Conflict Service-Learning as a Way Forward: University Students Supporting and Advocating for Immigrant Youth in Japan

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Abstract

Service-learning (SL) is an experiential pedagogical approach that engages students in meaningful community service while promoting learning through ongoing cycles of reading, action, reflection, and dialogue with peers. This study draws on an Action Research (AR) framework to explore how students actively engaged with an SL course offered by the author at a small faculty of a national university in western Japan. Through a content analysis of students' reflective journals, the study examines the processes by which students navigated interactions with local minority youth and educational settings, reflected critically on inequities in immigrant education, and developed strategies for advocacy. Findings suggest that sustained engagement in SL fosters not only reflection but also active, context-sensitive approaches to supporting immigrant children, highlighting the pedagogical value of experiential learning in higher education.

要旨

サービス・ラーニング（Service-Learning, SL）は、学生が地域社会において意義ある奉仕活動に参加しつつ、読書、実践、自己省察、仲間との対話を継続的に行うことで学びを深める体験的教育手法である。本研究は、アクション・リサーチ（Action Research, AR）の枠組みに基づき、西日本の国立大学の小規模学部で筆者が開講した SL 科目における学生の主体的な学びの過程を明らかにすることを目的とする。学生による省察的ジャーナルの内容分析を通して、学生が地域のマイノリティの若者や教育現場との関わりをどのように経験し、教育上の不平等についてどのように批判的に省察し、支援やアドボカシーの方法を構築していったかを検討した。その結果、SL への継続的な参加は、単なる省察にとどまらず、移民の子どもたちを支援するための文脈に応じた主体的な学習行動を促すことが示唆され、大学における体験的学習の教育的意義が確認された。

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In Japan's current social and political climate, media coverage and political discourse often portray immigrants as threats to local and national security, creating social tensions and posing educational challenges for immigrant youth. University educators, therefore, face the task of providing students with opportunities to actively cultivate advocacy, empathy, and social justice awareness. In response, a service-learning (SL) course in a small city in western Japan with a growing and increasingly diverse foreign resident population offers students a space to engage critically with Japanese immigration policy and the lived experiences of local immigrants. While international research has documented the potential of SL to foster these capacities, few studies have examined how Japanese programs support students in taking an active role in advocating for marginalized communities, leaving a critical gap in the literature.

As a long-term foreign resident of Japan and a full-time faculty member at a national university, I am aware of my positionality and the privileges it affords, including access to academic networks and institutional resources. At the same time, being a non-native Japanese speaker and outsider to local school communities has shaped my sense of place and professional identity. When I transitioned from another university setting, I initially experienced a sense of isolation, unsure of what "my community" was and questioning where I belong and how I might contribute meaningfully. While I am able to perform professional duties and maintain close relationships in Japanese, I sometimes feel constrained in fully expressing myself or in navigating complex social and professional contexts. This awareness has heightened my sensitivity to the dynamics affecting both immigrant families and those who, like myself, seek to support and collaborate with them.

In the late 2000s, I conducted a qualitative study examining middle school teachers' attitudes toward immigrant children (King, 2013). Through this research I found that although many teachers demonstrated care and warmth toward their students, subtle biases often persisted—particularly toward children from working-class immigrant families. Some teachers appeared to view immigrant students through an assimilationist lens, framing them as problems to be managed, rather than as valuable contributors to Japanese society with unique knowledge and experiences. These findings echoed patterns identified in other studies of Japanese schooling (see Haeno, 2017; Ota, 2000) and highlighted the need to examine the effects of immigration policy and educational practice on local immigrant populations, as well as pedagogical approaches that empower students to act as advocates for social equity.

In 2018, service-learning (SL) pedagogy was new to me, but it appeared well aligned with the mission of my faculty, The School of Global and Community Studies (GCS), which was established in 2016. Although it is the smallest faculty in the university, it is the only one explicitly dedicated to community engagement and to fostering students' capacity for intercultural understanding**.** These objectives are consistent with Japanese university education reforms over the past 20 years which have emphasized more student-centered learning, including active learning and experiential methodologies (Fukudome, 2019). One of the three pillars of GCS is its project-based learning (PBL) curriculum, designed to connect university students with local organizations in collaborative, community-centered projects while fostering critical thinking and leadership skills. Within this curricular framework, I was able to implement the SL course on which this study is based at the departmental level. At the time, it was the only PBL course that focused on supporting foreign residents in the local community and that recognized immigrants as a community resource.

In practice, the SL course that is the focus of this study centers on supporting children and young adults in local schools within the prefecture who are either foreign residents of Fukui or language-minority students, including Japanese nationals who do not speak Japanese as their first language. It is currently the faculty's only English-medium PBL course. Although students enrolled in the course are not training to become teachers, they bring educational and linguistic backgrounds that may support their work with immigrant children. All students are bilingual or multilingual, and most have experience studying in a non-native language, attending overseas institutions, or living as foreign nationals.

Many students also bring educational experiences shaped by Japan's increasing diversity during the 2010s, a period in which the number of immigrant and immigrant-background children in public schools grew substantially, as documented by a growing body of research on their educational experiences and needs (Haeno, 2017; Homma, 2021; Kobayashi & Tsuboya, 2021; Tokunaga, 2018; Yamamoto, 2014). Some students studied alongside immigrant peers in elementary and secondary schools, while others are themselves foreign nationals who were born and raised in Japan. These diverse linguistic and educational histories likely contribute both to students' interest in supporting immigrant children and to their decision to enroll in the SL course.

Taken together, these features position the course as a setting in which students do not simply learn *about* immigrant youth, but work alongside them in everyday educational

spaces. Through sustained interaction with children and young adults navigating Japanese public schools, students are confronted with the practical consequences of language policy, institutional expectations, and uneven support structures. As multilingual learners with varying degrees of personal familiarity with educational diversity in Japan, students are required to consider how their own experiences shape the ways they respond to immigrant youth, recognize structural barriers, and define their responsibilities—and limitations—as supporters.

It is this combination of sustained engagement and student reflection that the present study examines, focusing on how participation in the SL course may shape students' attitudes toward immigrant youth, their understanding of educational obstacles, and their sense of responsibility as supporters.

To explore these dynamics, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What attitudes do SL students display toward the immigrant youth they support?
2. What understandings do SL students have of the obstacles faced by immigrant youth in Japanese public schools?
3. How do SL students understand and feel about their role as supporters of, and their impact on, immigrant youth?

Literature Review

Schooling of Immigrant Youth in Japan

Research on immigrant children's experiences in Japanese education emerged in the 1990s, following the 1990 revision of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act. This policy change led to a rapid influx of Brazilian and other South American Nikkeijin[1] migrant laborers and their families (Tsuda, 2003; Yamanaka, 1996). During this period, Nikkeijin and other foreign nationals and their children came to be referred to as newcomers (*nyūkamā*) distinguishing them from oldcomers—long-term residents of Korean and Chinese descent (Kojima, 2006; Ota, 2000). With the increase of *nyūkamā* children, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) began the process of developing Japanese as second language (JSL) curricula and materials and began tracking the number

[1] Nikkeijin are defined here as Latin Americans, mostly Brazilians, of Japanese descent who came to work and settle in Japan in the 1990s and afterwards as a direct result of the 1990 changes in Japanese immigration law, which encouraged Japanese descendants to apply for long-term resident visas and work as unskilled workers in Japan.

of immigrant and language minority (LM) children requiring Japanese language instruction (Green, 2014; Vaipae, 2001).

Early research on immigrant children in Japan primarily documented difficulties related to language acquisition, school adaptation, and classroom participation (Haeno, 2017). Over the past three decades, studies have consistently shown that, without substantial language support, many JSL learners struggle to succeed in Japanese public schools (Burgess, 2007; Kanno, 2008; Vaipae, 2001). At the same time, sociological research has challenged the long-standing assumption of cultural and linguistic homogeneity in Japanese institutions, including education, demonstrating how dominant social norms are reproduced through schooling (Sugimoto, 2021). Building on this critique, education scholars argue that because compulsory education in Japan does not legally apply to foreign nationals, the school system has been structured primarily around the needs of Japanese citizens rather than immigrant children (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999). Consequently, immigrant students' languages, histories, and lived experiences remain largely absent from the national curriculum, while schooling continues to emphasize socialization into dominant norms of "Japaneseness" (Kanno, 2008; Sugimoto, 2021; Tsuneyoshi, 1995; Tsuneyoshi, 2004). More recent research confirms the persistence of these structural conditions, linking ongoing educational disadvantage to limited institutional support for Japanese-language education and uneven access to schooling and lifelong learning opportunities (Shimizu, 2021; Yamada, 2021).

Despite these systemic constraints, research also documents significant local agency and innovation. In municipalities with relatively large immigrant populations—such as Kawasaki and Hamamatsu—local boards of education have, for the past few decades, developed Japanese-language curricula and multicultural educational practices responsive to immigrant and language-minority students (Green, 2014). In some metropolitan areas, school principals, teachers, and parents have collaborated to create more inclusive school environments, including initiatives that actively involve immigrant parents in curriculum development and school decision-making.

Minami Yoshida Elementary School in Yokohama provides a recent example of such efforts. Recognized for its 2024 initiatives promoting multicultural coexistence, the school is presented as a model for multicultural education (Yokohama City Minami Yoshida Elementary School, n.d.). However, model schools tend to be concentrated in urban areas with comparatively large immigrant and language-minority student populations; in this case,

immigrant-background students reportedly constitute a majority of the student body. In contrast, schools in rural or less densely populated regions—where immigrant and language-minority students are fewer in number—often lack the resources, expertise, or institutional support necessary to develop comparable programs (Burgess, 2007). As a result, the implementation of inclusive and linguistically responsive education remains uneven across regions, with local boards of education and individual schools varying widely in capacity, expertise, and available resources (Green, 2014).

These disparities are reflected in national data on school attendance. In 2019, approximately 16% of elementary- and junior high school–aged immigrant children were reported as not attending school, compared with just 0.03% of Japanese nationals in the same age group (Hagiwara & Liu, 2023; Joshi & Tabata, 2021). Non-attendance rates among high-school-aged immigrant youth were estimated to be even higher, indicating increased educational precarity at later stages of schooling (Kobayashi & Tsuboya, 2020; Tokunaga, 2018). More recent figures suggest modest improvement: as of 2023, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) reported that 150,695 foreign-national children of school age were registered in Japan, of whom 8,601 (approximately 5.7%) were classified as "non-attending" (MEXT, 2024a; MEXT, 2024b). However, because undocumented children are excluded from official registration systems, these statistics likely underestimate the full extent of educational exclusion faced by immigrant children (Joshi & Tabata, 2021; Yamada, 2021).

Demographic trends further complicate these challenges. Over the past decade, the number of immigrant children living in Japan increased by approximately 25%, alongside growing heterogeneity in national, religious, and linguistic backgrounds (Tokunaga, 2018). This diversification has intensified pressure to establish more inclusive educational structures (Kobayashi & Tsuboya, 2020). Yet, there are currently no national diversity training requirements for new teachers, and teacher-training programs across Japan offer few courses focused on working with children from diverse backgrounds (Delakorda Kawashima, 2025).

Because education is not compulsory for foreign nationals and no national policy mandates require teachers to support non-Japanese speakers, responsibility for immigrant education is largely devolved to local and regional governments. This decentralization has resulted in wide disparities in educational provision for JSL learners (King, 2013). In practice, many local governments rely heavily on the volunteer efforts from residents, university faculty,

and students. Although educators widely acknowledge that such reliance is unsustainable, the absence of national coordination has allowed this system to persist.

At the same time, recent scholarship points to important shifts in research perspectives and educational discourse. Haeno (2017) notes a growing emphasis on critically examining school systems and institutional culture, advocating for social-justice-oriented reforms to address intergenerational poverty, and amplify the voices of immigrant youth (Joshi & Tabata, 2021; Kobayashi & Tsuboya, 2020; Tokunaga, 2018, Tokunaga, 2021; Yamada, 2021).

It is within this broader educational and policy context that the SL university course examined in this paper was developed. The course represents a collaborative effort to support immigrant youth in public schools, while also providing university students with opportunities to understand the challenges faced by immigrant children in local educational settings and to consider their own roles in creating pathways toward more equitable education.

Service-Learning

"Service learning is defined as pedagogy, a philosophy and a form of inquiry" (Carrington, 2011, p. 1) combining academic learning and community service with reflection and analysis, ultimately for the purpose of strengthening communities (Pacho, 2015). John Dewey's concepts and ideas about education put forward in *Democracy and Education* (1966) *Experience and Education* (1938) are considered by many to be the pedagogical and philosophical foundation of SL (e.g. Carrington, 2011; Cress et al., 2013; Jacoby, 2015; Pacho, 2015). At the same time, critical SL practitioners look to Paulo Freire's (1970, 2000) transformative pedagogy in which teachers and students study, learn, and create knowledge together while engaging in praxis and reflection, and grounded in critical thinking for the transformation of and betterment of society (Pacho, 2015; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). As pedagogy and program, SL includes four components: "concrete experience, observation of, and reflection on that experience, formation and synthesis of abstract concepts based upon the reflection, and active experimentation that tests the concepts in new situations" (Jacoby, 2015, p. 6).

Furco (1996) defines SL as follows:

> Service-learning programs are distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by their intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service, as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring. To do this, SL programs must have an academic context and be designed so that the service enhances the learning and the learning enhances the service. (p. 5)

As an instructional method, service-learning (SL) connects academic content with community engagement to "narrow the distance between universities and communities" and promote positive social change (d'Arlach et al., 2009, p. 5). SL practitioners and advocates contend that SL programs should critically engage students in community work that challenges oppression and prioritizes action for social justice (e.g., Carrington, 2011; d'Arlach et al., 2009; Hicks Peterson, 2018; Jacoby, 2015).

A defining principle of SL is reciprocity: university instructors and students view communities as equal partners rather than recipients of charity (d'Arlach et al., 2009). Knowledge flows in both directions, as universities and communities learn from and support one another (Jacoby, 2015). In practice, SL requires students not only to participate in community service but also to engage in structured critical reflection. Dewey's (1933) declaration that "we do not learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience" (p. 78) affirms for SL researchers and practitioners the critical role played by reflection in SL (Cress et al., 2013; Jacoby, 2015). Reflection should be continuous and integrated into the learning process through activities such as journaling, presentations, and peer discussion (Jacoby, 2015) and should be undertaken at all stages of service-learning, before, during and after completion of community service (Toole & Toole, 1995). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model and Toole and Toole's (1995) SL spiral, adapted from Kolb, are commonly used in service-learning curricula to guide reflective processes (Cress et al., 2013). Ultimately, critical self-reflection is central to SL pedagogy and to the assessment of learning outcomes.

Studies have identified multiple benefits of SL participation for students, including the development of critical thinking, leadership, communication skills, empathy, and social responsibility (Jacoby, 2015). Participation in SL has also been associated with reduced stereotyping, increased cultural awareness and cultural recognition, increased intercultural competence, and "an enhanced ability to notice social inequality" (Liu & Lin, 2017, p. 243). Practitioners acknowledge, however, that an "increased awareness of discrimination" does not always result in a decrease in "deficit-oriented thinking" about marginalized

communities (Gordon da Cruz, 2017), nor does the SL experience necessarily involve challenging social inequalities, and may in fact contribute to their reinforcement (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). University SL programs have been criticized for focusing on educational outcomes for their students, while marginalizing community voices and lived experiences (Blouin & Perry, 2009), and for a lack of commitment to social justice and social change, which may reinforce student biases and unequal power dynamics, "providing temporary solutions that do not address oppressive conditions" (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019, p. 44).

Since the 1990s, most U.S. higher education institutions have incorporated SL programs into their missions, making SL a common feature of the undergraduate experience (Carrington, 2011). Ma Hok Ka (2024) notes: "Initially embraced by Western education systems, service-learning has evolved into a versatile approach that aligns with the social, cultural, and political contexts of Asian societies" (p.109). Notably, SL practice and research has been ongoing in Hong Kong universities since the late 2000s (Ma Hok Ka et al., 2019), and Service Learning Malaysia, an initiative of the nation's Ministry of Education established in 2019, has institutionalized SL in universities across Malaysia (Govindaraju, 2025). In Japan, higher education reforms over the past two decades have emphasized active and experiential learning. To meet these national directives, Japanese universities have developed SL programs and curricula that connect universities with surrounding communities and promote learning through service (Fukudome, 2019). In response to the growing emphasis on cultivating global leaders and global citizens, universities in Japan have also expanded both local and international SL opportunities (e.g., Ando et al., 2016; Kikuchi, 2018; Kulnazarova, 2017). Scholars argue that strengthening these efforts is essential for preparing Japanese students for global citizenship (Kikuchi, 2018).

With growing calls in some East Asian and Southeast Asian nations to implement SL programs, conduct SL research, and develop SL pedagogies and rigorous assessment models, it is hoped that the current study may shed some light on a current SL practice at a Japanese university.

Service-Learning and Action Research Methodology

SL and action research (AR) share a commitment to experiential learning and practical engagement, linking theory with real-world contexts. Both emphasize active participation and collaboration with community stakeholders, fostering mutual benefit and social contribution. In SL, students engage directly with communities to address local needs while

developing academic and civic skills. Similarly, AR involves iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection to collaboratively solve real-life problems (Stringer & Aragón, 2021). In both, the researcher or student is an active co-creator of knowledge rather than a passive observer.

Reflection and reflexivity are central to both SL and AR, though they operate differently. In SL, structured reflection activities—such as journals, discussion sessions, and presentations—enable students to examine social inequalities, their experiences, the effects of their actions, and their personal growth (Kuronuma, 2022). AR emphasizes reflexivity, requiring practitioner- researchers to question assumptions, evaluate interventions, and adapt strategies for pedagogy based on feedback (Stringer & Aragón, 2021). The three principles of AR—reciprocity, reflexivity, and reflection—are integral, interrelated, and operate in tandem along a "continuum of critically reflective practice," allowing the research-practitioner and participants to generate and apply new knowledge (Robertson, 2000, p. 309). Both approaches recognize that learning is socially situated: in SL, through interactions with community members (Akimoto, 2018); and in AR, through collaboration with student participants to co-construct solutions.

Finally, both SL and AR encourage continuous cycles of action and improvement. In SL, students return to community sites to deepen learning, and through iterative reflection, apply new insights to their SL practice. AR's cyclical structure likewise promotes refinement of strategies to ensure that interventions remain effective and relevant (Stringer & Aragón, 2021). Ultimately, SL and AR share a commitment to active learning, social engagement, and reflective practice, highlighting the interconnectedness of action and inquiry in fostering both personal and community development.

Ultimately, AR is a form of qualitative inquiry with significant potential to examine and inform SL practice and other educational initiatives involving immigrant and language-minority children. Tokunaga et al.'s (2022) participatory action research (PAR) study of a collaborative after-school program for immigrant youth at a part-time high school in Tokyo illustrates how AR can function as a tool for both evaluating and affirming programs that aim to create safe and comfortable spaces (*ibasho*) for immigrant students. In contrast to Tokunaga et al.'s PAR study, the AR study at the center of this paper focuses on university students' SL experiences and perspectives rather than those of immigrant children themselves. Despite this limitation, this study seeks to offer insight into how university students and immigrant youth may begin to co-construct *ibasho* together.

Method

Research Design

The present study is qualitative and informed by AR methodology, in which I served as both investigator and active participant–instructor within the SL classroom. AR is practical and oriented toward improving educational practice, which aligned well with the study's goals of refining course content and enhancing students' learning experiences (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Using AR provided a framework to trace students' evolving perceptions as they progressed through the course, analyze their perceptions of the immigrant children they supported, deepen my understanding of their experiences in local schools, and examine how academic readings and other course activities shaped those experiences. This iterative approach also supported ongoing curriculum development. Insights from student discussions and journal entries provided a window into their thinking and SL experience allowing me to make informed adjustments to the course—immediately, and over time.

Service-Learning Course Structure and Organization

The SL curriculum integrates two essential components: service and learning. For the learning component, students attended a minimum of eight three-hour class sessions per semester. Sessions included community-building exercises, small-group discussions of readings, journal writing, cohort-wide discussions, and problem-solving tasks connected to service experiences.

Course readings covered four thematic areas:

1. Theories and practices of service-learning.
2. Research on immigration and experiences of immigrant communities in Japan.
3. Multiculturalism, multilingualism, and second language acquisition (SLA), including Japan-specific studies.
4. Best practices for supporting and mentoring language-minority learners.

Students wrote bi-weekly reflective journals to engage with course concepts and examine their SL experiences. At the start of each semester, students identified the type of service and support activities they wanted to undertake and the educational level at which they preferred to work. They were introduced to Yoshiko Hanbara, coordinator of a university learning support program for children with foreign roots (*gaikoku ni rūtsu o motsu kodomo*), who matched each student with a school where they provided academic or linguistic support.

Dr. Hanbara, a specialist in Japanese language education, a professor, and a colleague in the Faculty of Education graduate program, coordinated requests from schools seeking Japanese language or learning support and matched students accordingly. Her collaboration with local administrators, teachers, and university students is foundational to the sustainability of the SL course. Her responsibilities include scheduling students' SL support activities, connecting them with community partner schools, and matching, whenever possible, language minority children with university students who share their mother tongue. As part of her work, she also educates teachers and principals on the importance of maintaining language-minority children's home languages and respecting their cultural backgrounds (University of Fukui Faculty of Education Integrated Center for Educational Research, n.d.). Once schedules are finalized—typically one session per week—students begin their collaborative support activities with immigrant and language minority youth

Research Participants

Seventeen students enrolled in the spring 2024 course, 11 of whom continued into the fall semester. The cohort included 12 female and five male students, with four 4th-year, seven 3rd-year, and six 2nd-year students. Thirteen were Japanese nationals and four were foreign nationals (see Appendix A), and all provided a range of support services to language-minority children at local public schools (see Appendix B for details on activities and SL sites). Five of the 17 students were selected for inclusion in this study, all of whom provided written informed consent.

Participants were identified through purposive sampling based on the following criteria:

1. Enrollment in at least two semester-long SL courses.
2. Continued support for immigrant children after course completion.
3. Willingness to participate, as indicated by a signed consent form.
4. Capacity for continuous, in-depth self-reflection via journals and discussion.

A final criterion for selection drew on the AR principle of reciprocity, defined here as a long-term, mutually generative relationship between instructor and students in which knowledge is co-created. I deliberately included participants who have taken courses, conducted research, and worked on projects with me, including those I had taught prior to the spring 2024 SL course. Collaborating closely with these participants over several years has provided me with a unique perspective on their growth as learners, mentors, and community supporters, and our sustained collaboration has allowed us to build trust.

To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to the five participants whose narratives are included: Mariko, Ayaka, Mio, Sara, and Riku. Student writing is presented in a synthesized form where appropriate.

Data Collection: Self-Reflection Journals

Data from self-reflection journals were used to examine SL students' attitudes toward the immigrant youth they supported. Journal assignments accounted for 50% of the course grade. During the spring 2024 semester, students completed six journal assignments, each with prompts provided as PDFs on Google Classroom and submitted via Google Forms. Students were instructed to write at least one paragraph per prompt. Most assignments required responses to one or two mandatory prompts and selection of four additional questions from a list. Journals 2–4 followed this format, while Journals 5 and 6 used Gibbs's (1984) Reflective Cycle to describe and analyze a recent SL interaction: (1) Description, (2) Feelings, (3) Evaluation, (4) Analysis, (5) Conclusion, and (6) Action Plan. Journal 1 addressed students' pre-service expectations. For this study, Journals 2 and 4 (see Appendices C & D) were analyzed, as they most directly addressed the research questions. Sixteen students submitted Journal 2 (14,074 words) and 15 submitted Journal 4 (12,320 words). Excerpts included in the study are drawn from the journals of Mariko, Ayaka, Mio, Sara, and Riku.

Analysis: From Content Analysis to Narratives

In the first stage of analysis, I employed content analysis, as it aligned with AR's continuous cycle of acting, observing, and reflecting (Stringer & Aragón, 2021) and with the reflective cycles embedded in the course. Analysis occurred throughout the spring 2024 semester and continued afterward in multiple stages to support both student and course assessment. This process guided refinements to journal prompts, encouraging connections between SL work and broader systemic issues, such as immigration and education policies affecting the children served. Iterative adjustments included revising or removing readings, modifying journal questions, and integrating selected student excerpts into class discussions. Early analyses focused on course improvement, while subsequent thematic coding emphasized student perspectives and understandings.

I initially quantified and compared patterns in the data (Denscombe, 2021), identifying words and phrases that reflected participants' understanding of core themes developed a priori from course goals and research questions. Using Google Classroom tools, I scanned data from student journals, exported them as PDFs, and organized the information in

spreadsheets for analysis. The summary function in Google Forms enabled responses to be exported without student identifiers, facilitating comparisons across entries and prompts and highlighting which prompts elicited the most in-depth reflection. Journal data were then examined for expressions of empathy and understanding of immigrant children, awareness of challenges faced by language-minority students in public schools, and reflections on cultural values, which were synthesized into narratives for each theme.

Findings

The analysis draws on journal data from five participants collected over the course of one semester. Themes were developed *a priori* based on course goals, research questions, and journal prompts. Across the journals, the terms *struggle*, *trust*, and *reliable* appeared repeatedly, signaling core concerns for participants. Students described both their own struggles and those faced by the children they supported, emphasized the importance of being reliable and consistent in their interactions with teachers and children, and highlighted trust as central to building relationships—particularly in terms of how the children perceived them. These recurring ideas informed the thematic structure of the analysis presented below.

Students' reflections further elaborated these themes by linking them to cultural norms, values, and prior experiences. Participants reflected on the linguistic, cultural, and school-related challenges children faced, while also grappling with their own difficulties in responding effectively within unfamiliar educational contexts. In this process, students consistently returned to questions of reliability and trust as relational responsibilities, revealing a nuanced understanding of cultural difference and the role of sustained, dependable engagement in shaping SL experiences.

Cultural Identity and Cultural Differences

The participants in this study, like others in their SL cohort, were highly diverse. They differed in home language, cultural background, nation of origin, nationality, personality, personal style, and beliefs about education and immigration. In their responses to Journal 2 prompts about identity, they also emphasized different dimensions of their cultural identities, with some noting that identity is fluid and shifts across time and context. Students referenced gender, religion, "being Japanese," native language, educational background (including study abroad), family, socio-economic class, hometown, and region as meaningful aspects of identity. Their recognition of their own identities—including moments when they felt unable to express them—appeared to support their ability to

consider identity from the perspectives of the immigrant children they assisted. Furthermore, a prompt on SL students' ideal learning environments also yielded reflections that tied into SL students' beliefs about the type of support immigrant children might need and desire, and a prompt in Journal 4 about intercultural competence caused some SL participants to reconsider how their cultural identity might make them less responsive to the children's needs. In reflecting on their identities, participants questioned how best to communicate with the children and which aspects of themselves were most relevant in SL settings.

Mio initially struggled with elements of school culture, particularly expectations about how SL supporters should dress. Enjoying feminine and cute fashion, she felt embarrassed when asked to dress less conspicuously. In our class discussions, I shared a story about a similar feeling of embarrassment when conducting research in public junior high schools, when my pierced ears and long earrings were commented on by a participant in my study. Although clothing is only one marker of identity, and perhaps a seemingly unimportant one, feeling rejected based on personal style may result in a recognition of oneself as an outsider. Mio's initial response to this incident allowed her to consider how immigrant children might feel about differences in dress or behavior from the students around them. However, in Journal 4, Mio admitted a strong sense of national identity and stated she did not think she was at the stage of fully accepting cultural differences of all foreign residents. Yet rather than leaving it there, she also continued to explain that it was her responsibility to adapt to different cultural beliefs and practices, noting that only then will she be able to support children in the ways they need. Consistent with this, she wrote in Journal 4 that for SL participants to be effective, "respecting each individual's cultural identity and creating a more comfortable space" were essential, and reconfirmed her desire "to create a space that respects [immigrant children's] identities in future service learning activities."

Drawing on her identity as an English language learner and her study abroad experience, Mariko empathized with the immigrant child she worked with and emphasized the importance of having someone who understands one's background, culture, and language. Reflecting on her own feelings of difference as an exchange student due to linguistic and cultural barriers, Mariko may have initially projected aspects of her personal experience onto the child. However, critically examining these experiences allowed her to more intentionally plan and structure her support sessions around the child's expressed feelings and needs. She consistently created space for the child to speak freely about her home culture and her "favorite things." In Journal 4, Mariko reaffirmed these ideas, explaining

that feeling like a cultural minority while living abroad strengthened her commitment to respecting each individual's cultural identity and background knowledge. She further asserted that "forcing" culture on a child should never be an option. For Riku, his strong identification with family and appreciation for his parents' support provided insight into the significance family relationships may hold for the child he worked with. Reflecting on his own experience of drawing strength from family, he considered that for recent immigrants—who may have limited opportunities to share their lived experiences with others—maintaining and developing first-language use and family relationships may be crucial to their well-being. He further suggested that strong family ties and communication often precede effective communication in the classroom. In Journal 4, Riku reaffirmed his belief that establishing connections with a child outside of the classroom helps build trust, enabling more open communication between service-learning (SL) participants and immigrant children within the classroom setting.

Ayaka, the only participant to explicitly address social class, reflected on how her working-class background fostered resilience and helped her relate to both systemic and personal challenges faced by children from similar circumstances. She believed that this shared class background, which mirrored that of the child she worked with, deepened their connection and enabled her to tailor her support more closely to the child's expressed needs. In Journal 4, Ayaka reiterated her belief in the positive influence of her working-class identity on her interest in working with immigrant children. She also expressed a desire to learn more about the child's identity and cultural background, noting that doing so would allow her to engage more meaningfully, strengthen her support, and further develop her own intercultural competence for working in diverse contexts. In contrast, Sara's reflections revealed a sense of wariness regarding her strong identification with Japanese culture and concern that it might lead her to impose her own values on the child she worked with. She simultaneously questioned the extent of her own understanding of Japanese culture and expressed uncertainty about how to navigate school culture alongside the child.

Although participants' responses in Journals 2 and 4 varied considerably and at times reflected ambivalence about the meanings of culture and interculturalism, the majority of SL participants indicated that reflecting on their own identities and cultural values enabled them to better recognize each child's individuality and cultural background, ultimately fostering closer and more meaningful relationships.

Negotiating Roles, Responsibilities, and Relationship-Building

Participants' journal writing revealed strong self-reflective capacities, an interest in active learning pedagogies, and a genuine desire to learn about, connect with, and meaningfully support immigrant children. Several SL participants described their roles as those of a friend, rather than a teacher, or as a co-learner. At the same time, participants expressed concern and uncertainty regarding the type of support they should provide, their roles and responsibilities, their relationships with the children, and whether their efforts were meaningful to the children. These concerns reflected a sincere commitment to serving immigrant children thoughtfully and responsibly.

Mariko and Sara, who provided support at an elementary school, struggled to balance a teacher's expectation that they focus on helping a child complete homework with their own desire to build trust and foster communication through relationship-building. They were particularly uncertain about their roles when the teacher asked them to perform unanticipated tasks, such as translating announcements and other communications for the child's parents. As a result, Mariko and Sara questioned how to reconcile the role prescribed by the teacher with the role they envisioned for themselves. After observing the SL participants' work, Dr. Hanbara arranged a meeting with them and the child's homeroom teacher. Mariko later described how Dr. Hanbara explained the significance of the SL supporters' activities, reframing them as communication-based learning and emphasizing their linguistic and cognitive benefits for the child. With Dr. Hanbara's support, the teacher was able to reassess these interactions, and Mariko and Sara gained a clearer understanding of the child's needs, which enabled them to design more effective learning activities.

In Journal 4, Mariko reflected on this experience, stating that she felt her SL team and the elementary school teachers had envisioned the SL project differently. She emphasized that her team viewed language activities as essential for building a relationship with the child, whereas teachers appeared more focused on the child's study habits and learning style—an approach that, according to other team members, was often accompanied by teacher criticism. Mariko expressed feeling encouraged by the teacher's response following the meeting with Dr. Hanbara and stated that she came to feel her team's style of support was not wrong. She also described experiencing a new sense of acceptance from the teacher and reaffirmed her belief that supporting the child's ability to communicate her thoughts freely was ultimately most important. Through critical reflection on her experiences and the impact of Dr. Hanbara's intervention, Mariko recognized the tension between institutional

expectations and her team's goals, while articulating a clear commitment to facilitating the child's self-expression. Her reflection highlights a strong desire to build a meaningful bond with the child, an ability to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, and an awareness of the broader educational purposes of SL engagement.

In contrast, Sara—whose service primarily involved attending "regular" classes with the child—admitted that she felt compelled to follow the teacher's lead and focus on helping the child "catch up" academically. She questioned whether she should reprimand the child when the child behaved in ways the teacher disapproved of, even as she expressed a desire to spend more relaxed and comfortable time with the child. Sara, who noted that she felt uncomfortable scolding anyone outside of her family, continued to feel challenged by the differing and sometimes conflicting expectations placed on SL supporters.

Like Sara, Mio also questioned how best to support a child at her SL site who continued to struggle to express herself in Japanese. Teachers at the school where Mio and her team conducted their SL activities requested that the team support the children's Japanese language development, while also granting them the freedom to determine the form this support would take. For Mio, who was particularly interested in second language development, this presented an opportunity to create materials and explore ways to encourage children to use Japanese without fear of making mistakes. At the same time, she worried about whether her team was doing enough and how best to communicate the students' achievements to the teachers. Because she felt a strong sense of responsibility toward the children, Mio at times struggled to understand how the work of SL supporters was perceived or valued within the school context.

Riku similarly expressed a strong sense of responsibility toward the child he worked with, alongside an awareness that his actions at the school were not independent of his position as a university student. He explained that concern over the possibility of negatively impacting the university through miscommunication or inappropriate behavior motivated him to develop a strong sense of self-discipline. Unlike some of his peers, however, Riku did not feel the need to negotiate with teachers regarding the purpose or practice of his support. This was due in part to the school's long-standing involvement with Dr. Hanbara's project, as well as the fact that the youth he worked with clearly communicated the type of support he needed. As a result, Riku focused more on communicating effectively with the immigrant youth than with teachers. This approach allowed him to develop a co-learning

space with the child and led him to recognize that he could learn a great deal from someone younger than himself—an insight he had not previously considered.

Overall, SL participants provided differentiated forms of support to immigrant youth across diverse school sites. Unsurprisingly, they were required to negotiate their service in site-specific ways, whether through interactions with teachers or directly with immigrant youth. These differences in service contexts and school environments meant that SL experiences were not uniform and that each team or individual developed distinct skills and strategies. Importantly, however, all participants navigated these complexities in ways they believed would foster stronger relationships and provide more meaningful support to the immigrant youth with whom they worked.

Empathy for Immigrant Children: Creating Ibasho

Expressions of empathy for immigrant children, particularly regarding their schooling experiences, were among the most prominent themes in the journal data. Tokunaga's (2021) concept of *ibasho*—spaces where immigrant students can communicate their identities and "be themselves"—was both a topic of class discussion and a featured prompt in Journal 2.

Mariko reflected that creating *ibasho* with immigrant children could counter assimilationist pressures and help children who feel different from their peers find comfort and belonging. She demonstrated empathy toward the child she supported, noting the child's worries about differences between her home culture and Japanese culture, and expressing her desire to provide opportunities for the child to express herself freely. Similarly, Mio emphasized that *ibasho* provides a sense of safety, allowing children's identities to be acknowledged and their feelings accepted. She connected this idea to the struggles faced by minority language speakers, such as the inability to communicate needs effectively, and recognized the potential isolation these children might experience. Applying this concept to her SL work, Mio focused on increasing children's talk time at her SL site to encourage sharing of interests and ideas—a step she saw as foundational to creating *ibasho*. Likewise, Sara described *ibasho* as a place of relief for immigrant children and maintained that SL supporters have a responsibility to help create spaces where immigrant children can feel relieved.

Other participants highlighted *ibasho* as a form of belonging linked to mental health and emotional security. Riku's reflection highlighted the importance of physical and emotional

safety. Although his SL activities focused on academic support for a high school entrance exam, he intentionally integrated emotional support to reduce stress and foster comfort. In Journal 2, Ayaka emphasized identity affirmation as central to *ibasho*, particularly for immigrant children with roots in multiple cultures. She suggested that *ibasho* could help immigrant children avoid identity crises and discover new cultural environments, affirming that the creation of comfortable spaces is a core goal of SL work with immigrant children. Ayaka revealed her understanding of *ibasho* as an open, relaxed, safe space that allows immigrant children"to maintain a connection to their cultural heritage while … navigating the complexities of a new cultural environment." She further noted that "by integrating *ibasho* into [her] service-learning activities, [she aimed] to create a supportive environment that fosters emotional well-being for the students." Ayaka's writing emphasized not only empathy with immigrant children, but also a recognition that creating *ibasho* requires intentional action. She understood that providing safe spaces, fostering communication, and affirming identities are active, ongoing processes. Empathy alone is insufficient; it must be accompanied by strategies and behaviors that enable children to feel comfortable, seen, heard, and supported.

Although Ayaka's explanation of *ibasho* was perhaps the most developed writing of the SL cohort, all participants continued to insert the term *ibasho* in class discussion throughout the semester and recognized its importance for the development of honest interactions between SL supporters and immigrant children. Moreover, for SL participants co-creating *ibasho* with immigrant children is both a way of activating SL support as well as an outcome of SL support.

Discussion

Findings from this study suggest the importance of sustained, experiential engagement in fostering empathy and understanding toward immigrant children in local Japanese schools. The concept of *ibasho*, as described by Tokunaga (2021), highlights the critical need for safe spaces where immigrant students can communicate their identities and "be themselves" without fear of judgment or the pressure to speak *perfect* Japanese. Creating such spaces may be essential to the mental health and well-being of these children. The concept has gained attention in both educational research and policy discourse in Japan (Tanaka, 2021; Tokunaga, 2021; Tokunaga et al., 2022), emphasizing the broader social and institutional relevance of students' reflections in this study.

In the present SL course, participants' engagement with readings on immigrant children's experiences, paired with opportunities for experiential learning and reflective journaling, appeared to deepen their understanding of the challenges these children face in Japanese schools. More importantly, it motivated participants to apply this understanding actively. For example, SL students participated in *ibasho* cafés at local high schools, which provided spaces for Japanese and immigrant students to converse freely in multiple languages. These experiences allowed participants not only to support immigrant children but also to reflect on their own identities, privileges, and roles as allies in educational settings.

Consistent with Homma's (2021) findings, participants demonstrated awareness of the cultural and systemic misalignments between teachers' expectations and the lived realities of immigrant children and their families. Journals and class discussions revealed students' recognition that children's lives extend beyond school walls, encompassing practices such as religious observances that teachers overlooked or misunderstood. This awareness underscores the importance of *ibasho* as a tangible site for empathy, advocacy, and learning. At the same time, participants recognized that creating *ibasho* alone is insufficient; systemic change in school culture—from an assimilationist framework toward multicultural inclusion—is essential to ensure that immigrant children are meaningfully included in all aspects of schooling (Delakorda Kawashima, 2025). SL students, equipped with empathy, reflection, and practical experience, are uniquely positioned to facilitate dialogue with educators and contribute to these transformations.

The findings also highlight the ways in which SL students developed sustained relationships with the children and youth they supported. Many participants continued to engage with immigrant and language minority children beyond the course, reflecting a commitment to long-term advocacy. In their journals, students critically assessed local school policies and practices, including the placement of language minority children in special education, limitations on mathematics instruction for minority students, and patterns of classroom exclusion. Even in their first SL course, students demonstrated the ability to identify inequities and consider interventions, illustrating how reflection and experiential learning cultivate both empathy and actionable understanding.

In a broader context, the study indicates that SL can provide a meaningful framework for promoting social justice engagement in higher education, particularly in settings where discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion remain limited. In Japan, as well as in Hong Kong and Malaysia, SL courses that involve sustained interaction with minority youth have

the potential to enhance civic engagement, deepen students' understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity, and encourage advocacy for educational equity (Ma Hok Ka, 2024; Ma Hok Ka et al., 2019).

Limitations

The study is limited in scope to a single city and limited by its focus on SL participants in one semester of a two-to- four semester course. The SL participants in this study did not discontinue their work with immigrant youth, nor did the development of critical insights suddenly stop at the end of the spring semester. A longitudinal study would allow for a more in-depth consideration of students' attitudes toward the communities they serve, their realizations and insights about systemic inequalities in Japanese schooling, the modifications and improvements they make to their ongoing service, and the methods by which university students co-create *ibasho* and a sense of community with immigrant children. Moreover, including the voices of immigrant children, parents and teachers would allow for a better understanding of the impact of SL student impact on stakeholders in the community. Although the study may be considered exploratory, it is hoped that its findings and limitations provide suggestions for future research by SL practitioners in Japan.

Conclusion

The study's findings, though limited, indicate that SL courses can motivate university students to engage meaningfully with foreign residents and to build deeper interpersonal and community connections. Through reflection, dialogue, and direct support, students in the study were able to integrate academic readings with experiential knowledge and begin to identify actionable strategies for improving schooling experiences for immigrant children. Participants' ongoing engagement—continuing to support children and advocate for more inclusive practices after course completion—suggests that SL pedagogy fosters not only empathy but also practical skills for sustained community impact. Although not all service-learning programs lead students to advocacy, this study suggests that long-term engagement is a key condition for such outcomes. Just as students learned that sustained involvement with children is essential for building trust and understanding, extended participation in SL is necessary for developing the interpersonal and critical capacities required to advocate for a more equitable education system for all.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Spring 2024 Service-Learning Course Student Participants

Student	Gender	Year in university	Nationality/ Ethnicity	Previous enrollment in SL	Enrolled in fall semester
A	M	2	Malaysian	No	Yes
B	F	3	Malaysian	No	Yes
C	F	3	Chinese	No	Yes
D	F	2	Japanese	No	Yes
E	F	2	Japanese	No	Yes
F	M	2	Japanese	No	Yes
G	F	3	Japanese	No	Yes
H	F	4	Japanese	Yes	No
I	F	2	Japanese	No	Yes
J	F	3	Japanese	No	No
K	F	4	Japanese	Yes	No
L	M	4	Japanese	Yes	No
M	F	2	Japanese	No	Yes
N	F	3	Japanese	No	No
O	F	3	Brazilian	No	Yes
P	M	3	Japanese	No	Yes
Q	M	4	Japanese	No	No

Note: Gender is coded as M = male, F = female. "SL" refers to service-learning.

Appendix B

Table 2 : Spring 2024 Service-Learning Support Community

Student participants	Community partner school	Youth supported and weekly sessions	Type and place of support
A & Q	H Middle School	1 youth; 1 hour/once per week	School classroom after or during other classes; academic subject support; high school entrance exam support
B, E, G, J, K & N	K Elementary School	1 youth; 2 class times, two days per week	In-class shadowing; Japanese language support; pull-out class support; *ibasho*
C	M High School	1 youth; 1 hour/once per week	School classroom after classes; mental support; mother tongue support; *ibasho*
D & L	M High School	3 youth; 1 hour/once per week	School classroom during lunch; English language support; *ibasho*
F & P	A High School	Several youth; 1 hour or more/once per week, or sporadically	School classroom after school; one-to-one and group support on student projects; *ibasho*
H, I & M	K Middle School	3 youth; 1 hour/once per week	School classroom after school; Japanese language support; play
O	M Middle School	1 youth; 1 hour/once per week	School classroom after school; Japanese language and subject support; *ibasho*

Note: ibasho refers to a supportive space where students can relax, communicate, and "be themselves."

Appendix C

Self-Reflection Journal #2

Directions: *Choose 6 of the following questions or prompts, and write at least 1 paragraph in response. Everyone should respond to #'s 1 & 2, but you are free to choose from among the other questions or prompts*.

1. Describe your first (or first two or three) meeting(s) with the a) teachers, b) students and/or others at your site. Describe it in as much detail as you can. What was discussed? What was decided? Who did what or took on what role/s? What did you do? How long did you spend at the site? What did you learn so far? What questions do you have?

2. What is *ibasho*? What did you learn about the importance of *ibasho* from Tokunaga's reading? How do you think the concept or practice of *ibasho* might connect to your service-learning site or the children/young adults you work with? How might you connect *ibasho* to your service-learning work?

3. Describe your ideal learning environment. Then describe your ideal learning environment for learning a second or foreign language. Are they the same? If yes, explain and describe why this is so. If not, explain how they are different and why. How might understanding your own ideal learning environment help you in this service-learning course? How do you think this course will challenge you this semester?

4. Look at exercise 3.3 about your identity on page 40 (chapter 3) of your service-learning text by Cress et al. (2013). Write and answer the three questions.

5. Explain the ideas of helping, fixing & serving that are discussed in chapter 3 (pp. 44-45) of Cress et al. According to the authors, which of these terms is most appropriate to use in relation to the work you are doing or will do with your community partner/s? Why? Explain.

6. What are the seven C's that are discussed in the reading (chapter 3) by Cress et al. (2013)? Explain them in relation to service-learning work. Why are they important? How do they apply to you and your work or the work you do in this course?

7. How do you currently understand your role at your service-learning site? What are your responsibilities at your service site? What are the underlying issues, and why do they exist? Why does the organization need you to assist with those particular responsibilities?

8. What are you learning at your site about the beneficiaries being served? What are you learning about the organization? What are you learning about the community issues being addressed?

9. What were some positive and negative experiences you had this week? What were the best and worst parts about them? How can you use these experiences to develop who you are as a service-learner and actively engaged citizen?

Appendix D

Self-Reflection Journal #4

Directions: *Choose 6 of the following questions or prompts, and write at least 1 paragraph in response. Everyone should respond to #'s 1 & 2, but you are free to choose from among the other questions or prompts*.

1. What did you understand from Kuwahara's reading about the recent history of immigration in Japan? How might this article support your understanding of the students you work with during your service-learning project? How might it help your understanding of the context in which immigrants live in Japan?

2. Describe the stages that individuals are said to go through on their way to intercultural sensitivity and competence. How do you see yourself relative to these different stages? In other words, what "stage" are you "in" now? Consider this via your service learning activity. (Cress et. al. 2013, chapter 5 pp. 81–85)

3. Which aspects of your cultural identity are most important to you? (e.g. gender, region of the country, socioeconomic class, educational background, other factors) How might your cultural identity/ies affect your interactions at your service learning site?

4. Are you aware of any stereotypes regarding the community/ies you are working with? (Consider teachers, students, parents etc.) Explain. How do stereotypes affect your ability to work at your service learning site? How is this experience influencing your assumptions, opinions, and values?

5. What are some of your interactions like with the teachers, staff (including the principal and vice principal), other supporters, and children at your site? Why do you think these interactions occur the way they do? Are you interacting with a certain population for the first time? How does this influence your thoughts or behavior?

6. If you have supported children or youth in your service-learning in any way since your last self- reflection journal, explain what has worked, and what hasn't worked. Explain and give details of observable outcomes.

7. What activities are you involved in at your service-learning site? Has anything changed at your service-learning site since your last self-reflection journal? Explain.

8. What are some connections that you are making or have already made? How do you envision these connections developing in the near and/or distant future?

9. What are you learning at your site about the children or youth you are working with? What are you learning about the teachers/ principals/organization/school/community?

10. What insight would you share with someone interested in participating in the same type of service as yours?

Author's Biography

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