

Difficulties in Adapting at School Among Nepalese Immigrant Children in Japan

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Abstract

Introduction: Japan has experienced a shift toward a multicultural society, and an increasing number of immigrant children have enrolled in its educational systems. Unforeseen experiences may affect the mental well-being of these children and undermine their holistic development; however, research is scarce. This article explores parents' concern on Nepalese children's experiences in Japanese schools. We aim to reveal the issues that may inform healthcare professionals and schools in best supporting immigrant students.

Methods: Qualitative survey methods were adopted in an online survey tool to access and collect data from 13 Nepalese parents whose children (age 6–18 years) attended the schools (elementary or junior high school) in four prefectures of Japan. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

Results: The following four themes were identified: (i) interaction and relationship; (ii) feeling different and meals at school; (iii) academic exclusion—lack of assistance/review at home; and (iv) emotional distress, peer exclusion, and bullying.

Conclusion: Our findings suggest that because of the linguistic and cultural differences, children had difficulty communicating, leading to poor interpersonal relationships. Subjects reported changes in daily living patterns at home and school, and children felt different, shy, and unable to make friends or get involved. There were problems with school meals as well, and parents expressed concern over a lack of academic assistance. Some noteworthy emotional aspects were inability to be happy at school and bullying or exclusion from peers. They did, however, express the impression that Japanese students and teachers are cooperative. Overall, these findings have implications for schoolteachers, nurses, health personnel, parents, and others who promote the mental well-being and holistic development of children. This study provides a basis for mental health educational programs targeting the relationship between migrant and native students to create an inclusive society for all.

Keywords

qualitative research, thematic analysis, children, immigrant, mental health nursing

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Introduction

Japanese society is no longer homogenous, having instead incorporated a mix of small but visible immigrant population from different parts of the world, in the context of a declining birth rate and an increasing ageing population (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2021). There has been an increase in the population of non-Japanese children as well (Maruyama, 2018; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, 2021), often because parents migrated first for economic reasons, with the children later migrating to Japan to reunite with their family.

To meet labor shortages caused by ageing and depopulation, Japan began accepting more foreign immigrants. In December 2018, the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act was revised, and the residence status of

“Specified Skilled Worker” was introduced in April 2019. Therefore, the number of foreign nationals living in Japan is expected to rise further (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, 2021). According to an Immigration Service Agency of Japan report, as of December 2021, there were

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2,895,584 total immigrants living in Japan, including 2,404,503 Asians, of whom 97,799 were Nepalese. Immigrants with permanent resident status, including spouses and other family members, numbered 43,334 in total, including 34,165 Asians and 797 Nepalese (Immigration service agency of Japan, 2021). A survey of 1,741 municipalities across Japan by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) found that 120,070 children of foreign nationals were attending either elementary, junior, high, or international schools (Nippon.com, 2021).

Though the largest proportion of foreign residents are from China, followed by Korea, Vietnam, and others (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2021), our study focuses on Nepalese immigrant children, a group in which no previously published research exists. Additionally, an increasing number of immigrant students of various ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds are entering the Japanese educational system and diversifying the school population (Tokunaga, 2019); however, children's social lives and interactions in schools and their impact apart from academics are both very important and very understudied.

By the age of about 5–6 years, children enter school and engage in millions of interpersonal exchanges; after family time, children ages 6–18 spend most of their time in school. Hence, the school's learning and affective environment can have a substantial impact not only on intellectual development but also in social and emotional development (Epps & Smith, 1984). Expectedly, language may pose a barrier to non-natives. In all parts of the world, immigrant children and parents experience difficulties with acculturation and related stress, which may be particularly influential in children, who are developing their-selves and identities and may acquire a sense of inferiority and reluctance (Kayama & Yamakawa, 2020). A positive school environment can promote healthy social and emotional development during early years of life (World Health Organization, 2003). With this in mind, MEXT has emphasized the importance of schools fostering the overall development of every child, including accounting for diversity (MEXT, 2021). However, the educational system in Japan has limited resources for children of different backgrounds, even-though schools and teachers accept increasing numbers of immigrants (Maruyama, 2018). In some areas where immigrant children are enrolled, the local educational authorities provide educational support to immigrant children and host seminars for teachers on immigrant children's educational needs. However, apart from these efforts, teachers do not have adequate training opportunities on the various needs of immigrant children (Takahashi, 2020). Hence, it is crucial to explore the issues and difficulties that immigrant children in the Japanese educational system are facing, to provide an evidence base for planning programs that can offer effective support to immigrant children and ensure the fullest possible holistic development.

Review of Literature

To our knowledge, very few studies have been conducted among immigrant children in Japan, and to date, these studies have only focused on academic achievements or learning outcomes (Kobayashi & Tsuboya, 2021). For example, study by Ishida et al. (2016) indicated that the parental socioeconomic-status and having Japanese spoken at home were important determinants of the native-immigrant gap in academic achievement. It was also revealed that there was difference on academic achievement between first-generation immigrants and natives but it was not for the second-generations. Concerning mental well-being, even studies among non-immigrant middle and high school students have found associations between poorer interpersonal relationships at school and mental health problems including depression (Chen et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020), and in the case of immigrants the culture and language barriers are clearly major issues. Studies have pointed out the role of positive physical, social, and didactic spheres of school life in promoting subjective well-being (Tapia-Fonllem et al., 2020); interactions with peers and adults, including breaktimes and social behavior on the playground, for academic and social skills development (Blatchford et al., 2015). In addition, the degree of satisfaction with school lives through human relationships (Okada et al., 2010) and reciprocity in supportive friendships are related to alleviation of depression and contribute to mental health (Taniguchi & Tanaka, 2012). More precisely, it is reported that young immigrants often experience feelings of guilt regarding poor academic results and their inability to adapt to their school environment, but they often prefer to conceal these from their parents, to avoid burdening them with their problems (Nae, 2022). Similarly, as in other parts of the world, bullying is a common phenomenon in Japanese schools for immigrant children (Nae, 2022). Being bullied as "gaijin" (foreigner) was one of the reasons for sending an immigrant child to international school in Japan was revealed by a qualitative study (Yamamoto, 2014). On the other side, Nguyen (2017) reported the important role of bilingual support for Vietnamese student-family-teachers in a public school of Japan for academic improvement of students. However, understanding of areas such as meals and nutrition at school, interpersonal relationships, daily emotional patterns, and the immigrant children's health and psychosocial well-being are gaps to be filled.

Given this background, this study specifically aimed to explore parental concerns about what kinds of difficulties are faced by non-Japanese children at Japanese schools. Ultimately, the findings of the study may have implications for immigrant families and children by making it possible to offer specific and targeted assistance in areas of real and felt need. By revealing parents' report of their children's experiences and difficulties in Japanese schools, the findings may provide a basis to develop mental health educational programs to achieve an inclusive society for all people.

Methods

Design

Qualitative online survey methods were used to access and collect data from geographically dispersed participants in four prefectures of Japan: the Okayama, Tokyo, Fukuoka, and Nagoya prefectures (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014; Braun et al., 2021; Davey et al., 2019; Rohleder & Lyons, 2014). Before starting the project, researcher (RSB) talked with the members of Nepal-Japan Society about the purpose of the study. Majority of Nepalese were staying single or with friend or just couple without children as student or employee in Japan. Some couples had left their grownup children in Nepal and few had their children in Japan. Given that, data was collected from different prefectures.

Research Question

What are the difficulties among Nepalese Immigrant children in the schools of Japan?

The difficulties at school were focused on parental concern of their children's social-emotional-and-interactional relationship, and adaptation in the school.

Sample

The participants in the study were Nepalese parents living in Japan and whose children (6–18 years-old) attended Japanese schools, that is, elementary or junior high school or both. The participants were identified through the personal contact of the researcher and through their friend circle. Hence, it was snow-ball sampling. At first friendship relationship was started, as Nepalese residing in Japan, and then study purpose was explained because the researcher (RSB) had some experience with her child in Japan though it was in kindergarten, that is, Yochien in Japanese, and was very keen to explore how is the experience, whose children attending Japanese schools. Therefore, the participants were contacted by one of the researchers (RSB) who was Native Nepalese and had lived in Japan for three years, and it was easier to maintain the interpersonal relationship and to express feelings connecting with the similar experiences in own language spoken at home. Establishing relationship before recruiting the participants was done because the researchers were acutely sensitive to the potential anxiety to the participants in revealing their feelings and experiences. Therefore, the researcher assured the participants that their information will be used for the research purpose only and their personal identification will not be revealed elsewhere. The purpose of the study was explained in detail via online conversation, and after that a letter (written in the Nepali language) was sent to participants via email explaining the title and purpose of the study and for their consent to voluntary participation in the study. The adequate time was given to the participants to

decide whether to participate in the study or not. It was also explained that they can take their time and provide the response on their comfort and convenience. It took almost 3 weeks to obtain their decision as we mostly could talk in the weekends. None of the participants expressed uneasiness. Although the initial contact was made with 15 participants, two did not meet the criteria because their children's age was below 5 years; of the remainder, 13 participants completed and returned the questionnaire. However, we got responses from 10 participants at initial, but to meet the saturation, we followed up three participants and waited for their time. However, no new or additional data was found to add in generating codes and themes. Hence, considering the number of participants depend on the richness and saturation of data (Saunders et al., 2018), the final sample size for the study was 13. Characteristics of these 13 participants are presented in Table 1.

The anonymous open-ended questionnaire in written format was prepared in English then translated to Nepali language; back translation into English was done with the help of a bilingual expert. Then, a Google form in Nepali was sent to the participants' email address. To collect data via survey

Table 1. Background Information of the Respondents.

Characteristics	Number (total N = 13)	Percentage
Age of child		
≤12 years	10	76.9
>12 years	3	23.1
Age of parent		
≤40 years	7	53.9
>40 years	6	46.1
Relationship to child		
Father	8	61.5
Mother	5	38.5
Living-with in Japan		
Family	13	100
Language spoken at home		
Nepali	13	100
Years attended elementary school		
1–3 years	10	76.9
4–6 years	2	15.4
Not attended	1	7.7
Years attended junior high school		
1–3 years	4	30.8
Not attended	9	69.2
What parents do in Japan		
Study	3	23.1
Work	9	79.2
Business	1	7.7
Feel that to educate their child in Japanese is difficult		
Yes	8	61.5
No	5	38.5
Parents understand Japanese Educational System		
Yes	2	15.4
No	11	84.6

method was most convenient and feasible for the participants in this study because the participants expressed the willingness to use their convenient time and they have no problem in completing the questionnaire. The participants and the researcher could communicate via social sites such as Messenger, Viber, or email to further clarify the queries as needed throughout the study to simplify the process. Some of the participants were followed up for further clarification of their response, requesting to talk about more detail and incorporated in data analysis, and we believe that added to the trustworthiness of findings. The participants were requested to give their response in text “in some detail” to explain their perspective or experience; this can result in diversity of responses (ranging from brief to detailed). Contextualizing information or key definitions to help frame how participants view the qualitative survey questions was provided because they are unable to directly ask the researcher about it in real time. While data may be less detailed, there is more of it overall to compensate. The questions included collection of some background information, for example, ages of the child and parents, reason for living in Japan, parents’ occupation in Japan, the years of school attended by the child, parents’ understanding of Japanese educational system (i.e., do you fully understand the Japanese education system? Do you feel that it is difficult for your child to be educated in the Japanese education system, especially in Japanese?). Open-ended questions made up the latter part of the survey, asking for the detailed descriptions, for example, Please record your child’s experiences having difficulties in interpersonal relationships in the school setting. The researcher (RSB), while collecting data was committed and aware to prevent potential biases or own subjectivity that could influence the collection or analysis of data. Both the researchers (SI, RSB) discussed frequently about the collected data including stages of analysis, transcripts to gain a sense of the data that were emerging, the effectiveness of the topic guides and whether or not there may be additional participants who we wanted to invite to take part.

Inclusion Criteria

Nepalese parents whose children attended elementary, junior, or high schools were included in the study, that is, at least one child is above 6 years old and attending school in Japan.

Ethical Procedure

The study was approved by the Okayama Prefectural Ethical Committee, Okayama Prefectural University, Soja (21–54/25th January, 2022). The details and purpose of the study were fully explained to the participants as well as detail information sheet was provided to the participants. No one was forced to participate in any means. Participation was fully voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw from the

study at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, the collected data were used for research purpose only, and the identification of any participant was not revealed elsewhere.

Data Analysis

Data were subjected to thematic analysis with the inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014; Braun et al., 2021; Davey et al., 2019; Rohleder & Lyons, 2014). The six-phase guide to thematic analysis detailed by Braun and Clarke was used to analyze the data: (1) Familiarizing with the data, (2) Generating initial codes, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing the report. This allowed transitions in interpretation from a broad reading of the data to a discovery of patterns and developing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data collected from the participants was in English and Nepali mixed language. It was transcribed by RSB, at this phase, help of a bilingual expert (Nepali and English) who had experience with qualitative research was also obtained. Then the data was read and re-read several times by both the researchers. The repeated reading led to closeness with the data. After this initial step, the second was immersing the notes and ideas generated into formulation of codes. The researchers worked on transcribed data and any disagreement was resolved with common consensus. The codes were agreed and finalized by both the researchers. A fair-dealing analytic technique, as one of the ways of reducing bias in qualitative research was kept in our mind. That is a wide range of different perspectives were incorporated during the analysis, so that no particular viewpoint was “privileged” over those of others. To uncover similarities and differences, the constant comparison between accounts of each participant was done, which were subsequently highlighted in order to identify common themes (Dingwall & Staniland, 2020). The refinement of the themes was done by reviewing the codes matches with the themes and the themes accurately reflects what was evident in the data as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final stage/report production involved selecting examples from transcript to illustrate themes. The findings were conveyed to the participants as well.

Results

The thematic analysis process that was applied to the transcripts elicited key concepts that were evident in the data. The experiences of the immigrant students as expressed by their parents manifested in varying ways; hence, the themes are viewed as essential in determining the understanding of all the participants. The responses of the participants are presented in Table 2. Four themes were identified: (1) interaction and interrelationship: language a barrier, making friends and getting involved with peers and teachers; (2) feeling different and meals at school: culture and daily living patterns such as

Table 2. Child's Experiences of Having Difficulties in School Setting.

Description/transcripts of participants' responses	Codes	Themes
<p>It is hard to become close with friends of different culture, and maintain friendship relation. (P1, P8)</p> <p>Main problem is culture difference and Language (P2, P12)</p> <p>Given the language and daily living pattern difference; difficult for the child to interact and adapt at school with friends and teachers. (P6)</p> <p>When the child gets sick, it is also a problem to talk about their problems because of communication difficulties. (P3)</p> <p>It is hard to understand language and to adjust to Japanese culture. I hoped Japan would be an English-speaking country so that I can understand more but it's sad that Japan is a non-English-speaking country. (P9)</p> <p>Japanese are friendly and cooperative. (P5)</p> <p>It was very difficult to leave our child at school because it was a complete switch of culture and environment between home and school. There was difficulty understanding all the language spoken by teachers and child did not understand anything in the initial months. The child used to spoke in Nepali with teacher, but the teacher did not understand what he is saying. The teachers tried to communicate using sign, pictures etc. After several months child started to understand what was being said to him, but still couldn't express himself in Japanese properly. But the interesting thing was that the child never refused to go to school and every day he was ready to go on time. (P4)</p> <p>Japanese schools are resourceful, lots of play materials, good environment and teachers try to help but communication difficulty has caused reluctance and hesitancy. (P1, P13)</p>	<p>Language, Culture</p> <p>Interaction</p> <p>Involvement</p> <p>Difficult to explain when sick</p> <p>Relationship with friends</p> <p>Being involved with friends and teachers</p> <p>Friendliness, cooperation</p> <p>Adjustment</p> <p>Language barrier for communication</p> <p>Expression</p> <p>Teachers' effort</p>	<p>Interaction and interrelationship:</p>
<p>It was very difficult eating at school. (P1)</p> <p>Child feels different. Because of language, cultural, daily living style, foods and feeding practices and many other differences made it difficult to adjust and to be well adapted, as well as impacting the overall development of the child. (P2, P6). The school are completely different than our country of origin although here schools are good it takes time to adapt. (P4)</p> <p>Food and eating style are different. As we do not eat beef and pork at home, related to the religious value of Hinduism. Here, the friends use chopstick at school where as we are grown up eating with hands or using spoon instead. It is not easy, learning took time. That feels like different in the friend circle. (P12, P13)</p>	<p>Eating at school</p> <p>Meals and expression</p> <p>Food and living style</p> <p>School setting is completely different</p> <p>Adjusting/adapting</p> <p>Impacting development</p> <p>Feel different</p>	<p>Feeling different and meals at school</p>
<p>It is difficult to teach and make our children feel at home. It is difficult to revise and teach at home what they have learnt at school. (P3)</p> <p>It is hard to understand kanji. (P4)</p> <p>We even have problems with Japanese words to understand and tell appropriate meaning. (P9)</p> <p>I like the systems and rules of Japanese school, they taught according to the child wishes, the teaching system is very good, child-oriented class, child friendly environment, well security, well facilitated class, well-mannered and cooperative teachers, however, we lack ability to help our children at home in their academics. (P9, P11, P13)</p>	<p>Academic guidance</p> <p>Difficulties in reviewing at home</p> <p>Good system at school but unable to support at home</p>	<p>Academic exclusion-lack of assistance/review at home</p>
<p>Difficult to make friends and to be close or feel as member of the same group. (P1, P2, P4, P6)</p> <p>Experience of being bullied, and parents exaggerate small things about their children. (P8)</p> <p>It was a challenge at start, to adapt in a completely different setting.</p>	<p>Difficulty making friends</p> <p>Bullied</p> <p>Tears in eyes</p> <p>Shy, sad and afraid</p> <p>Adjustment</p>	<p>Emotional distress, peer exclusion and bullying</p>

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Description/transcripts of participants' responses	Codes	Themes
<p>Initial months were very difficult. Child used to be full of tears. Other native children come near and tried to speak but our child used to step back, looked afraid and was shy. Everything seemed difficult to adjust to or to be happy at school. (P4, P13)</p> <p>However, thankful that the teachers always gave the best efforts to support the child. (P5, P11)</p> <p>We parents felt sad, looking the child's sad and unhappy face at departure, it was like our child is alone and lonely among others "bhid ma yeklo". (P13)</p>	<p>Not happy</p> <p>Teachers support</p> <p>Lonely</p>	

These descriptions are responses to open-ended question, that is, Please feel free to write down about your child's experiences having difficulties in Japanese schools including difficulties in interpersonal relationship. These are directly translated responses (edited for obvious errors and clarity).

food and expression; (3) academic exclusion—lack of assistance/review at home; (4) emotional distress, peer exclusion and bullying: adaptation/adjustment, being sad, shy, afraid, or unhappy, and being bullied.

Interaction and Relationship

As per the parents the most pertinent challenge for immigrant children at Japanese school setting was that of language. Almost all the Nepalese students had difficulties in initiating relationships owing to a lack of facility for complete expression, communication, and establishment of friendships. They found it difficult to get involved in peer groups, resulting in a sense of exclusion and indifference, or of isolation. A father of a 7-year-old expressed that their daughter found it difficult to be close with friends, because of both language and cultural differences. A mother of a 7-year-old in elementary school pointed out that differences in language and daily living patterns caused her child great difficulty in interacting and adapting at school with friends and teachers. Similarly, a mother of a 15-year-old daughter in junior high school who brought her daughter to Japan at school-age reported the same kind of difficulty. She was unaware about the language spoken in school.

Most noticeably, the initial periods in Japanese school were truly difficult. After a certain period, the children began to understand some if the child gets concerns at school. And the parents also expressed about the supportive efforts of the teachers and two of the parents reported that Japanese are friendly and cooperative. Mother of a 6-year-old boy reported: "*It was very difficult to leave our child at school because it was a completely different setting. We had difficulty to understand all language spoken by teachers and our child completely did not understand in the initial months. However, I am very thankful that teachers always put their best effort to comfort the child. Teachers used to put children at ease by grasping my child's hand and talking to him if he has to go, teachers used to show the things and use signs to communicate. After*

several months my child started to understand a little of what is said to him but still cannot express himself in Japanese."

Feeling Different and Meals at School

Values and patterns of daily living of the immigrant students in their respective homes were suddenly being challenged on the classroom floor and school grounds. Regarding the food, a 19-year-old boy who came to Japan at 10 years of age along with his mother and brother to join his father and start school in Japan found it to be a completely different experience in all aspects, but the most difficult was the food at school. "*It was very difficult in eating at school.*" This may be because the foods and cuisines are completely different, along with the means of cooking, preparation and taste, as well as the eating utensils, especially the use of chopsticks instead of the familiar eating with a spoon or with the hands. Similarly, the father of a 12-year-old boy who came to Japan and started in the Japanese educational system at 9 years of age because his father came to study in Japan had a similar level of issues during his stay even though it was for a shorter-term stay (3–4 years). "*Our child feels different. Because of language, cultural, daily living style, foods and feeding practices and many other differences made it difficult to adjust and to be well adapted, as well as impacted the overall development of the child.*"

Academic Exclusion—lack of Assistance/Review at Home

Almost all respondents expressed that language is the main problem—the medium of teaching and learning is all in Japanese. Describing this situation, a mother of an elementary student expressed: "*I felt that the Japanese education system was very good. Compared with schools in our country, Japanese schools have plenty of opportunities and facilities, a very clean environment, and play materials and schedules that promote the optimal holistic development of children. However, because of the language, even though we think that the children will grasp it earlier compared*

with us, we parents are not able to help and support our children at home in their education.”

The parent added: *“as we visited the school to leave and pick our child and sometimes, we attended meetings and programs at school, I can understand some or to say very little, but not fully at all.”* Similarly, the mother of a 15-year-old junior high school student added about Japanese script causing worry for her daughter: *“It is hard to understand kanji.”* In addition, a father with an elementary-level child stated their inability to help their daughter with homework or assist in review: *“It is difficult to teach and make our children learn at home; to revise and teach at home what they have learnt at school.”*

Emotional Distress, Peer Exclusion, and Bullying

Fear, shyness, not being able to be with others (to engage with their peer circle), and feeling unhappy at school were commonly revealed by parents as psychological/emotional aspects for their children. A parent of an elementary-level child stated that: *“Our child used to be full of tears in his eyes. Other children (native) came near to him and spoke in Japanese and my son used to step back, and looked afraid and shy. The child speaks in Nepali with teacher, but the teacher did not understand what he is saying. This initial time was very difficult as he had no idea or cannot say his toilet needs too. So that these all seemed like difficult to adjust or to be happy at school.”*

Although being bullied and having negative peer relationships or peer exclusion or isolation can have adverse effects on children, bullying was also reported by one of the parents: *“It’s difficult to make friends, bullied, and parents exaggerate small things about their children.”*

Discussion

The school is a significant personal and social environment for children at different stages of their development, hence school should ensure that every child has an environment that is physically safe, emotionally secure, and psychologically enabling. This study explored the parental report of the experiences of immigrant Nepalese children in the Japanese educational system.

Beyond performance in school, integration of immigrant students into their new setting and promoting feelings that they belong to their new surroundings is important. The first problem faced by immigrant children when entering Japanese schools is that they do not speak Japanese well enough to communicate effectively with their schoolmates and teachers. Both linguistic and cultural gaps result in socialization problems for immigrant children, preventing them from building interpersonal ties in their school environment, not being able to make friends and get involved with their peers. A previous study found that the immigrant generation and language spoken at home were primary determinants of academic achievement among immigrant children

(Ishida et al., 2016), and the current study adds that establishing relationships with peers and even expression with teachers through interaction and communication was an issue caused by the acculturation effect.

Present study also revealed the supportive efforts of the teachers at school despite of communication difficulty as well as expressed that, Japanese students and teacher at school are cooperative and friendly; this aspect remains to be further explored that because the child has adapted to Japanese language and culture, either having been born or grown up in Japan, or perhaps either of the parents is native.

As language is the medium of interaction, this study explored the vulnerability of immigrant students. For two decades the World Health Organization (WHO) has emphasized the concepts of health-promoting schools and psychosocial environments, meaning that the school environment can enhance both learning and social-emotional well-being when it is warm, friendly, based on cooperation rather than competition, has open communication, and prevents punishment, bullying, and harassment in class and among staff and students (WHO, 2003). Therefore, the present study shed lights on this issue among one of the more vulnerable groups, immigrant/foreign children. In addition, previous finding indicated this lack of ability to communicate and explanation of intention may cause the conflicts and stress among students (Škof & Sangawa, 2013). While the classroom is the main place of interaction between children and teachers, the playground and break times are equally important areas for social/emotional skills development. Besides academics, the interactions in schools affect students in different ways (Blatchford et al., 2015). When children play with their peers, they discover more about who they are and how they behave in different situations; students who participate in class are less likely to feel alienated from school, but a study from Finland showed that, though teacher’s report did not show any significant difference, the parents of immigrant children reported that they had lower school engagement, less courage to talk, and often felt loneliness (Parviainen et al., 2021). Alienation brings increased risks to mental and physical health (WHO, 2003). Studies among non-immigrant students (Chen et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Okada et al., 2010) have also highlighted the associations between school interpersonal relationships and psychological symptoms or risk of mental health problems or depression. Hence, the first theme identified by this study, regarding interactions and interrelationships, is a prime area of concern.

Emotional and social well-being is linked with feelings of acceptance, while feelings of exclusion or difference can be damaging to self-esteem and dignity. Our study revealed the feeling different as the second theme. The WHO (2003) has stated that students who are treated as equals are not only more likely to develop to their full intellectual potential but also will value their school and become more tolerant of others who are different; therefore, schools should

acknowledge and welcome ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. Studies have also confirmed that acceptance of children in their diversity is necessary for the promotion of subjective well-being (Tapia-Fonllem et al., 2020), and a study from Portugal revealed that perceived discrimination was strongly related to lower well-being and acceptance among immigrant school children (Guerra et al., 2019). It has also been reported that young immigrants often experience feelings of guilt about poor academic results or inability to adapt to the school environment, and often conceal these feelings from their parents (Nae, 2022). Moreover, being perceived as “foreign,” switching languages between school and home, and not being able to adequately express themselves can cause pressure and contribute to wavering perceptions about their own identity (Škof & Sangawa, 2013). Our findings support that preventing immigrant children from feeling different or detached consequently may lead to psychological well-being.

Similarly, school lunch or food at school is a very important aspect for growing children; however, the present study revealed eating difficulty at school, possibly caused by differing eating patterns and food items at home and at school. The MEXT (2021) stresses the promotion of food and nutrition to children led by diet and nutrition teachers, in Japanese schools, lunches are utilized as living education materials to teach the significance of diet on mental and physical health, a sense of gratitude, socializing skills, and food cultures, we noted that among immigrants this is lacking. Further exploration is warranted to determine ways to assist these groups of children.

Thirdly, we reported parental concern and anxiety on not being able to guide and assist their children in their academic activities, such as by reviewing at home and assisting with homework. In concordance with our findings, one study also reported that parents are either not aware of their children’s plight or if so, lack the ability to help their children because of their limitations with the Japanese language and insufficient understanding of the school system (Nae, 2022). Teachers and school heads generally appear to be open to immigrant students, while the government and legal situations have not yet actively arranged for the coordination of services (Maruyama, 2018). In this context, monolingual curricula and a lack of assistance are likely to cause academic difficulties for children with different linguistic backgrounds (Yamamoto, 2014), and this could be contributing to the performance gap (Ishida et al., 2016; Schleicher, 2015). A study among four Vietnamese bilingual supporters in Hyogo Prefecture determined that students who were supported showed academic improvement. That study also pointed out that parents should be encouraged to study Japanese to help to communicate with supporters and teachers of their children (Nguyen, 2017). Similarly, study from Europe indicated that, though language shift at home and school are common for immigrants, linguistically responsive pedagogies and positive school climate, that is, more diverse

school environment can contribute on education of newly-arrived immigrants the most (Kilpi-Jakonen & Alisaari, 2022). Another study also revealed the beneficial effect of bilingual instruction at school (English + Spanish) on academics of Latino immigrant children (Collins, 2014). Moreover, Greenberg (2014) have indicated about quality after-school program for immigrant children and their families. Therefore, as evidenced in other countries, it might be beneficial to plan the immigrant child and parents focused interventions by Japanese educational systems, as well as the interventional studies can be conducted to assess the effectiveness of such support program for immigrant families.

Present study revealed that parents were concerned for their children looking sad, not being able to be close with friends, not feeling happy, and being bullied at school. While there are different demands in different developmental periods, the ability to adjust and contribute to one’s context is a hallmark of competence (Blatchford et al., 2015); it was also noted that some students had adjustment problems. Similar to present finding, bullying experience and emotional symptoms of immigrant children were also reported by their parents than the native parents in Finland (Parviainen et al., 2021).

A Japanese study reported that peer relations, bullying, and having no friends, were reasons among foreign children for not attending school (Yamamoto, 2014). The WHO (2003) has described that bullying and harassment can make going to school an intensely unpleasant experience, and, if persistent, can have severe influence on mental health, potentially leading to depression and suicide. Studies have determined the association between peer attachment and relationships with prosocial behavior and fewer conduct and behavioral problems; that is, having healthy peer relationships has been well established as a powerful predictor of emotional and psychological well-being (Schoeps et al., 2020; van Hoorn et al., 2016). Furthermore, a Canadian study has highlighted that while immigrant children in Canada experience equitable access to resources, their unique migration experiences differentially affect their physical and mental health and social well-being (Salami et al., 2022). Hence, future study could consider to identify why immigrant children do have emotional upsets including bullying experience and its association with school attendance and mental wellbeing.

As a solution, a Canadian study revealed that effective approach in addressing mental health issues among immigrant-refugee children, youth, and their families could be the collaborative care models and establishing partnerships between schools, communities, and families including the school-based creative expression programs (Herati & Meyer, 2020). Furthermore, the report of the analysis of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Programme for International Student Assessment in regard to development of sense of belonging and integration in the countries with high immigrant children at education systems has showed that, in Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Portugal, first generation

immigrant students expressed the most alienation from schools than non-immigrants, while in Norway, Spain, and Luxembourg the second-generation immigrants had stronger sense of belonging, and in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Qatar, both the first or second generation migrant students feel belonging higher than the percentage of natives. And it was also reported that those four countries had adopted highly selective immigration policies (OCED, 2015). Although this single study could not confirm, but based on the findings and in reference to the literature discussed, the immigration policies can be assessed and applied by concerned authority in Japan.

In addition, the school nurses and nurse psychologists might play important role in Japanese educational systems to address the issues identified by this study because a review study on the educational, social, and emotional needs of immigrant Latino children puts forth the need of high-quality psychological services to immigrant families who are diverse both culturally and linguistically. It also mentions the role of school psychologists in working with schools and families to promote positive outcomes (Garcia-Joslin et al., 2016). Overall, the foreign national children who migrate with their parents and enroll in school in their host countries anywhere in the world are vulnerable groups who need concern and support.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study of the experiences among Nepalese immigrants is the first study in this group and covered geographically dispersed participants. This qualitative survey analysis identified the issues, needs, and experiences that can be explored further via interviews or focus-groups. Unlike past work that has focused on school/academic success among non-natives, this study sheds light on psychological aspects of these children according to their parents. Another important strength of this study was that one of the researchers was Nepalese and stayed in Japan, with whom the participants could talk as they speak at their home. It was comfortable to establish relationship and build trust. Despite the strengths, the study has its own limitations, such as that it covers the experience of one specific group. Though the open-ended questions provided respondents with the freedom to express how they feel as well as derives exploratory data that reveal unforeseen issues, however, the in-depth interviews with probing at the same time as well as field notes on observed expressions and gestures could better dig up the issues. Therefore, future studies can consider this fact. In addition, this study collected responses from parents on their children's difficulties, future study incorporating responses from both the child and the parents could bring greater clarity to the issues.

Implications for Practice

Ultimately, this study has psychosocial and interpersonal implications for Nepalese students in the Japanese educational system.

The school-based interventions can be planned, that is, native and immigrant parents-teachers-and-children interaction programs including cultural sharing and peer support group, peer integration and resilience; mental health assessment and educational programs might become effective. Interventions that improve the school engagement as well as linguistic and cultural support to parents/families and training to teachers and school health personal on psychosocial and emotional need of immigrant students can be organized. Furthermore, the effectiveness of these interventions can be studied. Thus, the study has also presented issues that provide topics for future research and intervention to promote mental health and instill a sense of belonging for those school children who are experiencing diversity.

Conclusion

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the difficulties experienced by non-native children attending Japanese schools. The study has provided insight on the feelings and experiences common to Nepalese immigrant children in school setting as expressed and reported by their parents. Along with problems in establishing satisfying interactions and relationships with peers and teachers in school being mostly caused by linguistic and cultural difference, it has also identified a common range of experiences, such as parents' inability to help children in their academic activities, difficulty eating at school, not being able to be close with friends, bullying, emotional distress like feeling sad or unhappy at school, and having feelings different and detachment including feelings of peer exclusion. However, the study also found that at least some immigrant students regard the Japanese as cooperative and friendly. Some parents also appreciated the efforts and helpfulness of the teachers. This study examined these types of experiences apart from the academic and linguist focuses of previous research and adds to the existing literature, for it is very important to address not only the academic achievements but also the emotional and psychosocial aspects of these children. Although this was a relatively small-scale exploratory study among participants of a single nationality, confidence in the generalizability of the findings can be enhanced by further exploration among other groups using multiple methods. At the same time, the four predominant themes identified should not be considered discrete but as overlapping and complementary issues.

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Author Contributions

Author SI conceptualized the project, developed the research instrument, mentored research personnel and reviewing and editing of the draft; author RSB was involved in data collection, review of

literature and preparing the draft. Both the authors contributed to the finalization of the manuscript for submission.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.



Ethical Approval/Participants' Consent

This study was approved by the Okayama Prefectural Ethical Committee, Okayama Prefectural University, Soja (21–54/25th January, 2022). The participants were provided their consent. The participation in the study was voluntary and no one was forced to participate in any means. The data was used for the research purpose only and the identification of any participant was not revealed elsewhere.

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