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**Oizumi Public Library:
Bridging Cultures in Partnership with Community Resources**

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Abstract

Oizumi is a small town in Gunma prefecture. However, the town is well known as one of the most culturally diverse communities in Japan, a traditionally homogeneous country. Over 6,600 residents are foreign born, 15% of the entire population. Most of the foreign residents are from South American countries, especially from Brazil. After the Immigration Control Law was changed in 1990, it became easier for those who are descended from Japanese immigrant to South America to come and work in Japan to ease the labor shortage.

Even though they have shared heritage of their ancestors, many do not speak Japanese. They have difficulties to communicate with Japanese and understand Japanese way of doing. From the beginning to accept them as guest workers, local government, schools, library and other resources in town have been working together in order to live together harmoniously.

Oizumi, a multicultural town

1. History

Oizumi is located in Gunma prefecture and it is about 80 kilometers northwest of Tokyo. In spite of the fact that Oizumi covers an area of 17.93 square kilometers and is the smallest town in Gunma; it has its largest populations. Oizumi is a lively and bustling industrial area. In 1950's, many subcontractors related to the consumer-electronics maker, Sanyo, and the car maker, Subaru, built factories in this area. After that, food companies, printing companies, and so on

came to the industrial park developed by Oizumi local government.

2. An influx of temporary immigrant workers

The population of Oizumi became 42,391 in the end of December 2005, with 6,753 of them being immigrants and their dependents. They account for 15% of all residents which means that one out of seven people is foreign born. This is the largest proportion of foreign born residents in city or town in Japan. According to their nationalities, 90% of them came from South American countries such as Brazil (4,953), and Peru (859).

The number of registered alien has grown radically after the Immigration Control Law was changed in 1990. Japanese-Brazilians, Japanese-Peruvians and other Japanese descents were granted special residence permission. The reason why Japanese government changed the law at that time resulted from the shortage of manpower especially in medium and small sized industries. Employers sought workers to hire for their factories. Manufacturers facing a shortage of workers and the Oizumi local government have made a special effort to work together from the beginning when they decided to accept immigrants as guest workers.

Action plans by local government

Soon after the change in the Immigration Control Law, the municipal government received around 30 registrations of foreigners daily. Even if these people have shared heritage of Japanese descent; many don't speak Japanese. Their culture and way of life are different from their ancestors. Staff working at the municipal section of revenue, welfare, health care, education, and so on had a meeting and discussed how to treat people who do not speak Japanese and how to manage this unfamiliar situation. Language was identified as the biggest problem among the participants at the meeting. A teacher from a nursery school pointed out the difficulty of communication between parents and teachers. In contrast to Children of foreign guest workers, it is the parents who usually have trouble learning another language in addition to their mother tongue.

The following action plan was put into place.

1. Employment of Japanese-Brazilian bilingual staff

In April 1991, the local government hired a woman who came from Sao Paulo to work at the municipal administration office. She was hired to translate documents issued by local government, mediate between Japanese and Brazilians, and listen to new comers problems. Then, another bilingual staff member was placed at the window of the Alien Registration Office.

2. Distributing information in Portuguese

Thanks to bilingual staff, many kinds of documents and announcements have been published in Portuguese. In August 1991, a Japanese-Portuguese bilingual pamphlet, "A Handbook for Residents" was issued. It contained almost everything someone needed to know to live in Oizumi, such as Alien Registration, tax payment, health insurance, education, public facilities, garbage

collection, anti-disaster measures, consultation of living, etc. This kind of bilingual pamphlet is thought to have been the first publication of this kind in Japan at that time.

In Japan, garbage trucks collect the waste at fixed stations and on fixed days during a week. Often disputes between foreigners and Japanese arise because of the way they dispose of garbage. The local government has put the signs in English at the garbage stations since 1989. In 1991, signs in Portuguese were added. The town also publishes and distributes a calendar of garbage collection days in Portuguese.

Many kinds of bilingual announcements such as for health checks and vaccinations at the public health center, and tax filing requirements are also published in Portuguese.

3. Information as public relations

Breaking the language barrier and sharing information with multicultural groups is essential to living together in the same community. Since March 1992, Oizumi authorities have published a monthly bulletin named “Garapa” in Portuguese with information for the target group. Furthermore, a separate bulletin introducing Japanese culture has been also published irregularly. These bulletins are distributed through public facilities, Brazilian stores, companies where they work, nursery schools, elementary schools, and middle schools.

4. Promoting tripartite meetings in districts

Even though multicultural populations increase in a community, there are less connections between residents and new comers. Especially, in rural area there are many kinds of traditional culture, customs and rules. People have helped each other within their neighborhood traditionally. The Oizumi authorities try to encourage new comers to understand these customs and rules to participate in community activities. The promotion of tripartite meetings, consisting of community mediators, foreign residents, and local government staff is also encouraged.

Programs to minority children

1. The establishment of Japanese as second language classes

The more new comers with their families come to Oizumi, the more foreign born children are seen in elementary and middle schools. Schools are facing challenges with children who do not understand Japanese. In October 1990, Japanese classes were established in three elementary schools where many children from South America are enrolled. In JSL classes, bilingual staff and Japanese staff teach Japanese, Japanese history, civics, etc. to students who have difficulties using the Japanese language.

2. Research on the school attendance of minority children

The Oizumi government sends school enrollment information to the parents of every child of school age in the same manner as that sent to Japanese families. However, less than 40% of children enter public elementary school. When a family moves to Oizumi, we recommend a consultation with the board of education. Students, however, are not always transferred to

schools in Oizumi. In addition, some students drop out from school because of poor academic achievement and the difficulty of school life. In 2002, the Oizumi government and Gunma University conducted research on school attendance of minority children. As a result, 50% of all minority students go to elementary and middle school in town. Other students go to private Brazilian schools. However, 5% of all students do not take advantage of the opportunity to get an education. Even though the majority of minority school age children do go to school, they still need support.

Library services to multicultural populations

The Oizumi Public Library moved into a new two-story building in July 1989. The floor has an area of 2,052 square meters. Library has more than 140,000 books and other materials. The annual circulation is almost 300,000 books and other materials.

1. The International Library Corner

Children who came to Japan when they were under 10 years of age can acquire Japanese language quickly; however, they are more prone to easily forget their mother tongue. Parents who care about this situation asked the local government to provide Portuguese books in library for their children. Although it took a little time to accomplish, in 2000 the International Library Corner opened on the second floor of Oizumi Public Library.

The collection is now about 3,000 books, 2,500 of which are Portuguese books, 150 are Spanish, and 300 are English. Those books can be categorized as fiction (1,000), children's books (600), language and reference (300), and biology and non-fiction (200). In addition to books, there are AV materials as well. In 2001, internet access was made available to the public, and users can access websites in Portuguese.

2. Data input by volunteers

Library is also supported by minority volunteers who help with acquisitions and cataloging. Books in Portuguese are cataloged and put into bibliographic database. At first, students of Brazilian schools volunteered to input data and the library continues to have volunteers help.

3. Multilingual materials

Library provides materials in Portuguese and other languages in order to meet the needs of minority people. In addition, we also provide related materials for them to study Japanese. Public elementary schools in Oizumi started teaching English to students by Assistant English Teacher (AET), native English speakers. This is one of the special projects certified by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. In cooperation with teachers, our library purchased 70 English picture books for the English classes last year. We also aimed to introduce the cultures of other countries to Japanese children.

4. Multilingual library guide

The Oizumi Public Library provides a multilingual guide to the library written in Japanese, English, and Portuguese to encourage using library. The library website now has a Portuguese version, and the library website can place reserves for Portuguese materials online. In the library, there are signs and announcements written in all three languages. Communication with minorities is very important, therefore, the library has prepared sample messages in Portuguese. These sample messages are used if library staff needs to talk to users in Portuguese. For example, 'You can't eat and drink in the second floor,' or 'The first floor opens until 22 o'clock,' and so on in Portuguese.

5. Multicultural programs

The library offers several English programs for children. One is the "International exchange meeting" where the Assistant English Teachers and children play together. The other is "Japanese traditional stories in English" where the Assistant English Teachers read books and narrate stories with pictures for children.

6. Multilingual salon

The "Multilingual salon" is a program developed to help children mainly from South America who have difficulties in Japanese schools or who have dropped out of schools. Research has shown that approximately 5% of all minority children have no opportunity to get education. Every Saturday library opens the "Multilingual salon" in the library in order to assist them in studying Japanese. The "Multilingual salon" is also open to people who want to study Portuguese, Spanish, and English. Recently Japanese, Brazilian, and Peruvian adults have also joined this salon and the salon is lively.

The trend of minority library users

Recently, the members of Chinese trainees working in Japanese companies have increased. They borrow mainly movie videos.

Japanese descents from South America are gradually becoming permanent residents of Japan. These people are inclined to read Japanese text books and materials on Japan. Some use Japanese traditional stories, movies, and animation for studying Japanese.

Oizumi Public Library attempts to provide multicultural services in cooperation with local government, teachers, and people in community in order to help people of many nations to live together harmoniously.

(This paper was translated from Japanese by Yasuko Hirata, Susan Clark assisted with the English.)