You know, they distribute food, clean up everywhere ... including the toilets. They are learning to be part of society and to show gratitude.

The sub-category relating to acquiring Japanese cultural values was mentioned by seven mothers. For example, Rumi said, “I appreciate that my daughter receives lots of opportunities to meet elderly people living in our community.” Meanwhile, Rie discussed the nature of the local public school, where different kinds of families gather:

> I think the characteristics of private school families are quite the same, but here at public school, some come from rather poor households while others come from high-income households. Also, some children don't have a mother or father. So, children are encouraged to learn to live in harmony with others from many different backgrounds.

Japanese are known to place importance on harmony with others (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Several participants confirmed the importance of this cultural value, saying that the school teaches implicit rules necessary to live appropriately with others.

(2) Anxiety regarding bilingual education: Although they acknowledged the positive aspects of the schools, the group members also admitted experiencing anxiety regarding their children’s second-language acquisition.

One of the two sub-categories was (a) was it a good decision? A good example of this was reported by Sayaka: “I have to admit that I sometimes regret neglecting French, as we focused too much on Japanese.” Seven others confessed that they had at least once regretted enrolling their children in the local public school and, then, after that, finding their children unable to speak their second language.

The other sub-category, (b) difficulty motivating their child to study their second language, was mentioned by four of the mothers. Akiko, whose daughter was initially poor at English and was later sent to Canada for one year, recalled, “We were hoping that our children would be good at both English and Japanese school subjects, but it was very hard to maintain their motivation.” Similar comments revealed gaps between the desires of the parents and those of the children. Although the parents tried to teach the second language to their children outside of school, the children were surrounded by Japanese-speaking peers and teachers and did not feel an urgent need to study a second language.

(3) Sense of distrust toward the school: This cate-
gory was composed of two sub-categories. Sub-cate-
gory (a) Feeling angry with the school for eliminating
the child’s uniqueness, was mentioned by eight
mothers. Ayumi said: “My son will learn to behave
well and so on, but sometimes I feel he is becoming a
‘square.’” Similarly, Miki said “The international school
we visited was encouraging children to express them-
selves and develop logical thinking. Now that our son
is in the local Japanese school, he is becoming a bit ...
boring.” Intercultural parents may experience such
ambivalent feelings more often than Japanese families,
who generally only need to decide between Japanese
schools.

(b) Frustration over exam wars². Miki said: “I’m
becoming more and more fed up with the exam wars.
They are way too excessive.” Four other mothers also
felt that they were concerned their children would be
negatively influenced by the schools’ excessively com-
petitive atmospheres.

(4) Conflicts with husbands. The sub-categories of
this category are (a) general educational policies, (b)
sense of unfairness in role sharing, and (c) bilingual
education methodology. Although the first two of
these can occur with every couple, six mothers in the
Public Group reported conflicts about sub-category (c)
bilingual education methodology. For example, Ayumi
said: ‘We frequently fight because he often says Tm not
a good teacher’ and gives up, but he is the only one
who can teach my son English!”

International Group

For the International Group, the overall structure of
the categories in the group with results relating to
expectations and anxieties stemming from double cul-
tural domains is similar to that of the Public Group, but
the sub-categories were different.

(1) Positive evaluation of school: This category
includes two sub-categories (a) bilingual education will
broaden the child’s future opportunities, and (b)
encouraging the child’s uniqueness. Eight of the 15
International Group members told the researcher that
they appreciated the effect of the second-language edu-
cation, as it allowed their child to speak two languages.
Megumi said, “If you speak two languages, you have an
advantage in job hunting, which provides more
opportunities.” Further, four of them said that they
appreciated the fact that the school attempted to pro-
mote each child’s uniqueness. For example, Harumi
stated:

In the Japanese school we visited, I saw a boy col-
oring the sun pink. Then, the teacher said to him,
“You should correct the color to orange or yellow.”
No freedom. Here, children are free to express
what they want and to be themselves.

However, the International Group also had ambivalent
feelings, but with different implications from those of
the Public Group, as was reflected in two other catego-
ries within this overall group of categories: (2) fear of
the child losing Japanese-ness, and (3) sense of distrust
toward the school.

The two sub-categories of the former concerned iden-
tity and literacy: (a) fear of the child losing Japanese
identity, and (b) frustration over difficulty maintaining
literacy in Japanese. These two sub-categories are
interrelated; both of them were mentioned by 10
mothers. For example, Sanae said:

[About education.] It is so difficult to strike a good
balance between being British and Japanese. I feel
bad, but I feel to achieve this I have to give my
daughter lots of tasks. I feel she is becoming more
and more Western in her manner. She cannot kneel
on a cushion like a Japanese person. She looked
overwhelmed when she joined a group of local stu-
dents.

Similarly, Sayuri expressed sadness: “When we went
to France, my daughters were really just like French
girls. I felt so lonely at the dinner table when every-
one was speaking in French and laughing together. I
often feel like an outsider.” Nine others also men-
tioned that their children were becoming less Japanese.

(3) Sense of distrust toward the school: This cate-
gory has the following two sub-categories: (a) interna-
tional school is a closed world, and (b) puzzled at dif-
fences between the international school and the
Japanese school that they had attended. Although the

² “Exam wars” refers to the keen competition in entrance exams for private junior high schools.
participants in the International Group acknowledged some positive aspects of the schools, they were simultaneously dismayed with the reality, comparing it to what they themselves had experienced when they were in elementary school. All of the mothers had graduated from Japanese public schools, which may account for their dissatisfaction or concerns regarding the international schools. The majority of the mothers expressed frustration about being unable to access information regarding how their children were faring at school and reported difficulty communicating with the school staff. Chikako complained, “There are no teacher/parent meetings or class visitations. How can I find out how my children are doing?” Further, Kaede mentioned:

I feel that the teachers do not love the kids, and they draw a clear line. Like “work is work.” I remember that my Japanese teachers were very dedicated and performed activities outside of their roles. Once, when my son made a mess at a cafeteria, he tried to get a napkin and clean the floor. Then a teacher came and said, “You don’t have to do that,” implying that the cleaning staff would do it. In Japan, we learn to be responsible for our actions.

Such unsatisfactory feelings toward the schools seemed to be grounded in an anxiety that their children were not learning behavioral styles appropriate for Japanese culture. Many mentioned that their children were becoming more individualistic, which “may have been different if they were going to a Japanese school” (Sanae). It is also notable that, during the school-selection phase, only a few concerns regarding literacy and identity were mentioned, but these concerns increased after the children’s enrollment, leading the mothers to develop a sense that they were losing their deep connections with their children, as can be seen in Sayuri’s narrative.

(4) Conflicts with husbands: This category brought up stronger emotions in the International Group than in the Public Group. This category was comprised of three sub-categories.

(a) General educational policies or maintaining skill in Japanese: This was referred to by 12 of the mothers in the International Group. For example, Naomi reported:

Educational policies are fundamentally different. He (her husband) believes facilitating autonomy is most important, while I want to stay close to her and teach her love. I want to provide as much support as possible, but he often says I do too much for her.

(b) “Why me?” refers to a strong sense of dissatisfaction regarding role sharing. The following is an illustrative quote from Chikako:

Of course I’m not happy. I say, “I put my kids into this school to learn your language!” But, I am the one doing everything, helping with the children’s homework, school activities ..., and so on. He is busy with his work and doesn’t really care about what is going on, and only helps from time to time on weekends. So, I often feel like, “Why me?”

(c) Increased conflict: Four participants in the International Group referred to increased conflict after their children had enrolled in school. This was reported only by the members of the International Group. All of the husbands of the women in the International Group worked full time and some returned home late at night; therefore, these mothers, just like those in the Public Group, were tasked with monitoring their children’s work. Sayuri said, “I don’t speak French and know nothing about French school. I find it strange I still have to chase after my husband to help with homework and so on.”

The other major group of categories reflecting the mothers’ comments about the time following their children’s elementary school enrollment related to supporting the child’s adaptation to school.

Supporting Child’s Adaptation to School
Public Group

Strategies adopted by the Public Group for supporting the child’s adaptation to school include active involvement of fathers, bilingual education, and expansion of resources.

(1) Active involvement of fathers: This category includes two sub-categories: (a) Sharing information with fathers about school and the child’s issues, and (b)
Involving husbands in school activities.

(a) Sharing information with fathers about school was best described by Yoko:

I'm sharing everything with him: what's happening with our daughter, when there will be a sport's day or excursion; good and bad. This creates opportunities for him to have conversations with her. Like he says, "So, you are going to do that at school? That's great!"

(b) Involving husbands in school activities was mentioned by six mothers. Rie explained: "I asked my husband if he would be willing to come to school and read a book. Now, he does it on a regular basis. He said he was happy because the children enjoyed listening to him, and our son was proud of him." Other mothers made similar statements regarding trying to involve their husbands who, because they were unfamiliar with the Japanese school system, could feel isolated inside the family.

(2) Bilingual education: This category includes strategies for motivating the children to learn their second language through the use of (a) books, media, lessons, and assistance from their father, and (b) visiting their extended family overseas.

(3) Expansion of resources: This categories includes a range of resources that the parents and children acquired from the time of enrollment in school, such as (a) other mothers, (b) their child's friends, (c) community, (d) extended families, and (e) school. In particular, (a) other mothers and (b) their child's friends helped the families adapt to school life by providing information and mental support to both the children and their parents. Ayumi said, "I appreciate my mom friends with whom I can complain about everything and share information. Some have multi-ethnic children like us, so we can discuss specific issues." Regarding (c) community, Aya mentioned:

The community group in this school is well organized, and everybody knows all of the children. If someone sees the school bookbag, they say "hi" to the children. They all know my son and chat with him on his way home. I really appreciate that.

Others also reported appreciating help from and feeling part of a community.

International Group

Strategies adopted by the International Group for supporting the child's adaptation to school include (1) following up Japanese language skills through (a) at-home study or (b) lessons outside, and (2) expansion of resources, all of which were similar to the strategies of the Public Group. As was seen in the Public Group, nine of the mothers in the International Group mentioned that (a) other mothers were a great help. Additionally, (b) community seemed to play an important role. Kyoko said:

Our neighbors know about our daughter and the children often play with her. Intercultural families like us, whose children are attending an international school, tend to be excluded from the community, so I really appreciate that our daughter is accepted by the community.

Other sub-categories of expansion of resources by the International Group were (c) their child's friends, and (d) school.

In summary, both groups reported experiencing issues regarding bilingual education, having mixed feelings toward the education that their children were receiving, and experiencing conflicts with their husband, while adopting various strategies to support their children.

However, certain differences between the two groups were identified. First, while both groups acknowledged positive aspects of their current schools, which validated their school-selection decision, a sense of distrust toward the school (category #3 under Expectations and anxieties stemming from double cultural domains) revealed a concurrent implicit envy of the other type of school. For example, mothers in the Public Group mentioned feeling angry with the school for eliminating the child's uniqueness (Public Group sub-category #3a), because uniqueness is promoted in international schools. On the other hand, the International Group mentioned that an international school is a closed world (International Group sub-category #3a), implying that Japanese public schools are more open, holding many events that
involv family participation.

Second, only the participants in the International Group showed strong concern about maintaining literacy in Japanese (International Group category #2b), and said that their children were acquiring another cultural identity while their Japanese identity was diminishing. Furthermore, only the International Group mentioned increased conflict (International Group sub-category #4c).

Third, active involvement of fathers (Supporting child’s adaptation to school, category #1) was mentioned only by the Public Group; the International Group rarely mentioned that their husbands functioned as a resource.

Discussion

The present research explored the experiences of Japanese mothers in intercultural couples during the process of selecting an elementary school for their eldest child, and how they navigated their child’s entry to the chosen school. It focused specifically on the experiences of Japanese women married to non-Japanese men, comparing those who chose public schools for their child with those who chose international schools. Particular attention was paid to asymmetric effects of the cultural identities of the intercultural couple living in dual cultural domains.

The present results suggest that intercultural families’ challenges may be exacerbated by their unique dynamics. In striving to adapt to their child’s enrollment in elementary school, both groups of mothers faced challenges regarding retaining the child’s skill in the Japanese language and Japanese culture, while balancing those elements with those in the child’s other culture.

A common factor in both groups was that, when choosing the school, the mothers took into consideration the societal and cultural values that they wanted their children to identify with and, as a consequence, the language that the child should acquire as the main language. The reality reported by the mothers varied, as did the level of stress and the power balance within the couple.

Kuramoto (2016, 2017b) reported that intercultural parents experience a reawakening of their cultural identity during their transition to parenthood, which leads to them providing further language education for their child, transmitting their heritage, and developing certain stressors, as well as conflicts within the couple. The present research builds on these findings, confirming that the next developmental phase, the child’s enrollment in elementary school, can also impact parents’ cultural identity by incorporating them into multi-layered cultural domains, and can also incite tensions within the couple.

Figure 1 diagrams a proposed family system, indicating asymmetrical patterns based on the cultural identities of the parents. In the present research, no data were obtained directly from the participants’ husbands; thus, the husbands’ spheres in Figure 1 were based on the researcher’s previously published studies. From the findings of the present research, the Public Group section of the diagram (left) indicates that choosing a public school is likely to have a limited impact on Japanese mothers’ cultural identity, because Japanese schools are these mothers’ native institutions, and through them, their children can acquire literacy in Japanese and a Japanese identity. Kuramoto (2016) and Kuramoto et al. (2017) reported that non-Japanese men living and working in Japan undergo adaptation to Japanese culture and become even further incorporated into Japanese culture if their child is enrolled in a Japanese public school. However, this can also marginalize them, which is shown by the dark, smaller cultural sphere in the Figure. For example, non-Japanese fathers with children in Japanese schools described experiencing loneliness and frustration, such as when their children refuse to learn their father’s language and culture (Kuramoto, 2016; Kuramoto et al., 2017).

The condition of the mothers in the International Group was more complicated. As can be seen on the right side of Figure 1, in contrast to the Public Group, the cultural sphere of the non-Japanese husbands of the women in the International Group is larger than that of their wives. Their child is learning their father’s culture and language, thus leading to a greater likelihood of the child predominantly adopting the father’s cultural identity, as was suggested by the mothers’ comments in the interviews. The Japanese mothers, then, while searching for ways to adapt to another culture and an unfamiliar education system, were likely to experience difficulties when they had to support their child’s bilin-
gual education on their own. Their internal ambivalence became apparent at the time of school selection, and was amplified after enrollment. The sense of unfairness seemed to stem not only from the fact that the mothers had little experience or knowledge about the school (even though they were the ones doing the most to help their child), but also from the context of being in another cultural domain while living in their home country, which resulted in complex emotions. This frustration was particularly strongly expressed by the mothers who were not proficient in the second language. This implies that language skills may influence how the mothers perceived their reality, perhaps making them feel more marginalized.

Many narratives by the mothers in the International Group indicated a fear that their child would lose Japanese-ness. Nitta (1992) reported that non-Japanese mothers whose children were attending Japanese public school felt that they had less authority over them. Considering this in conjunction with the present findings suggests a cultural-identity disequilibrium that may occur in dual-layered cultural settings within which one parent (in the present study, the mother) is living in her own country while the child is developing through another culture’s language and resources. This may result in one parent’s marginalization within the family, causing that parent to feel vulnerable and frustrated.

Both groups of mothers in the present study also reported experiencing conflicts with their husbands regarding bilingual education and role sharing. However, only the Public Group mentioned involving their husbands in their children’s school life. This may be attributable to the International Group participants’ gatekeeping behavior (Schoppe-Sullivan, Cannon, Brown, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008), that is, some mothers may discourage their husbands’ involvement in parenting and education. Fear of losing a deep connection with their children, along with frustration as a result of needing to manage unfamiliar school activities, may be part of the background that caused some mothers to shun their husbands.

Conclusions

Published literature regarding intercultural families mostly reports research done outside of Japan, however, many of those societies are much more multicultural than Japan. What makes the present study unique is that, first, very little research has been done on intercultural families in Japan and, second, the research itself

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**Figure 1** Diagram displaying how a child’s school can impact intercultural parents’ cultural identities.
sought to capture specific issues that intercultural parents living in Japan encounter while raising a child and attempting to integrate the child into a society that has deep-rooted expectations of homogeneity and assimilation. This differs from the situation in most Western countries, which have a long history of multiculturalism (Sugimoto, 1997).

Life transitions involve qualitative reorganization of both inner emotions and behavior. The present research suggests that, when their child is at school age, intercultural parents may experience a deepening sense of discontinuity with their cultural identities as they adapt to their children’s entry to school. This was especially evident among the Japanese mothers in the International Group. Berry (2001) presumed that encounters with another culture reawaken cultural identity; the present study suggests that encounters in a child’s school based in another cultural domain could have similar effects.

**Ramifications for Practice**

The present study represents a significant advance for research-informed practice. Intercultural parents are caught within, as well as between, multiple cultural domains: family, school, and the wider society. Along with negotiating normative events, intercultural parents, who are incorporated into dual-cultural systems, are often forced to compromise their inner cultural selves and adjust to everyday life patterns by addressing a range of issues, including school education, language education, transmission of heritage, planning for the future and future objectives, and the acculturation and socialization of their child. Thus, it is important to pay attention to the inner experiences of individual parents who are struggling in multiple cultural domains, as these experiences underlie salient normative issues.

In particular, rather than teachers and counselors applying traditional standards to intercultural families, the present author recommends that they encourage close communication in order to gain an understanding of the unique issues that families face and the resources that they have. Bronfenbrenner (1986) posits that human development progresses through interaction with an environment that can be divided into five layers: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. In that context, experts should consider intercultural families not only from a microsystem perspective (e.g., the family), but also, from a broader perspective, because macrosystems (e.g., society and dual, or more, cultures) can also affect families.

Finally, the present study’s findings indicate that community can play an important role for such parents. Investigating how intercultural families could be integrated better into communities is recommended.

**Limitations**

One limitation of the present research is that 20 of the 29 participants were full-time homemakers. In actuality, 65% of Japanese mothers work (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2018b). No major difference was detected between the two relatively small groups in the present study, but noticeable differences may be identified if sampling were expanded. Second, all participants were from relatively high-income households; a study of couples with lower incomes would complement the present findings. Third, the fathers were not interviewed in this study; future research should explore fathers’ perspectives. Fourth, the present study was limited to Japanese women with non-Asian husbands. In order to enable further elaboration of the model, future studies should examine other ethnic combinations of partners, such as non-Asian mothers and Japanese fathers.

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――公立小学校とインターナショナルスクールの比較を主軸に――

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本研究では、日本に在住する国際結婚夫婦がどのようなプロセスを経て子どもの小学校を選択したのか、入学以降どのような経験をしたのか、子どものサポートにおいてどのような対応を実施しているのかを、外国人夫と結婚し、学齢期の子どもを持つ29名の日本人母親へのインタビューから検討した。主に、子どもを公立学校へ通わせている公立群とインターナショナルスクールへ通わせている国際群の比較を主軸に論じた。親は教育期への移行に際し、二重の異文化構造に組み込まれること、日本文化・教育と父親の文化・言語教育との狭間で葛藤していたこと、子どもが自身の出身文化圏と異なる学校に通う際、親の文化的アイデンティティが揺るがされる可能性が示唆された。学校関係者やその他支援者は、複雑な文化的背景にある家庭に対して、典型的な基準や問題意識を当てはめるのではなく、密にコミュニケーションをはかることで、彼らが経験する様々な独特の問題を把握するべく努めるべきである。本研究で得られた異文化間で子育てすることに付随するバイリンガル教育に関する問題や親個人の葛藤を先行知識として持つことは、支援の一助となるだろう。

キーワード：国際結婚、学齢期への適応、文化的アイデンティティ、バイリンガル教育