Fieldwork Report

Thinking globally, acting locally: Creating a support network for multicultural families in Niigata

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This report outlines the background for and the set-up and logistics of a community support project focusing on multicultural families launched at the University of Niigata Prefecture. This project, The Support Network for Niigata International Families, and the events called International Family Gatherings were made possible by funding through a grant for aid in research and community outreach projects, from the University of Niigata Prefecture. The program is aimed at supporting multicultural families living in the Niigata area, while at the same time providing exposure and experience for students at the university interested in multiculturalism and/or childcare.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, bilingualism, child care, family

1. Introduction

Although Japan has “one of the lowest figures of foreign nationals” (Graburn, Ertl, & Tierney, 2008) multiculturalism has become a key concept in Japan, in our local communities and now at our university (University of Niigata Prefecture) where considerable effort is being invested in our multicultural literacy program. This development mirrors the trends and activities presented in Multiculturalism in the New Japan (Graburn et al., 2008) in which there is discussion and presentation of how a variety of locally-based activities are moving Japanese society into the realm of multiculturalism.

We begin this report by introducing the changing demographics of Japan, and then describe a program organized at Kwassui Women’s College that served as a model for our project. Continuing on, we give details of the events and activities held

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at the University of Niigata Prefecture and then provide an evaluation of the project while at the same time look ahead to future avenues for development in this area.

1.1 Foreigners in Japan: General Statistics

According to information collected by the Niigata Prefectural Government, the number of foreign residents has been steadily rising, doubling since 1989. Most come from China, Korea, Brazil and the Philippines. The largest group is permanent residents (41%), followed by long-term residents (11.7%) and spouses or children of Japanese nationals (11.1%) (Tsunashima, 2009).

The greatest number of foreign residents has settled primarily in Tokyo, Aichi, Osaka, Kanagawa, and Saitama Prefectures. Niigata has comparatively fewer foreign residents, but, since 1989, the number has tripled to 14,662, 0.61% of the total population. The status of foreign residents in Niigata, most of whom live in Niigata City, mirror those elsewhere in Japan: Chinese comprise the largest group, followed by Koreans, Filipinos, and Brazilians; permanent residents make up the largest group (31.5%), followed by spouses or children of Japanese nationals (16.8%).

Niigata Prefecture provides a range of services to the foreign community, such as providing multilingual information services, Japanese language-learning support, living support including resources for education, medical-health care, and disaster prevention, and offers a lecture series for Japanese residents in the community “to reflect opinions of foreign residents in local policies/measures” (Tsunashima, 2009). To add to these services is one created at this campus, the Support Network for Niigata International Families.

1.2 Foreigners Raising Families – The Case of Nagasaki

According to an article from the Nagasaki Shinbun (“1 in 30 people has a foreign parent,” 2006), 35,651 babies born in 2006 had a foreign parent. Mothers comprised the majority of foreign parents and out of 49,000 marriages registered, one or both parents was a foreigner. In Nagasaki City alone at least 60 children with a foreign parent had attended or were attending childcare; however, support for multicultural families raising children in Nagasaki was not always easy to find, as there were no places for foreign families to meet and gather (Masatsugu, 2008).

1.3 Nagasaki: Coffee Mornings: Kwassui University

In order to remedy this problem, an innovative program entitled “Coffee Mornings” for foreign families raising children in Nagasaki was created by Karen
Masatsugu of Kwassui Women’s College with the aim of not only helping foreign parents obtain access to social services and fill a need for child-raising support for non-Japanese speakers, but also to give experience to university students who, in their future careers as early childhood educators would meet such multicultural families and would benefit from learning about them. The aims of the program were as follows:

- to create a space for foreign families to meet in a casual, relaxed setting and to create a support network
- to provide a multicultural play environment for the children, to affirm self-identity and stimulate language development
- to provide authentic learning experiences for students, developing critical cultural consciousness

Coffee mornings take place once every two or three months for a 2-hour period on the campus of Kwassui University. There, in addition to informal chatting and playing, children partake in a variety of holiday-themed activities prepared for them by university student volunteers.

According to Masatsugu (2008), families attend Coffee Mornings for a variety of reasons such as to meet other international families, for the children to meet children from different backgrounds, so that the children would feel less “different”, to meet other people with similar child-raising concerns, to meet families with non-Japanese-speaking children, and to relax and chat while children play. Families report being satisfied with the events and their expectations were met for both social and informational reasons.

Students also report benefitting from these activities as well, not only from increased opportunities to communicate in English, but also for chances to learn about foreign holiday customs, to use skills learned in the early childcare studies courses, to learn how to create a fun environment for children and interact one-on-one with them, to watch children develop over a 4-year period, to interact with children of different ages and to observe and interact with parents and their children. Students also report raised awareness of the issues facing parents generally and foreign parents specifically, as well as how foreign parents feel about how their children are perceived (“cute” or “half”) in Japanese society. Students also report realizing that there are different ways of thinking.
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2. Niigata: The Support Network for Niigata International Families (SNNIF)

It was with the Nagasaki Coffee Mornings in mind that the impetus for creating a similar network in the Niigata area was born. Melodie Cook, having recently moved from Nagasaki to Niigata brought the idea to Bethany Iyobe, who had been thinking of starting such a network for some time. Both professors are in multicultural families and felt that interacting with children in other multicultural families would be the best way to help their children to feel comfortable with their identities.

Creation of the network involved both university faculties and university administrators along with Human Life Science Professors Kakubari and Koike. With a generous start-up grant from the University of Niigata Prefecture, a unique network for Niigata multicultural families began to take shape.

The first step of preparation was to invite Karen Masatsugu to give a presentation, not only to the professors involved in the creation of the network, but also to University of Niigata Prefecture students, and the community at large, about the creation of Coffee Mornings. Her talks served a myriad of purposes including

- clarifying the form and purpose of the network to participating professors
- inviting interested students to volunteer to work for the network
- introducing the network to the local community

Thus the Support Network for Niigata International Families or SNNIF was born. SNNIF’s aims were the same as those of the Coffee Mornings:

- creating a space for foreign families to meet in a casual relaxed setting and to create a support network
- providing a multicultural play environment for the children, to affirm self-identity and stimulate language development
- providing authentic learning experiences for students, developing critical cultural consciousness

With the addition of:

- providing an opportunity for UNP students to experience hands-on childcare under the guidance of childcare professionals
2.1 Finding Facilities

Finding a location to hold the events was the first order of business. It was decided to use a large room on campus, which was subsequently developed into a room available for family events and childcare purposes adding carpeting and the purchase of other necessary materials. For meetings, most tables are moved into the hallway and chairs are stacked at the sides of the room. Some tables and chairs are left near the sink area, so that parents and can sit comfortably and chat over coffee and snacks, while toys are set out at the other end of the room for children to play with under the joint supervision of parents, student volunteers and childcare professionals.

2.2 Inviting Student Volunteers

In addition to Karen Masatsugu’s presentation, fliers about the program were distributed to all first-year students, inviting them to join in the event. A total of 21 students from both faculties signed up to take part.

2.3 Hiring Professional Caregivers

One distinct feature of the Network is the hiring of professional caregivers for events, who fulfill the dual roles of providing safe, loving care to children while parents talk, in addition to providing modeling for student volunteers about how to work (play) with children.

2.4 Purchasing Educational Toys and Child Care Items

Grant money enabled the Network to purchase a variety of age-appropriate educational toys for babies, toddlers, and preschoolers as well as items essential for childcare such as blankets, potty chairs, and other items.

2.5 Advertising Events

Events were advertised through a variety of means:

- an initial mass mailing to daycare centers;
- emails to friends and acquaintances;
- fliers sent to the Niigata International Association (in English, Chinese, and Korean), advertising in its monthly events calendar;
- Internet announcements via a Facebook page and on our university’s website, and
- word-of-mouth.

3. Event Summary

A total of five events will have been held by the end of March, 2010. Although it was initially intended that meetings would be held bimonthly, it quickly became
evident that this schedule would be impossible for both the families involved and the organizers, and the decision was made to meet once a month. In order to accommodate those who work on Saturdays, it was decided to alternate Saturday and Sunday meetings.

The events are very loosely organized because the main purpose for parents is to simply provide a space where they can meet, discuss issues of common concern and to network with other parents. Most parents spend the beginning of the two hours settling in and playing with their own children, then gradually start to move towards the refreshments and adult conversations. The children spend most of their time playing with the other children, parents, caretakers or student volunteers. Also, at each event, the student volunteers have planned activities for the children, which have included making origami, Christmas trees and Oni masks. Planning and implementing these activities gives student volunteers the opportunity to try out their care-giving skills and to gain a sense of the abilities and interests of children at different ages.

### 3.1 Participant Summary

#### 3.1.2 The Participants

Over the three events held to date, 15 families (24 adults and 21 children), 20 students, 3 childcare professionals and 2 observers have participated. Most of the participants participated in more than one event, and 4 families attended all three events, making an average of eight families (12 adults and 10 children) at each event. This is very similar to the numbers that gathered at the Coffee Mornings in Nagasaki (Masatsugu, 2009). Table 1 highlights participation in the first three activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>meeting</th>
<th>#of families</th>
<th>#of adults</th>
<th>#of children</th>
<th>#of childcare professionals</th>
<th>#of student volunteers</th>
<th>Total #of people</th>
<th>#of countries</th>
</tr>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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#### 3.1.3 Demographics of Families

So far, the adult participants have come from 10 different countries: Japan
(10), UK (5), USA (4), Singapore (2), Canada (1), China (1), Mongolia (1), Thailand/USA (1), and France (1). Of the 14 women who attended, 10 were foreign and 4 were Japanese, while there were 4 foreign men and 4 Japanese men. Considering the demographic make-up of foreigners in Niigata, we have yet to reach the non-English-speaking community, although an effort to advertise events in Russian, Korean, and Chinese was made. We believe that a more concerted effort at advertising will help make our participant base more closely reflect the demographics of Niigata Prefecture.

3.2 Initial Impressions

3.2.1 Participating Families

Response to the creation of the group has been overwhelmingly favorable, with a number of families coming to all events, some from as far away as the Murakami area, about an hour’s drive away. It became clear that this kind of group is very necessary in the Niigata area and that many families are happy to have chances to meet and interact with other foreign families. One family offered to take a leadership role in guiding discussions about child-raising concerns, and the chance to lead future discussions on specific areas of interest to particular families has been offered to all in the membership.

Positive effects on children’s language awareness and bilingual development have also been noted. According to research (Baker, 2004), when a child is being brought up bilingually “any possibility of similar parents and toddlers getting together needs encouragement.” A story provided by one of the participant mothers illustrates this perfectly. She reported that her son has been positively influenced by his friend in the group. For a while, her son was reluctant to speak English or have his mother speak it, but after discussing the friend, who is a balanced bilingual, her son began to identify with him and see himself as someone who could speak both languages.

Some specific requests from families have also been made. For example, one foreign husband expressed his concerns about the future citizenship of his children. Since Japan has yet to recognize dual-citizenship, most of these attending children may eventually have to choose between one of the two countries that they have held citizenship for. This father asked if our group could possibly become a forum for encouraging the government to create more multicultural-friendly legislation. Another family requested that we invite guest speakers who have expertise in understanding the education system and the difficulties that foreigners may experience while supporting their children’s efforts to succeed at school.
Through follow-up questionnaires given to student volunteers after participating in the events, it is clear that they found the experience to be both enjoyable and educational. Students commented on how they learned specific and practical aspects of childcare, such as ensuring that young children don’t put things in their mouths; how to change diapers; awareness that children at different ages behave very differently; and that each child has individual talents, likes and dislikes. One student wrote, “it was a precious experience to learn how to take care of children from childcare teachers and mothers.” Such responses from students strongly support our rationale for including the childcare professionals in the event.

Students also commented on the use of languages and their growing awareness of the necessity for international families to meet each other. One student mentioned how moved she was when he saw fathers exchanging email addresses. This kind of awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of multicultural families will benefit the community when these students become daycare teachers.

It was fortunate that the same two childcare professionals attended all of our events. Initially, it was unclear how the event would progress with childcare professionals and parents in the same room, and the childcare professionals felt uneasy about their role because this was their first experience at this type of event: children are usually cared for in a separate room while parents attend a seminar or a lecture. In the end, however, the childcare professionals quite enjoyed themselves and found a very natural rhythm and balance between sharing the care and play with student volunteers and parents.

There is a variety of ways in which we would like to see this project developed. It is also foreseeable that this project may branch off into other activities to support the community.

In the near future, we would like to organize books, DVDs, toys, and clothing exchanges. The first two are especially important for those families hoping to encourage their children to become bi-literate. Materials for such efforts are very expensive for one family to continuously purchase. It has been pointed out that it is very helpful to cooperate with other bilingual families in the community to ease the financial burden of providing the necessary materials to support bilingual development.
By setting up a rotation system or by sharing materials, we could support families in this area. Even more helpful would be to establish a lending library of multilingual material as well as possibly inviting or hiring a teacher to work with the children for an hour or so at the meetings to improve their English literacy skills.

We would also like to invite speakers who have experience and knowledge regarding different areas of interest that parents might have in connection with being a multicultural family in Japan. One specific example would be to invite Cheiron Mac Mahill from Gunma. She has set up a Multicultural Education Research Institute, organized summer camps for children of international families, established an international elementary school and founded the NPO “Ijime Zero.” Bullying is an especially difficult issue for many children in international families.

Branching out into the community in other ways is another possibility for expansion of this project. Specifically, we would like to set up some activities aimed at non-international families that are interested in having exposure to multilingual/multicultural communities. One challenge we have faced in setting up the international family gatherings, has been how to define who our participants should be. During initial stages of advertising, a few families approached us that had hoped to participate for the purpose of exposing their children to foreigners and English. We felt that these families did not face the same challenges as foreigners do in raising children in Japan or in trying to preserve two languages and cultures in one home. However, we do recognize that by reaching out to them we build stronger ties with the community. Therefore, planning some events or activities that would be open to any family interested could serve this purpose. One example of such an activity would be to have an English book day. On this day, either parents or student volunteers could read books to the children and organize activities in connection to the themes of those books. As this event would be open to anyone interested, it would naturally attract a multinational group of people. This type of activity would be a move towards promoting the development of multicultural awareness in our immediate community.

5. Conclusion

We believe that the Support Network for Niigata International Families is something foreign families in Niigata are very much in need of. In responding to the needs of the foreign community by creating such a network, we hope to help others enrich their lives and for all our children to feel less isolation from the community at
large and feel positive about being part of their multicultural families.

We believe that our students are benefitting in the same way as those at Kwassui, by gaining awareness of the needs of multicultural families and experiencing hands-on childcare. We hope that the University of Niigata Prefecture will continue to support us in our efforts to expand our network and reach out into the local community even further.

**Acknowledgements**

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We would also like to like to thank Professor Kakubari and Professor Koike of the Human Life Sciences Department at the University of Niigata Prefecture for sharing their expertise in the area of childcare and childcare training, as well as for all of the administrative support they provided.

**References**

30人に1人親が外国人  1 in 30 people has a foreign parent. (2006, August 4th). Nagasaki Shinbun.


