

## NEGOTIATING SPACE AND IDENTITY: THE EXPERIENCES OF *HAFU* CHILDREN IN JAPANESE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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### **Introduction**

Japan has widely been characterised as a mono-ethnic society (Willis, 2006), and this myth of homogeneity labels mixed-race (*hafu*) people as different to other Japanese (Befu, 2010). The number of *hafu* is growing dramatically in Japan, with the latest statistics stating that one out of every 50 babies born in 2012 had one non-Japanese parent. Some *hafu* children are new arrivals, some have lived all their lives in Japan, and others move back and forth between the lands of their parents.

Early childhood education represents the first formal context where children's home culture(s) and the Japanese education system connect. Early childhood centres are not only crucial sites where home and host society meet, they are places where new citizens, communities, and cultural forms emerge (Tobin, Arzubiaga, & Adair, 2013). Another distinctive characteristic of early childhood education is the close relationships between families and centres. These relationships can be threatened if teachers lack understanding of the complexity of family's home lives (Ramsay, 2009).

While the faces of *hafu* children mark them as "other" in the eyes of their classmates, they are expected to assimilate into Japanese society. There are few acknowledgments of diversity in the early childhood context, and despite the claim that that all are treated equally (Moorehead, 2013), many *hafu* children experience inconsistent treatment or exclusion. In light of Japan's aging population and dropping birth rate (Douglass & Roberts, 2003), the need for foreign labour and immigration will rise, and with it diversity. Drawing on Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity and giving space to the voices of parents of *hafu* children, this paper suggests that *hafu* children both embody the complexity of Japan's changing society and challenge the Japanese education system.

### **Methodology**

In order to explore these families' experiences, this study draws on the *Preschool in Three Cultures* (PS3C) methodology (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989; Tobin, Hseuh, & Karasawa, 2009; Tobin *et al.* 2013), which uses video as a stimulus for dialogue, in order to generate a "multi-vocal text" through the use of film and interviews. The research was supported by a JSPS (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science) Fellowship Grant and by Hiroshima University, which acted as a host institution during my 17 months of fieldwork in Japan.

The PS3C method involved observing and filming a class of four-year-olds (*nen-chu-san*) over a two-month period at the public kindergarten chosen as a field site. The hours of film were then edited down to a 20-minute video of a “typical day.”<sup>1</sup> The PS3C method views the video less as data and more as a way of encouraging dialogue, which in turn illuminates culturally informed philosophies and practices of early childhood education within wider social patterns. The video acts as a point of contrast and comparison for parents to think about their own child’s kindergarten experience.

While the PS3C use of video initially seemed like a non-threatening way to engage parents, it soon became apparent that many families did not require the video “prompt,” and they were eager to talk about their experiences. Also, some interviews were carried out in public places, such as cafes, meaning it was not always practical to show the video. Discussion of the video became minimised, and data is predominantly drawn from semi-structured, qualitative interviews, ranging from one to two-and-a-half hours long. All of these interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for further analysis.

A total of 46 “mixed” families were interviewed, with 29 families consisting of a foreign mother and a Japanese father, while 17 families consisted of a Japanese mother and a foreign father. Within this latter group, one was a single foreign father separated from his Japanese partner, and three of the Japanese mothers were separated from their foreign partners. Three of the foreign women had separated from their Japanese partners and formed new relationships respectively with Argentinian, German, and Brazilian partners. Interviews were conducted with families living in urban and rural settings throughout Japan: Tokyo, Saitama, Osaka, Hyogo, Kobe, Wakayama, Izumo, Fukuyama, Hiroshima, Kure, Miyoshi, Yamaguchi, and Kitakyushu. I also sought to find families from a range of backgrounds and, in the case of the foreign parents, from a variety of countries: Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, China, England, France, Finland, Ireland, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, New Zealand, Pakistan, Peru, Spain, Taiwan, Ukraine, and the United States.

Approximately half of the research participants were found using the “snowball sampling” technique (Vogt, 1999) in order to conduct qualitative research. Snowball sampling has been criticised due to fears that participants may share similar opinions within a limited demographic range. However, the families found through “snowballing” were often only linked by their perceived “difference” in the local community and reflected a wide range of cultural, socio-economic, political, and educational backgrounds.

The remaining participants were found through online support groups for foreign parents raising children in Japan and for mixed families in my local region. Access to these closed groups is limited and requires a recommendation from a current member and/or to be a foreign parent. As my sons accompanied me during my fieldwork, I fulfilled the membership requirements, and I also drew on my previous Japan

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1 To address issues of typicality and accurate representation, teachers at the kindergarten field site were asked first to comment on the video before it was shown to families of *hafu* children.

connections to gain a recommendation. As a member of these groups, I was able to participate in online discussions about parenting in Japan, to become aware of related media press, and to gain greater awareness of the issues affecting mixed and foreign families living in Japan.

### Constructing *Hafu* Identity

The term *hafu* comes from the English word “half” and refers to someone who is ethnically half-Japanese. The number of *hafu* children, those with one Japanese and one non-Japanese parent, is growing dramatically in Japan. The latest statistics from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare state that one out of every 50 babies born in 2012 had one non-Japanese parent. Before moving on to discuss the ways in which mixed children are challenging Japan’s education system, it is necessary to discuss the term *hafu*. Fish claims that “despite the diverse reality of ‘mixed-blood’ Japanese, few labels of a group in Japan come so packed with tagged meanings for the English-speaking world” (2009, p. 41). Construction of *hafu* identity is not only constantly evolving; the labels that define it change from generation to generation and reflect the prevailing social conditions. But the act of labelling a child as “other” can be a point of contention, as this mother interviewed for the study explains:

I hate that you have to label a child here [in Japan]. They don’t need a label. Honestly, if you look at them you can tell that they are mixed with something, but does it matter after that? So, I don’t use it. I told my children’s teachers not to use the word *hafu*, that I don’t like it, but once in a while I hear my husband saying it. (American mother of two)

The terminology of mixed-race children has evolved and continues to evolve in modern Japan (Fish, 2009). Some of these labels are offensive, while others may be seen as complimentary, but all of them reflect a growing awareness of identity and ethnicity issues in Japanese society (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2000). The derogatory labels of the past, like *ainoko* or *konketsuji*, have been replaced by more neutral words. Scholars now write about children of international marriages (*kokusaiji*) (Noiri, 2010) and children that are mixed-race (*mikkusu*) or connected with other cultures (*gaikoku ni tsunagari no aru kodomo*) (Uchida, 2013), and discuss children’s roles in a multicultural society (*tabunka kyōsei*) where everyone can co-exist peacefully (Okano, 2014; Suefuji, 2011). *Daburu* (from the English “double”) is the current politically correct term that counters images of deficiency by asserting endowment (Lie, 2001; Murphy-Shigematsu, 2008). But *daburu* is also problematic, as it implies education in both English and Japanese (Kamada, 2010) and excludes non-English-speaking *hafu* (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2012).

### Acceptance and Rejection of the Term *Hafu*

While the term *hafu* is far from universally accepted, especially by foreign parents, it “remains a popular term of choice as a self-identifying label. Its usage represents an active defining of an inherently racism term” (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2008, p. 287). The

term is widely used in Japanese media and society, and many of the Japanese parents interviewed were surprised to learn that such labelling was not commonplace in their partners' home countries.

Is the term *hafu* specific to Japan? But, it is not actually a negative word for us. Actually, it conveys a kind of envy towards them, it's not negative towards *hafu*. You've got something mixed in you, so, yeah. (Japanese father of three)

The word *hafu* refers to a fact, meaning that half of the child's blood is Japanese. (Japanese father of one)

While some of the non-Japanese parents indicated a preference for the emerging term *mikkusu* (an abbreviation for mixed-race or mixed-roots), Japanese parents were mystified as to why such a word would be favoured over the more "factual" term *hafu*.

Mixed is not a good word either to me. You know why? Because at the pet store they use mixed like mutt, not pure bred, so that is why it sounds like an animal, like a half daschund and half chihuahua. That is mixed. We use the word "mixed" to describe dogs or cats that are mixed. (Japanese mother of two)

However, for many foreign parents, the term *hafu* contains the same kind of offensive, non-human connotations, as this father explains:

I don't know if Japanese children understand what the English word behind it means, but I feel it is insulting that children learn that name for them, *hafu*. I don't understand how those kinds of terms are used for people. For people, that kind of name is not appropriate . . . [only] for something else, like things. (Finnish father of two)

Several of the non-Japanese parents drew on notions of *Nihonjinron* ideology to explain and make sense of the term *hafu*. *Nihonjinron* refers to theories and discussions about the Japanese people, with a focus on issues of national and cultural identity. These discourses promote the myth of Japanese homogeneity through emphasis on the uniqueness of Japanese shared blood, culture, and language (Befu, 2001).

From *hafu*, people understand that the child's mother and father come from different countries. In most countries, that's not strange. But Japan is different. There is a belief that everyone is completely Japanese, or completely Korean. So if you are not completely one ethnicity, then words like *hafu* come into use. (Korean mother of two)

I think Japan is a relatively homogeneous society, so that kind of label is just to recognise the difference. I don't really mind my son being called *hafu*. It's just recognition of where you are from. (Taiwanese mother of one)

*Hafu* are not only separated by the multitude of cultural identities that they embody, but they are also divided along socio-economic and class lines. It is also critical to remember that identities are complex, fluid, and constantly changing (Ramsay, 2009). When considering the evolving identity of *hafu*, it is useful to draw on the theories of Bhabha (1994), who suggests the concept of hybridity as an in-between third space. Bhabha argues that hybridisation is based on the constantly evolving location of culture, and while the notion of hybrid is founded on the existence of pure cultural groups, Bhabha rejects the idea of a pure identity. This contradictory concept of hybrid permits culture to transgress and occupy a liminal space, as this comment from a Tokyo mother reflects:

[Instead of *hafu*] I use my own word. I call him my little hybrid. . . . He is not double, he is not two things, but he is kind of a mix of things. (French-Canadian mother of one)

*Hafu* children embody a wide range of experiences, identities, and cultures as well as straddling differing socio-economic and class lines. Some *hafu* children may be recent arrivals to Japan, others were born and raised in Japan, and still others have travelled back and forth between their parents' home countries or other places. As Bhabha explains, these children are "neither the One . . . nor the Other . . . but something else besides" (1994, p. 28), which makes them challenging in a Japanese educational context predicated on oneness (Moorehead, 2013; Okano, 2013).

### ***Hafu* Children in the Japanese Classroom**

In the Japanese early childhood context, *hafu* children embody Japan's growing diversity in a globalised world. Yet, while increasing hybridity has become a feature of Japanese classrooms, the Japanese government has not yet formulated a comprehensive policy to address the rising number of culturally and ethnically diverse students. Instead, as Okano points out, "the government still holds to the principle of treating everyone equally which doesn't work if you are starting from different places" (2013, p. 87).

Robinson and Diaz have shown that young children can hold and perpetuate bias and discrimination against "those who are perceived as different from the dominant culture and those who engage in social practices different from their own" (2006, p. 4). This point is significant for foreign and *hafu* children who are perceived as "other" from their very first years of schooling. Yamashiro (2011, p. 1503) asserts that there are only two major categories for social identification in Japan: "Japanese" and "foreigner" (*gaijin*), and that these classifications are seen to be mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed. Comments from families interviewed for this study illustrate how these opposing classifications play out in the reality of *hafu* children's classrooms:

When we first got here, the kids would be told, "You're *gaijin*," and the boys would say, "I'm Australian, but I'm Japanese too." They would be told, "No, you're not Japanese." They only see the difference, they don't see the same. (Australian mother of three)

My kids get *gaijin* a lot, or *Eigo no hito* (English language person), which is ridiculous as they can't be a language! (English mother of two)

My daughter is very fair, so the kids would call her *gaijin* or *Amerika-jin*. For a start, her father is British, and she is also not *gaijin*. She has spent all her life here in Japan! (Japanese mother of two)

*Hafu* embody not only diverse cultural identities but also a myriad of phenotypes. Sims shows that “far from being a neutral characteristic, physical appearance is often of paramount importance to the racial identity of mixed race individuals” (2012, p. 63). Several parents interviewed for this study touched on the visibility of their children in the education system and the role their children’s faces play in their kindergarten experiences. Similarly, when choosing names for their child, parents think carefully about the way names mark and define children in Japanese society (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2012).

I know my son can't escape from my distinctive surname, so I want to teach him to stand up for himself from the very start. (American father of one)

We chose Japanese names for our sons so they wouldn't stand out on the class roll. I want them to be as invisible as possible. (English mother of two)

As Kamada (2010) notes in her study of white/Japanese *hafu* girls, certain forms of hybridity can also be linked to identities of privilege and higher self-esteem, leading to children being cast as the exotic other.

The *encho sensei* (principal) at my sons' *hoikuen*, she idolises my children. I think she probably has thousands of pictures of them on her personal cell phone. (American mother of two)

Bhabha suggests that the symbolic signifier of the stereotypical self/other binary reflects the “ambivalence and the antagonism of the desire of the Other” (1994, p. 52). For *hafu* children, their lived realities neither mark them as foreign (*gaijin*) or Japanese, but occupy a third liminal space that cannot be easily understood by their early childhood teachers or peers. Being located in this third space also means that *hafu* children may challenge educational expectations regarding “appropriate” language and development during the preschool years.

### **The Use of Language in the Early Childhood Classroom**

Moorehead (2013) suggests that the Japanese education system strives for class cohesion, encouraging immigrant students to assimilate rather than respecting students' discrete cultural identities. As a result, students try to avoid appearing different and attempt to advance through the acquisition of Japanese language and culture. Moorehead concludes that in order to integrate fully in the Japanese education system, “students

must either be ethnically Japanese or act as if they were” (2013, p. 3). Kobayashi notes that, in the past, even Japanese children returning from living overseas (*kikokushijo*) were frequently treated as “subnormal children because of their Japanese language deficiency” (1989, p. 187).

Research has shown that respect for a child’s language and culture fosters positive learning experiences and identity formation (Yasumoto, 2008). Parents interviewed for this study agree that it is important to encourage Japanese language development at kindergarten but also to support, protect, and promote the languages of home. Parents claim there is an expectation that teachers and children prioritise and communicate in the Japanese language and refrain from using other languages. For those *hafu* children who speak Japanese as a second language, there is clear pressure on them to become fluent in Japanese as soon as possible. As a result, children with limited Japanese can find themselves bearing the brunt of teacher pressure and frustration, as this mother describes:

No matter how many times we explained to my son’s [kindergarten] teacher that he didn’t understand because of language issues, she would just treat him like he was stupid, like he was retarded. He became very angry and frustrated. (Japanese-American mother of two)

But, it is not just *hafu* children who are under pressure to become more proficient in Japanese, but it is the families themselves. Several parents related anecdotes about teachers who were concerned about the use of a “foreign” language in the family home. Teachers often linked their concerns to a belief that children’s language development can be delayed or damaged if they are bilingual (Lanza, 2004). In some cases, like the one described below, teachers recommend that foreign parents cease speaking their own language at home, to allow the child’s Japanese language to develop and dominate.

In my son’s second year at kindergarten, we went to parent-teacher talks. His teacher said my son is shy, and he doesn’t talk or interact well with other children, maybe because his English is better than his Japanese. She told me it’s better if you talk to him in Japanese even in the house. Oh, I didn’t show her, but it made me very angry! You don’t have the right to tell me what to speak inside my house with my own child. (Filipino mother of one)

However, for those *hafu* children who have lived all their life in Japan but whose faces portray them as foreign, it can be equally frustrating to be regarded as an “outsider” by their teachers and classmates:

One of the teachers said to me, “Your daughter’s Japanese is really good,” and I’m like oh, no, don’t go there. I said, “Well, she is Japanese,” because that is what I always say. She is Japanese, she has a Japanese Dad, she was born in Japan. I wasn’t rude to her or anything, but I made it clear that, yeah, why shouldn’t her Japanese be good? She is a Japanese child. (English mother of two)

*Hafu* children whose foreign parent is Asian (Chinese, Korean, Thai, etc.) and who are not fluent in Japanese also face similar stereotyping. Yamashiro points out that being categorised according to appearance is not always simple if the child, who appears outwardly to be Japanese, is not familiar with the Japanese language or Japanese customs: “This causes confusion for most *nihonjin* who subconsciously assume that someone who looks Japanese will speak and act Japanese” (2011, p. 1511). Once it is realised that these children are not Japanese, they are often re-categorised as Asian immigrants.

Bhabha suggests that “hybridity is not a problem of genealogy or identity between two different cultures . . . [it] is that the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation” (1994, p. 114). *Hafu* children embody this cultural ambivalence, and the perceived disconnect between their faces and their language skills is often replicated when teachers introduce cultural activities into the kindergarten classroom.

### The Dominance of Japanese Culture

Along with a strong focus on acquiring the Japanese language, early childhood teachers disseminate Japanese culture rather than try to introduce or foster children’s home cultures in the kindergarten setting.

Teachers don’t try and use words from children’s home cultures. Regardless of whether the children are foreign or *hafu*, teachers say that this is a Japanese kindergarten so please get used to our way of doing things (*narete kudasai*). Those children are expected to adapt to the Japanese way. (Japanese mother of two)

Many of the activities and rituals in Japanese early childhood settings have the underlying purpose of socialisation towards “becoming Japanese” (Hendry, 1986). Festivals that celebrate traditional customs and special events seen as intrinsically Japanese are held in kindergartens and childcare centres across the nation. Such celebrations not only reproduce a state-constructed national identity but also represent opportunities to reinforce key goals such as cooperation, perseverance, and interdependence. Ironically, many of the old traditions and rituals celebrated so enthusiastically at kindergarten have been cast aside or forgotten by the adult population, but they endure as important socialisation and pedagogical devices in the early childhood sphere.

This strong focus on Japanese culture in the early childhood setting means that there is little acknowledgement of the home cultures of *hafu* or foreign children. Although some Japanese teachers may talk about globalisation and internationalisation, they give little attention to incorporating the diverse cultures of children into activities, displays, and classroom practice, and any attempts tend to be superficial, as these mothers describe:

At the *undōkai* [sports day], they put up all these countries’ flags, even the Philippines flag, but it is just for decoration, it has no meaning. At least,

realise who are the foreigners here or the mixed families. Instead of saying, “Oh, it’s a foreigner,” it would be nice if they said, “Oh, yes, she is from the Philippines. We have met her.” (Filipino mother of one)

The letters the kids wrote me last year after a [cultural] talk I gave.... They put them altogether in a folder, and it had a flag of Japan and a flag of Puerto Rico. I mean the colours are there. It’s still red, white, and blue, but, no.... You’re an educator, just spend a minute more double checking. Ask my daughter, “Is this the [American] flag?” (American mother of two)

Many teachers find it easier to focus on the holidays, crafts, food, and music of other cultures, which can often reinforce stereotypes and place children in the category of “other” (Ramsay, 2009). Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) describe these superficial approaches as “tourist curricula.” They suggest removing the focus on cultural diversity and engaging in an anti-bias approach that critiques all forms of discrimination instead. Ramsay (2009) argues that culturally responsive teaching is critical in a diversifying classroom. However, “culturally responsive education is not effective if teachers base their understanding of children’s culture on outdated and static views” (Ramsay, 2009, p. 227). By maintaining close contact with families and gathering current information about families’ evolving cultural values, teachers can become more responsive.

The parents interviewed for this study overwhelmingly expressed a desire for teachers to undergo some kind of multicultural or diversity training in order to better support their families. However, parents also acknowledged that Japanese early childhood teachers are incredibly busy and cautioned that attempts to include children’s home cultures need to be carefully considered before teachers put them into practice in the classroom setting. The idea of multicultural education is still very much in its infancy in Japan (Hirasawa, 2009) and designed more to nurture Japanese nationals than to support mixed or foreign children. For the parents interviewed, it is important that their children’s Japanese and “foreign” identities are acknowledged and valued, but that their child is not marked as “other.”

### Normalising Development

In Japan, early childhood teachers work within a system that normalises children’s bodies according to Japanese standards. Documents and charts pertaining to early childhood education are generally produced by “experts” and present parameters of “normal” childhood development (Goodman, 2002). As the majority of teachers are constantly referring to these texts, their assessment of children is structured around official definitions of children’s physical and mental development.

This process of observation and normalisation of the body is a common feature of Japanese early childhood education. Importance is given to children’s health and development checks as well as to visits by paediatricians, dentists, and nutritionists (Duncan, 2006). But *hafu* children may not conform to Japanese standards of “normal,” as this mother explains:

At only one-and-a-half years old, my son was categorised as overweight according to Japanese child and development charts. He was a big baby, but he is tall and not fat. At daycare, the teachers would say he is a little fat, so they wouldn't try to feed him so much. I had a problem with them assessing him with Japanese [children], and in a group, and fitting into these statistic averages. (French-Canadian mother of one)

Mothers from a wide range of cultural backgrounds (Chinese, Korean, Filipino, and American) also described how their children were diagnosed as physically or developmentally delayed, due to the instructions being given in a language the child didn't understand.

The support isn't very strong and the education isn't very strong. It's not supporting families like us. When we had health checks for babies, they check the growth, their language ability, and their motor skills. But most of the people doing those tests have no experience with mixed families. So, it is standard for a mixed child to be slower in Japanese. But [the doctors] don't know that, so they tell you that you have problems, you need to work on that, we're going to come and check on you. (American mother of two)

In contrast, a Canadian mother watched her daughter struggle at kindergarten and discovered that she had dyslexia when she entered first grade. Asking the principal for help, she was told, "Well, isn't that a foreign thing? That's an ABC problem, right? It must be because she is *hafu*." Several parents felt that Japanese teachers were too hasty to link learning disorders or perceived developmental problems with children's "otherness":

The teachers seem to blame everything that is happening on the fact that I am a foreigner. Whether I make a mistake, or I do something, or even my child's autism. They said it's probably because his Mom's a foreigner, because they don't believe it happens in Japan. (Canadian mother of four)

The Japanese education system is based on the notion that everyone is equal (Noiri, 2010), and kindergarten rules often make one rule for all the children, with little recognition that foreign or *hafu* children might have different physical needs. Many parents talked about the teachers' refusal to allow children to use sunscreen or to wear rashguards when outside during the hot summer months.

My child's kindergarten required a doctor's letter for sunscreen at kindergarten! That's crazy. My daughter's skin is not the same as the Japanese kids in her class. (Australian mother of two)

For several of the families interviewed, such rules resulted in their children suffering severe sunburn, and in one case a child had to be hospitalised for heatstroke.

Bhabha (1994) states that hybridity was first conceptualised in terms of the physical body. Historically, hybrids were seen as corporeal representations of coloniser and colonised, and their blended bodies and mixed blood were seen as impure and abnormal, leading to exclusion and institutionalised racism. However, in modern society, embodying multiple identities can be a powerful means of disrupting the boundaries of binary racial identities (Yazdiha, 2010). The experiences of *hafu* children in the Japanese early childhood context suggest that they are not yet recognised as important challengers to the myth of Japanese homogeneity in the classroom and in wider society.

### Attempting Multiculturalism

Despite Japan's growing diversity, the state is largely resistant to immigration, leaving it to local governments to introduce policies that attempt to understand the meaning of place for foreigners and mixed-race residents (Flowers, 2014). One attempt to understand and support the collective globalising body of Japanese children is the idea of *tabunka kyōsei* (multicultural co-living). According to Okano (2014), the emergence of the term *tabunka kyōsei* centred on domestic ethnic diversity brought about by globalisation. The need for *tabunka kyōsei* first arose in schools in the 1970s when Japanese returnee children, grandchildren of war-displaced orphans in China, and Indochinese refugees began appearing in classrooms. During the 1980s, the bubble economy opened the way for foreign workers and their families, and in the 1990s, there was an influx of South Americans following an amendment of the Immigration Act.

These children challenged the existing practice of schooling based on the assumption that "all students shared a Japanese language background and culture" (Okano, 2014, p. 56). The Ministry of Education responded to the influx of these newcomers by using the model of Japanese returnee education (Mabuchi, 2002), with an emphasis on Japanese language instruction and cultural adaptation (Goodman, 2012). However, a lack of clarity in the curriculum meant that it was left to individual schools and local governments to try to accommodate and support migrant children (Okano, 2014).

To this day, there remains a disconnection between national policies that discourage immigration and local policies that promote multiculturalism (Flowers, 2014). The issue of education for immigrant children is compounded by the lack of enforced national standards. As Okano (2014) argues, if the government had developed clear policies on *tabunka kyōsei* to incorporate cultural diversity, schools would be required to take action. Instead, such initiatives are left to local governments across Japan. The dominant discourse does not permit or foster diversity and difference within the Japanese classroom, even though the presence of *hafu* children challenges this ideology. As Flowers argues, "the discourse of difference that underlies *tabunka kyōsei* is still limited by Japanese conceptions that posit the origin of difference as coming from outside Japan, and thus continue to ignore the existence of difference within the Japanese population" (2014, p. 84). For *hafu* children and their families, this realisation comes as soon as children commence early childhood education.

## Conclusion

The multiple identities of *hafu* children are both hybrid and complex (Bhabha, 1994), with mixed families embodying Japan's diversifying and globalising society. Despite the rising number of *hafu*, the myth of Japan's homogenous society remains pervasive (Lie, 2001). Early childhood education represents a critical space where children and their families' home cultures first intersect with Japanese concepts of education. Positive experiences in these early years rely on close relationships between families and teachers, but if there is little acceptance or understanding of children's cultures or complex identities, this opportunity can be lost (Ramsay, 2009).

This paper has argued that many *hafu* children still experience inconsistent treatment in an education system that claims to be equal and fair for all (Moorehead, 2013). The Japanese government has not yet introduced a comprehensive policy to support diversity in the education system, relying instead on local government and individual institutions to draw on their own interpretations of multiculturalism (*tabunka kyōsei*) (Flowers, 2014; Okano, 2013). Although localised attempts at multiculturalism are a positive start, there is a lack of continuity throughout the nation when it comes to supporting and fostering children with connections to other cultures beyond Japan.

Bhabha (1994) positions hybridity as a liminal, ambivalent third space where existing limitations and boundaries can be blurred and disrupted. The third space is also a productive one, which supports new forms of cultural meaning and fosters alternative identities. As one Australian mother commented, "Here [in Japan] it is very black and white. You're either in or you're out, and as a *hafu*, you're neither of those things." *Hafu* children may challenge long-held notions of Japanese cultural homogeneity in the early childhood setting, but they also represent exciting new possibilities for the future of Japanese education.

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