

THE ZEIT GIST

Schools single out foreign roots

International kids suffering under archaic rules

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Special to The Japan Times

Since 1990, when Japan started allowing factories to easily import foreign labor, the number of registered non-Japanese (NJ) residents has nearly doubled to more than 2 million.

Many migrant workers have become immigrants: staying on, marrying, and having children.

Some have faced illegal work conditions, according to the domestic press: incarceration, physical and emotional duress, even child labor and virtual slavery. Policymakers at the highest levels are currently debating solutions.

Good. But less attention has gone to the children of these immigrants, particularly their schooling. This is a crisis in the making for Japan.



Non-Japanese students with naturally lighter or curlier hair are being singled out under Japanese school rules supposedly aimed at curbing unnatural or nonconformist hairdos. AP PHOTO

The bellwether of any country's internationalization is the altered composition of the school population. Many of Japan's immigrant children are becoming an underclass, deprived of an education for being born different than the putative "Japanese standard."

I recently met "Maria," a college-age Brazilian of Japanese descent. She and her younger sister, "Nicola," grew up as children of Brazilian laborers in Shizuoka Prefecture. With factories producing machinery, chemicals, tea, etc., their region contains about a third of Shizuoka Prefecture's nearly

100,000 NJ residents.

They went to Japanese primary schools without incident.

In high school, however, Nicola ran afoul of school rules.

Nicola has wavy brown hair, unlike Maria's straight black. So Nicola got snagged by the school's "hair police."

"Every week teachers would check if Nicola was dyeing her hair brown," explained Maria. "Even though she said this is her natural color, she was instructed to straighten and dye it black.

"She did so once a week. But the ordeal traumatized her. She still has a complex about her appearance."

Even after leaving the school, Nicola's hair is still damaged.

Her health may also have suffered. Google "hair coloring" and "organ damage" and see what reputable sources, such as the American Journal of Epidemiology and the National Institutes of Health, have to say about side effects: lymphatic cancer, cataracts, toxins, burns from ammonium persulfate ...

Last May I visited Nicola's school to hear their side of the story.

According to their head uniform inspector, the school has never forced anyone to change to anything but their natural hair color.

"In principle we say, 'Don't mess with your hair,'" the teacher said. "Having them dye it again, even to black, would contravene our rules."

The regulations are as follows.

"Boys will not perm, straighten, dye, bleach etc. their hair.

"... are not allowed to have extreme ("kyokutan") hairstyles, or shave their temples, etc.

"... will not let their hair fall over their eyes (and will not let their hair grow down to their collars).

"They will have a refreshing style as befits a high school student.

"Girls will not perm, straighten, dye, bleach, or add extensions etc. to their hair.

"... will not let their hair fall over their eyes.

"Girls with long hair will pin it back in a way that does not interfere with classroom instruction."

The teacher continued: "During the first week of school we carry out inspections during assembly. If anyone looks suspicious, we call them into the office for closer scrutiny of follicles."

I asked what happens to students with naturally brown hair, such as my daughter, or even myself.

"You would still be inspected. We can tell if it's natural."

How? He gave an explanation so detailed that I imagined him moonlighting as a hairdresser.

But doesn't this direct unwarranted suspicion on children born with international roots?

"We think it's more important that students understand the importance of following rules ("kihan ishiki"). They must have an awareness of society ("shakai ishiki") and stop thinking only of themselves. Also, given job and college interviews, it wouldn't serve our reputation to have kids look slovenly."

What if students don't comply, and dye?

"We would have homeroom teachers keep an eye on them, call their parents ..."

Even suspend the student?

"It's never come up. So far, students have always complied." He repeated that nobody has been compelled to blacken naturally-colored hair.

When I related that story later to Maria, she laughed.

"This happened to my sister only last year. What's he talking about?"

Nicola's trauma is still so great that she refused to be interviewed for this article.

Hairstyle might seem insignificant, but it matters. Doubt it? Try enforcing a rule where all students (including girls) shave their heads. No worries about length, color or style anymore, right?

But let's look at the bigger picture: systematic alienation.

According to the Asahi Shimbun (Feb. 12, 2007), between 20 and 40 percent of all Brazilian children in Japan are not attending school at all.

More than 10,000 Brazilian children are estimated to have dropped out of school, or never entered one in the first place.

A lack of accommodation of natural differences, thanks to blind adherence to "following rules," doesn't help.

Other barriers are financial and legal. The Yomiuri (May 21, 2007) reports that 20,000 NJ students lack sufficient Japanese ability to follow classes. Yet schools have no budgets for remedial lessons.

Some schools are even refusing to enroll NJ children. Claiming "a lack of facilities," they note that compulsory education is only guaranteed to Japanese citizens.

Sadly, they are right. And Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's revision to the Fundamental Law of Education last December, with all the emphasis on teaching patriotism, did not change that.

Some local municipalities have adopted remedial policies. But we still have a situation where thousands of NJ kids grow up unable to read, write, or speak proficiently in any language.

What other choices do they have? Ethnic schools, perhaps. But, unaccredited by the Ministry of Education, they go unfunded and become too expensive for laborers. And graduates of these schools cannot enter many of Japan's premier universities anyway.

So they leave school, get underage employment, even join criminal gangs. We are seeing youth-crime policy in the pipeline already, targeting the miscreants without addressing the root cause.

Conclusion: Ye shall reap an NJ underclass. The government

cannot keep ignoring this situation. The NJ workforce (not including overstayers) is estimated at nearly 800,000, and growing.

Foreign labor has rescued many domestic industries such as Toyota, now the world's top automaker by working for extremely low wages with no social security. Where's the gratitude?

And don't think this only affects foreigners. Consider two sea changes.

One is the Japanese children of international marriages. We don't know how many there are out there. The Japan Census Bureau refuses to survey by ethnicity.

So probably hundreds of thousands of children with international roots live invisible lives in purportedly "monocultural, mono-ethnic" Japan.

Invisible, that is, until they enter secondary school, and have their roots inspected.

The other shift is in the entire NJ population. The number of "oldcomer," or Zainichi-generation foreigners (about half a million), has been slowly decreasing for decades, dropping by an average of 2.5 percent since 2002.

Meanwhile, "newcomer" immigrants (i.e. those coming from abroad and receiving Permanent Residency status) have shot up by 15.2 percent in the same period.

With these trends, the growth lines will cross in 2007. For the first time in Japan's history, there will be more newcomers than oldcomers. And at this rate, the newcomers will double yet again in five to seven years, with more of their children needing an education.

Yet schools keep confusing uniforms with uniformity, with crass enforcement of class rules.

Meanwhile, the government remains negligent toward the psychological hurt caused to kids at a highly impressionable age.

Time for Japan's education system to catch up with the demographic reality. Because it could affect your children too.

Dealing with the 'follicle enforcers'

Following is some advice on what to do if your child gets nabbed by the school "hair police."

1. Support your child. Reassure him/her that he/she is as "normal" as anyone else.
2. Seek an understanding with teachers and the principal. Point out that variation is normal. There are plenty of Japanese with naturally lighter, curly hair.
3. Get written proof from your previous school that your child's hair color or texture is natural.
4. Raise this issue with the Classroom Committee of Representatives ("gakkyu iinkai") and/or the local Board of Education ("kyoiku iinkai"). With all the attention on "ijime," or bullying, these days, the board may be sensitive to your concerns.
5. Be firm. Dyeing hair is neither good for your child's mental or physical health.
6. If compromise is impossible, consider changing schools. Your child deserves a nurturing educational environment, not alienated by perceived "differences" on a daily basis. **(D.A.)**

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