Setting Assumptions Aside

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Minority identity development research is primarily situated in Western, monolingual contexts and rarely addresses racially or ethnically "mixed" individuals. I found the experiences of "mixed" individuals raised in Japan did not fit those models. Identity was not a question of either/or for participants, but took shape from dialogues that reflected a complex relationship between community, individual, language, and culture. The experience was profoundly different for individuals attending international schools or Japanese schools. The difficulties articulated by international school students, in contrast to those attending Japanese schools, appears as a clash of boundaries, not values, particularly where "Japaneseness" fits in the hierarchy.

According to much of the minority identity literature, children growing up between two cultures struggle with divided loyalties, are troubled and alienated from one or even both of their heritages. Language is an issue only in relation to the minority language parent or trouble in school. Those are the assumptions.

According to the assumptions in Japan, mixed children can only speak English or are fluent bilinguals

but they can't speak Japanese, are physically attractive, especially the young women, are not Japanese and are all American. It is confusing.

But rarely have the individuals themselves spoken or even been asked.

When you ask, you must be prepared to set aside the assumptions, the stereotypes in order to attend to the experiences they are prepared to share.

I have a place in this experience. I have three children who are interracial, intercultural, bilingual, and *biliterate*. I have worked with children like them as a teacher for over twenty years in Japan, where I worked and lived for 28 years. I share part of their experience, but not all of it.

So, I asked. "Who are you? How have you come to be this person?"

I asked young people born and raised in Japan. They had a Japanese parent and a non-Japanese parent. Cecilia, Rick and Kenta attended Japanese schools through junior high. Rick and Kenta moved on to high school in the U.S., staying with relatives. Cecilia remained in Japan, attending a private Japanese girls' high school. Seven of the young people I asked attended international schools. Liam, Phillip, Anna, Michael, Alicia, Violet and Victoria attended international schools where twenty to fifty nationalities and several languages mingle. Anna left Japan to attend a US boarding school. Michael attended the only public high school in Tokyo

that offers both Japanese and English content classes and went on to a Japanese university before transferring to a U. S. university. Alicia, Violet and Victoria now study in U. S. universities. Phillip graduated from a U.S. university, took a graduate degree from a Japanese university and now lives and works in Japan. Five of them were my students, in kindergarten, fourth or sixth grade. (See Appendix 1)

I asked them how they wished to speak to me. It was important to respect not only what they wanted to share but also how they wanted to share it. They chose the language and the medium. They chose face-to-face interviews, a narrative response journal over e-mail, an on-line chat, or a combination. Cecilia and Kenta chose to speak to me only in Japanese, the rest of them chose to use English as the primary language but mixed and switched when they felt it appropriate. I followed their leads.

I did not ask them to define themselves in terms of nationality, language or culture. The literature on minority, ethnic and cultural identity assumes an either/ or, first one and then the other perspective. I asked, "Who are you?" then followed their leads. I asked for clarification, expansion or reflection at times. None of them told me the same stories. They shared some experiences, but each individual centered his or her story in a different set of experiences, on a different point. I took this to be a manifestation of the identity

dialogue, an idea that Charles Taylor uses rather than a linear identity development. They had each carried out dialogues with members of their families, their friends and the community around them. Those interlocutors were different for each individual and so were the dialogues.

I gathered their stories from the computer, from the tapes and read and listened again and again. I read and listened to them as whole, unbroken narratives and as small units, sometimes words and phrases as they switched from one language to the other, sometimes an incident, sometimes an idea. Each time I read or listened, I did not have just the words, but I also had the pauses, the laughter, the gestures, the expressions on their faces as part of the text. And it struck hard that the assumptions I had read, the definitions and patterns of development were for someone else. If I listened through those filters, I would not, could not hear or understand these people's experiences.

Violet told me, "I'm a lot more comfortable with myself now and, ummm, I mean, umm being able to speak both languages without having to worry about an accent. Which makes me feel more comfortable saying that I'm half Japanese, half American...now I can say more confidently, and really kind of feel that I've gotten both cultures."

Alicia said, "Even though I seem to have issues with my race and identity, I can say one thing for certain. I am proud of who I am and my wonderful upbringing."

Rick reflected, "I think I am pretty lucky compared to other people...Because I have two different kind of cultures...and both cultures are real good cultures, both high society...it's just that, I don't know, I guess I can be proud of those...because I have double stuff compared to other people..."

Victoria stated, "I don't really want to classify myself...I'm proud of my unique background and "double" does not describe it sufficiently."

For students who attended international schools, "cultural differences were never really an issue...they were a natural part of my environment", according to Anna. Within the school environment, it was normal to be different, but outside of that...

Victoria told me:

It was probably around this time (in swimming school, from age two) that I became self-conscious about my identity. What made me realize the difference between the rest of the kids and myself was my name. After ten minutes of meticulous stretching, a teacher took attendance. Among 30 Japanese names was mine, written on the attendance sheet in katakana. They pronounced my name awkwardly, and I knew they couldn't help it; I still blamed them for making it sound so ugly.

Or Alicia's first day of preschool:

Then the first time that I remember that I didn't like, like when I, when I felt like I didn't like being half was ummm, I went to preschool, in a public preschool and, uhh, the first day I went there, I was ...the first day I went there, I went with my mother and then all these little kids wearing yellow hats and yellow shorts and yellow outfits and everyone said "Gaijin! Gaijin!" Everyone said gaijin to me and then I just started crying, I was like, "I'm not gaijin." And they were like "Yeah, you are, you look like you're gaijin" and I was like "NO! Look at my mother. I'm not gaijin, she's Japanese!" And they were like "Gaijin, gaijin, gaijin!"

But the students of the Japanese schools saw it differently. Kenta said:

When I was little, I never thought of myself as American. I had only spoken Japanese, I couldn't speak English, so I thought I was Japanese. Growing up, everything was fun. Going to the park and playing, going to the after school center. We did art, basketball, different sports. I have lots of different friends. I still see my friend from daycare, we went straight through together, and he lives nearby.

And Cecilia:

Since I was born I have lived in Japan, so, (pause) I've always been to Japanese schools, regular Japanese schools, living just like Japanese, I think of myself that same as regular Japanese So far, I've never had any unpleasant experiences. I've never really thought about myself in negative terms.

That wasn't exactly the same way that the law or the society seemed to see it. Until 1985 none of these individuals who had a Japanese mother could claim Japanese citizenship. Japan does not officially recognize dual citizenship. Although Japanese nationality is not legally defined on the basis of race, in social practice, an individual must "look Japanese" racially and possess pure "Japanese blood" to be considered "Japanese". The children of these marriages are subsequently seen socially not as Japanese-Korean or Japanese-American, Japanese-French, etc. but as non-Japanese. They are often labeled *haafu*, from the English "half". The non-scientific concept of Japanese blood is assumed to give exclusive ownership to cultural and linguistic knowledge. But the social definitions didn't seem to be applied to or experienced in the same way by the two groups. The Japanese school attendees focused on stories of playing with friends, sneaking into a big park in downtown Tokyo to play, going shopping and talking on the telephone late at night. Whereas the international school

students volunteered incidents like this:

> When I meet Japanese people they usually tell me, "You speak Japanese! Incredible! In response, I say, "My mother is Japanese and I was raised here so..." then they'd say, "Even so, it's incredible. Can you read and write Japanese as well?" This kind of conversation actually annoys me because it implies that if I'm only half Japanese, I shouldn't be able to speak and be literate in Japanese...if I grew up in Japan, it would make more sense for them to assume that my English isn't as good as my Japanese. (Victoria)

As I listened to the stories, I began to hear two very different worlds and two very different responses to the same physical phenomenon, being a mixed race individual. They all shared an awareness of their *mixedness*. The students in the Japanese schools had not themselves made it a salient part of how they thought about themselves, nor had the community around them made much more than a brief and intermittent reference to it, which they found to be only mildly annoying. The students in the international schools told stories of being pointed at, talked about, of feeling like alien objects, sometimes of wishing to be "pure Japanese" so they would fit in and other times asserting their *differentness*. That's not the way the story was supposed to unfold, according to the assumptions.

Children with Japanese mothers aren't supposed to be bilingual. Children with English speaking mothers are supposed to be able to speak English. Children who look different and attend Japanese schools are supposed to be bullied, teased and forced to suppress their foreign identity. Children in international schools should never feel uncomfortable or excluded. The assumptions didn't stand up very well.

I believe that what is most basic to the difference is that the international school attendees were positioned outside of Japanese community, and attempted to assert membership in both the Japanese and another community at the same time. Consequently the Japanese community denied them access, in spite of their language proficiencies and familial ties, whereas the Japanese school attendees were positioned inside and made no attempt to place themselves otherwise. The question that emerges is one that forces a consideration of not just the individual and family dynamics but also the dynamics of a society that defines itself in exclusive terms. How can there be a dialogue with such a society that would contribute to the construction of a Japanese-Something identity when being Japanese precludes being anything else?

The Japanese school attendees' experience is an additive one, firmly grounded in one culture and language with a second set of experiences being added to the first. The degree to which that second set of cultural

and linguistic experience penetrates the first is a function of a number of variables including length of time spent in the second language and culture, receptivity to that second language and culture and support to develop and maintain the second culture and language (LaFromboise, 1993). The other experience, the international school attendees', is integrative. It too is subject to a number of variables, including language proficiency, time spent in both cultures, and sense of community.

The international school participants talked about their identity as being made up of an individual's knowledge, experiences, reflections on the past, present ways of thinking, perceptions of things and surroundings, perceptions of self, and reactions of others to the individual all of which interact and affect one another.

> So I don't think my identity is static. I like to think that it's constantly evolving...if I make big generalizations, I've concluded that there are very Japanese aspects about myself and also very non-Japanese, or Western characteristics to my personality. It's all a matter of context. (Cecilia)

> It [identity] changes, it changes, I guess. I don't remember why, the reason, But I feel like we change, I mean that's a change I have right now, liking Japan and hating Japan....I guess that's because of the knowledge we take in, knowledge and experience...but the core part of me won't change, I guess, but the different parts, maybe I might hate Japan and American and become like Mexican. I don't know...Yeah, yeah, but I don't know, but I guess until a certain age, we have to take in more and we are finding who we are and understanding. By understanding others we can understand ourselves and change." (Michael)

They spoke about choosing to make "halfness" just one part of who they were,

> ...you start off with like I said with being half but then you know you stretch that out like "Phillip is good at this and this, interested in this" and that *halfness* fades away...if you're talking with someone and the *halfness* becomes subconscious or unconscious, that's what you want. That's what you're going for. Ideally, you want to... I think, it's you want to defuse that although it's a core part of your life, it's, it's you want it to be a small part of your life... you don't want the *halfness* to be what you are. (Phillip)

For the Japanese school attendees, being half has not been a very important part of the dialogue. "I don't think there are really any people who think of being *haafu* as bad, I'm pretty sure, that's what I think...Not much more than, I'm not just Japanese, just about that."

It is necessary to remember the context of the dialogue is very different. Construction and assertion of a

personal identity is not a large part of the dialogue in the Japanese school context. There are a number of roles in Japanese society and individuals are expected to conform to those roles. Kondo, writing about her experiences as an ethnographic researcher in Japan, vividly describes the attempts of her informants and relatives to nudge her into the appropriate roles as daughter, guest, young woman, or student. She calls them ready-made molds (Kondo, 1990, p. 14). Cecilia, Rick and Kenta were all appropriately assuming their roles, their student identities within Japanese society.

Generally those individuals who had attended international schools seemed to experience more tension and conflict asserting their identities. However, it was not a simple dichotomy between being part of the Japanese community or not. Rather, it appears to be a clash of assembly and boundaries of self, where "Japaneseness", the other culture and language fit in a hierarchy and the relative permeability or rigidity of the boundaries of the self. Those in the international school world pushed and pulled and assembled the parts in different ways asserting combinations and pushing the boundaries, the Japanese school attendees didn't assemble so much as participate in the dialogue around the ready made molds that were appropriate for their time and place in life. So, it seems that we need to question the assumptions of theories around belonging, the roles of language, choosing, and schooling and construct a more appropriate framework to use to understand the process of growing up mixed in Japan.

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Appendix 1

Details of Interviewees

NAME*	MOTHER	FATHER	ELEMENTARY	HIGH SCHOOL	CURRENT**
Cecilia	Japanese	Austrian	Japanese	Japanese	11th grade
Rick	American	Japanese	Japanese	American	Grad. 2/2001
Kenta	American	Japanese	Japanese	American	11th grade
Liam	Japanese	New Zealand	International		11th grade
Anna	Japanese	American	International	American	11th grade
Michael	Japanese	Japanese-American	International	Japanese w/English content	Japanese university, U. S. university
Alicia	Japanese	American	International	International	U. S. University
Violet	Japanese	American	International	International	U. S. University
Victoria	Japanese	Swiss	International	International	U. S. University
Phillip	Japanese	American	International	International	U. S. University, Japanese grad school, lives and works in Japan

- *pseudonyms
- **at completion of research