

Walking the line between Peru and Japan
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Mr. Moorehead is currently studying the relationship between Japan's self-identification as a racially and ethnically homogenous country and the experiences of foreign migrant workers and their families. In his fieldwork, he has been volunteering at an elementary school in a neighborhood with a large Peruvian community and a smaller number of Bolivian and Brazilian immigrants.

My fieldwork at a Japanese public elementary school began dramatically, as a Japanese teacher explained his views on Latinos. "Do you know '*hasta mañana*' (until tomorrow)," he asked me in Japanese. My stomach tightened as I sensed what was to follow. "Peruvians and Brazilians are Latino. They don't work, and they don't value time. It's always '*hasta mañana*.' '*Raten-kei dakara*,'" he explained. "It's because they're Latino."

Amid national and local public policy discussions of developing Japan into a multicultural society, in Japanese public schools, teachers often complain that foreign residents of Japan are not acquiring Japanese language and culture quickly enough, and are remaining too foreign. In contrast, foreign parents of children in those schools complain about the structural constraints that limit their ability to effectively interact with the school, despite their desire to be more involved.

I have found myself right in the middle of this debate, mediating between Japanese teachers and Latino parents as the sole Spanish-Japanese interpreter and translator for a school of over 800 students, including 45 from Latin America. Nearly all of these 45 students come from Spanish-speaking homes, although Japanese is often the children's primary language. Most of these families come from Peru and have lived in Japan for 15 years. The parents work in local auto parts and electronics factories, in 10- to 12-hour, rotating day and night shifts, five to six days a week. At the parents' request, I have also been teaching free Spanish classes on Saturdays to the local Peruvian and Bolivian children.

I have tried to keep a relatively neutral stance between the teachers and the parents, trying to walk the line between groups sociologist Willard Wilder called "natural enemies." Teachers have been cordial and appreciative, welcoming me into their classrooms and occasionally turning to me for advice. The parents have been similarly generous, inviting me into their homes, agreeing to interviews, and insisting that I stay for a Peruvian dinner. But trying to maintain a functional balance between these two sides has been like trying to serve two masters. Each side sees me as an ally, meanwhile, a third master, my dissertation, continually calls for me to avoid choosing sides and to keep taking notes.

Thankfully, teachers like above are rare in the school, and most teachers genuinely care for the Latino children in their classes. Similarly, many Latino parents get along well with their children's teachers and

their children are performing well in school. Yet, serious problems exist at the school, as some Latino children never seem to close the gap between themselves and their Japanese classmates. Instead, they advance to the next grade each year without mastering the academic material. Some teachers also seem resigned to not being able to communicate with Latino parents and rarely solicit translations of the materials they are sending home. Absent a coherent plan for providing remedial instruction to children who are slipping through the cracks, tensions between Japanese teachers and Latino parents remain. In response, teachers often cite these tensions as evidence of defects in Latino culture.

I had intended to enter the school and observe, to use my language skills as a way to gain entrée to the site and build rapport with teachers and parents. I did not anticipate having my mere presence lead to people becoming increasingly dependent on me. When the school year ends in March, my fieldwork there will also end. As that date approaches, I keep hearing cries of "What will we do without you," in Japanese and Spanish, on an increasingly frequent basis. To ease my discomfort over having such an impact on my field site, I keep reminding myself that this dependence on me has been caused not by my deliberately altering my field site, but by the absence of more formal support for parents and teachers. After I leave, the school will likely return to its previous state of dysfunction.

The challenge of getting up and going to work each day when you do not particularly like some of your co-workers is fairly common. However, going to work and taking notes on those co-workers for later publication is rather unusual and difficult to manage. As the months pass in my fieldwork, the ethical responsibility of fairly representing the lives of everyone in the school, both those I may like and those I may not, weighs heavily on me. I have been accepted into the social world of the school, and I need to fairly represent that world in my writing. But doing that while, at the same time, remaining intensely critical of the school's missteps will be a continuing challenge and responsibility for me.

To deal with this, I have sought refuge in the children, joking with them in their creolized mix of Spanish and Japanese, playing *onigokko* [Japanese children's game] on the playground, and accompanying them as they walk home from school. In a society stereotyped as being cold and distant, Japan's children, both Latino and Japanese, thrive on constant contact and closeness. This closeness has sustained me

throughout my fieldwork.

As I walk down the halls each morning and hear the school reverberate as classes sing and practice the recorder, I try to reconcile my views on the school's problems with the joy and energy that echo down the halls. It may be too early to know what the future holds for these children, but it is clear that some Japanese schools are not ready to guide them all to their destination.

