

## The *Wa* Concept and its Effects on Deaf Education in Japan

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### ABSTRACT

Japanese society has been noted for the emphasis it places on social harmony. As with other cultural values, ideas of harmony may have played a part in the written and unwritten rules of the community. As a marginalized group whose existence itself is seen to not be in accordance with the norm, disabled people might particularly be affected by such normative values. This research discusses how values within the *wa* concept are interwoven in the educational practice for deaf children, as well as the effects it has on them. Values of self-reliance and 'sameness' push deaf children into assimilation, and to become independent society members that can adapt to the comfort of their surroundings. The deaf education system that has been permeated by the *wa* concept has resulted in numerous issues, mainly in regard to the childrens' linguistic skills, as well as social and emotional development. This research shows that while the *wa* concept is supposed to create societal harmony, normative values created through the lens of the wider and typical society could create a paradoxical situation when applied to marginalized groups such as deaf people.

**Keywords:** *wa*, harmony, Japan, deaf education, special support education

### INTRODUCTION

Deaf children are often years behind their hearing peers in terms of academic subjects (Fedorowicz, 2019). This is because the priority put upon children in Japanese deaf schools is to learn the ability to communicate orally, which may take up so much time that it hinders their academic progress in comparison to hearing children (Fedorowicz, 2019). The process of learning a spoken language is not natural for deaf children, and research has shown that deaf children retain information better without oral aspects in classes (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:40; White & Stevenson, 1975). However, it seems that oral language acquisition still seems to be prioritized or held in high regard. Deaf children are considered brighter than their deaf peers if they can pick up some speech (Fedorowicz, 2019). Oftentimes, they are mainstreamed into 'regular' non-deaf schools, which still have negative attitudes towards disabled children and pressure them to assimilate (Fedorowicz, 2019; Forlin et al.; Sato & Hodge in McGuire, 2020:200). It can be said that one characteristic of Japanese deaf education is the push for deaf children to communicate according to what is seen as the norm.

The formation of norms and the way they are enforced, be it through formal or informal methods, are closely tied to a group's cultural beliefs. Norms that reflect cultural values are often seen as a means to achieve collective order. There are many costs to norm enforcement, but the dominant suggestion is that it is done because of the positive outcomes that it brings (Horne, 2007:140).

In Iwakuma (2011), it is stated that disability is a social construction that is not free from norms, value systems, or other cultural factors. Iwakuma's article mentions how slight deviation from the norm is quick to be noticed and criticized by the tight and collectivistic Japanese society. Japanese society puts an emphasis on efficiency and dictates orderliness; diversity, including diversity in bodily constructs, is seen to disturb said efficiency and the status quo (Iwakuma, 2011).

Iwakuma's article touches upon the topic of disability, normativity, and diversity. However, Iwakuma's article seems to discuss disabled persons as a whole, as opposed to how I plan on taking a more specific route with this article. While the deaf label also falls under the disabled category and may include some shared experiences with others in the bracket, many aspects of deafness provide an entirely distinctive experience for deaf individuals. Deafness is unique to other categories of disabilities in the sense that deaf persons can not naturally discern spoken language or hear their own voices. This greatly affects their natural communication style and form of language. Deaf people's inability to naturally take in spoken language puts them not only against physical normativity but also *linguistic* normativity, which is linked even closer to a group's cultural identity.

There is a lack of papers on the topic of Japanese cultural values and normativity and its relation to Japanese deaf education. In 2015, researchers Hayashi and Tobin published an article titled *Contesting Visions at a Japanese School for the Deaf*, which touches upon the subject of Japanese values that affect the usage of language instruction in one public deaf school. While Hayashi and Tobin mainly focused on a certain deaf school, I find that it would be intriguing to not only analyze deaf education practice in deaf schools but in mainstream schools as well. Hayashi and Tobin's article also provides more personal experiences and perspectives through direct sources. Meanwhile, I find that it would be an interesting perspective to use textual sources to analyze how cultural values related to normativity have permeated their way into the deaf education practice in Japan.

To discuss this topic of normativity within the Japanese context, and its relation to Japanese deaf education, I would like to utilize the *wa* concept, which could be said to be the traditional Japanese concept of harmony.

Japan is known by others as a country that puts an emphasis on social harmony. Conceptually, *wa* is behavioral standards that society members are expected and pressured to conform to; it dictates appropriate behavior and helps shape relations and interactions between society members (Hirata & Warschauer, 2014). The *wa* concept puts collective needs above individual ones and refers to the idea of working together to obtain the same goal (Rayhan, 2023). Through certain behavioral standards that people adhere to, a state of societal harmony is expected to be achieved.

In their book *Japan: The Paradox of Harmony* (2014), researchers Hirata and Warschauer named some aspects or behavioral standards under the *wa* concept, and I feel that two of them are most fitting for the discussion in this article. The first is *Self Reliance and Service to Others*. According to Hirata and Warschauer, independence within the Japanese system emphasizes communal interest and Japanese society expects its members to be self-reliant and minimize their burden on others. The second is *Rigid Orderliness*, an aspect that includes enforced equality and ‘*sameness*’. There is a Japanese saying that translates to ‘the nail that sticks out gets hammered down’, so Japanese children learn to not stick out (Hirata & Warschauer, 2014). According to Hirata and Warschauer, the rigidity of *wa* has the potential to heighten feelings of dissatisfaction, and in reality, serves to intensify conflicts in the country. This is the paradox of the *wa* concept, a concept that is meant to enforce behaviors or norms for the sake of collective harmony, but in a way that could disturb said harmony instead.

As previously stated, norms are likely enforced for the sake of a beneficial result (Horne, 2007:140). However, who exactly is the benefitting party, the one that reaps the supposedly positive outcome? While the *wa* concept, which enforces norms and behaviors that are expected to create societal harmony, exists within the minds of Japanese people, it is undeniable that within each cultural group, cases of deviation from norms are inevitable.

I would like to analyze and address two questions throughout this article. First, how is the *wa* concept reflected in the implementation of deaf education in Japan? Second, how does this educational system and practice, which has been affected by values of *wa*, affect deaf children in turn?

Through this research, I hope to give more insight into this aspect of Japanese culture and unravel how this Japanese concept of harmony, which is tightly knitted to the topic of normativity, affects deaf persons in Japan. Therefore, by elaborating on the specific ways the *wa* concept has permeated through the educational policy and practice for deaf persons, I hope to give readers more understanding of the paradoxical nature of norms, the delicate nature of societal harmony, as well as the complex nature of this aspect of Japanese culture in general.

## METHOD

This qualitative research will utilize textual sources, such as ones from academic journals, books, or news articles that report deaf education practice in Japan. The data obtained will be used to analyze the role of traditional Japanese notion of harmony in the world of deaf education, as well as the effects (or, borrowing the words of Hirata and Warschauer in their book (2014), *paradox*) that it creates. Findings will start from basic information on the education system for disabled people in Japan, as well as on the subject of Deaf identity and language. The subchapter is expected to give readers brief, yet adequate, information to help them understand the discussions in this article. The topic will be followed by a subchapter on the values of *wa* that can be seen in the

current practice of deaf education. Lastly, there will be a subchapter on the effect of said education, which has been affected by *wa*, on deaf students.

Readers may find that throughout this article, the word 'deaf' is at times written with or without capitalization. This article utilizes the d/Deaf concept which separates the definition of 'deaf' (without capital-D) and 'Deaf' (with capital-D). According to the Canadian Association of the Deaf, the word 'deaf' refers to medically deaf people, who have little to no functional hearing (2015). The association describes 'Deaf' people as medically deaf and hard-of-hearing people who sign as their preferred mode of communication; these people are participants in the language, community, and culture that are based on sign language.

This article mostly discusses medically deaf children, who may or may not identify as Deaf. In spite of that, sign language and Deaf ways of living are essential to discussions surrounding deafness. Therefore, I have decided to utilize this capitalization concept for semantic clarity. This concept will be used throughout this article aside from titles or beginnings of sentences, which have their own rules on capital letters.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Identity and Education of Japanese Deaf Persons**

Prior to diving deeper into analyzing the values of *wa* within the deaf education system in Japan, I would like to provide the readers with information about the deaf or Deaf community in Japan and the type of education they receive.

In 2006, Japan went through an education reform that changed Tokushu Kyouiku, or Special Education into Tokubetsu Shien Kyouiku, or Special Support Education (Monbukagakushou, 2020:4). This educational change is anchored in the philosophy of inclusive education, and dictates state or local authorities to provide disabled children with educational support which correspond to their needs (Mithout, 2016:165-168). This reform aims to further develop existing support structures in mainstream schools, such as by opening more special classes and giving enhanced training for teachers (Mithout, 2016:169). Additionally, special schools dedicated to one category of disability also evolve, becoming special support schools that are open to children with other categories of disabilities as well (Mithout, 2016:170).

The Japanese education system has adopted the inclusive philosophy, which intends to fulfill the individual needs of disabled students including the deaf. However, due to inadequate teacher training and negative attitudes towards disabled students, on top of the continuing pressure for them to assimilate, it seems that the reality of the situation reflects the principle of integration more than inclusivity (Forlin et al.; Sato & Hodge in McGuire, 2020).

As I had previously stated in the introduction, deaf persons do not only have to deal with norms of physical constructs but norms of language and communication as well. Deaf children are encouraged to integrate into the wider, non-deaf, Japanese society. Deaf children who are able to pick up some speech are considered brighter than those

who cannot (Fedorowicz, 2019). Aside from speech, under the Total Communication approach which is endorsed by the government, deaf students may also use signing as a form of communication in classes (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:25). However, the form of signing widely used for deaf education is the Japanese language in signed form, as opposed to the naturally-formed Japanese Sign Language (JSL) which is embraced by the Deaf community.

The Deaf, with a capital-D, identity is a sociocultural or quasi-ethnic label that centers on sign language. It is easy to dismiss the idea of deafness as a cultural identity if one does not view sign language as a genuine language, or underestimate the relation between language and cultural practices. However, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, held by the United Nations in 2006, recognizes sign language as a valid language (Takashima, 2020). When sign languages get recognized, other practices associated with languages such as wordplays, patterns of greetings, and traditional story-telling also get recognized (Senghas & Monaghan, 2002:78). Through recognizing sign language as a genuine language, in addition to recognizing that acquiring spoken language is unnatural for deaf persons, the idea of deaf people experiencing a different culture than hearing people seems to be a matter of course.

Deafness as a cultural identity started surfacing in Japan in the 1990s. During the time, an activist group called D-Pro proclaimed that Deaf people are a linguistic minority that uses JSL as their language (Kimura & Ichida in Nakamura 2006:9). In Nakamura (2006), the author describes D-Pro as a radical group that insists that Deaf people are linguistically, and culturally, non-Japanese. This is not to say that all or even most Deaf people in Japan see themselves as culturally separate from hearing Japanese people. For example, Meisei Gakuen, the only Japanese deaf school in Japan that officially uses JSL, is described as a bilingual and bicultural school (Meiseigakuen, 2017). Meisei Gakuen uses JSL and written Japanese as its language of instruction, and embraces both Deaf and Japanese culture within its environment. This view and understanding of the Deaf identity as having its own culture correlates with the deaf education in ways that I will elaborate in the later parts.

### Reflections of *Wa* on Japanese Deaf Education

In this subchapter, I would like to analyze reflections of *wa* that have permeated its way through the special support education system for deaf people. As previously stated, the Japanese education system has started adopting an inclusive philosophy. The goal of the Japanese inclusive education curriculum is so disabled persons can live independently while participating in society (Yoneda, 2020). Within the Japanese context, and the one that falls under the *wa* concept, independence is emphasized as a means to lessen one's burden on others (Hirata & Warschauer, 2014). In other words, the independence of disabled persons, including deaf children, is viewed through the lens of how much they can fit themselves into the wider Japanese society.

Values of self-reliance can also be seen in the pedagogical approach used in Japanese deaf schools. In practice, most deaf schools in Japan utilize the Total Communication



approach, a method that uses numerous means of communication for teaching and interacting with students. The use of the approach in public deaf schools is endorsed by MEXT or the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology; its application in the country puts importance on learning how to speak through the use of cued speech, fingerspelling, lip reading, and Signed Japanese (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:25). The official website of MEXT states the importance of appropriate support for 'hearing-impaired' (deaf and hard-of-hearing) children to maximize their potential; maximizing their potential can be done through the utilization of spoken language and various other means of communication. The Ministry clearly specified spoken language on its page, but is quite vague with its use of the phrase 'other means of communication'. Indeed, deaf children are considered brighter than their deaf peers if they can pick up some speech, and not a few of them end up entering mainstream schools (Fedorowicz, 2019).

For deaf children in mainstream schools, they are granted the option to attend a special class outside of the regular class they attend. According to the official MEXT website, these classes are available at the elementary and middle school level. There is an official standardization for these classes, and their aims and methods vary throughout the country (McGuire & Tokunaga, 2020:299). Across Japan, students may receive academic guidance in these classes, but there is also an emphasis put on improving their language skills (McGuire & Tokunaga, 2020:299). For example, at one middle school in Tokyo, the official objectives of the special class for deaf or hard-of-hearing students include improving their speech through speech training (McGuire & Tokunaga, 2020:299). The official MEXT website does state that the curriculum of these special classes can be organized to include instructions on speaking, as well as the use of students' auditory senses. If even deaf schools emphasize the importance of spoken language, it is then not odd for mainstream schools, as a 'normative setting' which mostly takes up non-deaf people, to emphasize the same thing as well.

In Hayashi & Tobin (2015), a MEXT figure with the pseudonym Mikata states that he wants deaf people to have the concept of living in both worlds; a deaf person with an oral education background can sign when they meet other deaf persons, but try their best to speak with their family at home. From this statement alone, it can be concluded that what is expected of deaf people is to be capable of adapting to the communication method of their surroundings. The application of the Total Communication approach for deaf education is backed by the belief that deaf children need to be taught spoken Japanese, as to prepare them for life in the wider Japanese society (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:40). This would not have been an issue if not for the unnatural nature of oral language acquisition for deaf children (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:40). Therefore, putting oral language on the same level (or above) of sign language as a language of instruction in classes could potentially be a cause for concern.

Aside from the emphasis deaf education puts on spoken language, the form of signing used for Japanese deaf education also reflects values of self-reliance within the *wa* concept. Sign language was once banned in Japanese classes for decades until 1993

(Fedorowicz, 2019). After the ban was lifted and schools moved to embrace the Total Communication method, Signed Japanese became the form of signing that is widely used for deaf education. Signed Japanese is a Japanese language that is manually codified into signed form, and in general is used while speaking simultaneously (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:26; Kwak 2015). This form of signing is different from JSL. Natural sign languages, such as JSL, develop among deaf communities and are not representations of oral languages (Lillo-Martin & Henner, 2021:2).

According to Article 3 of the Basic Act for Persons with Disabilities, all disabled persons are, to the extent possible, guaranteed the opportunity to choose their own means of communication, including sign language (Chiba & Iwanaka (Ed.), 2022). The word *shuwa* or sign language is stated in the article, but there is no detail as to which type of sign language the article meant. Not only that, in 2011, the Chiba Deaf Association released a survey result which states that out of 70 deaf schools in Japan, only 55% of the teachers can sign (Chiba ken Choukaku Shougaiha Kyoukai Katsudou Un'ei linkai in Taira, 2015:32). The survey does not seem to differentiate between Signed Japanese and JSL, so it can be assumed that lower than 55% of those teachers are JSL users. Teachers who learned some JSL after getting assigned to deaf schools are also often transferred out of deaf schools, as a part of MEXT's policy on staff rotations (Hayashi & Tobin, 2015:393-394). There are not any new surveys to confirm the increase or decrease of the use of JSL in classrooms, but even in 2023, there is still news reporting on a Deaf student's struggle to obtain education with JSL. The student, who grew up culturally Deaf, reported having a homeroom teacher who teaches Signed Japanese and barely comprehends JSL (Hiraoka, 2023).

How, then, does the fact that Signed Japanese dominate the deaf education scene correlate with the *wa* concept? Firstly, Signed Japanese was initially created by hearing persons (Fedorowicz, 2019). They use the grammatical structure of Spoken Japanese and are often used while speaking simultaneously (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:26). It can be described as a by-product of oral education, and used in deaf schools as one of the means to learn spoken Japanese (Fedorowicz, 2019; Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:25). Deaf people often find Signed Japanese confusing, as it lacks facial expressions and classifiers that are crucial in JSL (Fedorowicz, 2019). The clarity of Deaf ways of thinking is seen to be absent in Signed Japanese (Hayashi & Tobin, 2015:387). One can only conclude that despite the confusing aspects of Signed Japanese for deaf students, it is still widely used due to its closeness to the spoken Japanese language. This circles back to my point that deaf students are expected to be independent, but said independence is independence through the perspective of *wa* which emphasizes self-reliance so as to not burden others, which can be done by adapting their communication method to that of the wider Japanese society.

The use of Signed Japanese, as opposed to JSL, not only correlates to the self-reliance value of the *wa* concept. It also correlates to the aspect of 'sameness' or avoidance of being 'different'. This is due to the perceived societal homogeneity within Japan, as well

as the close link between JSL and the Deaf cultural identity as I had elaborated in the previous subchapter.

In their article from 2015, researchers Akiko Hayashi and Joseph Tobin wrote about the efforts of two teachers from Sapporo School of the Deaf in teaching their students with JSL. Due to the efforts of these teachers, who are supportive of Deaf culture and provide education in natural sign language, the school came to be separated into two programs. The first is a program in favor of oral education; the other is a program in favor of using JSL and without any oral aspects or Signed Japanese, similar to the program used in Meisei Gakuen. In the article, according to a MEXT member with the pseudonym Mikata, 'Deaf culture' is a heavy term in Japan as it suggests the rejection of Japanese culture and the proclamation of belonging to a whole other culture (Hayashi & Tobin, 2015:393). Mikata argues that Japan is a homogenous country without the notion of subcultures; the MEXT member also states that it would be different if Deaf culture is claimed to not be a completely separate thing, and that it would be fine if Deaf culture is said to be a part of or have an overlap with Japanese culture (Hayashi & Tobin, 2015:393).

Japanese homogeneity is a topic that is seldom debated. Prior to the Meiji Era, people in the pre-modern Edo period did not view themselves as 'Japanese', but as members of villages and feudal domains (Narzary, 2004:312). The concept of Japan's homogeneity came into existence due to the imperialistic attitude of Meiji rulers, and it continued to be ingrained in the minds of many Japanese people (Narzary, 2004:312). The rigid conformity enforced by the central government allowed little room for the average Japanese to consider that within the same society, there is a possible existence of socially, culturally, or even racially different individuals (Narzary, 2004:319). This concept of Japanese homogeneity seems to be in line with the value of rigid orderliness of the *wa* concept.

While Japan may not be as homogenous as many believe, the perception of Japan as a homogenous country has been planted inside many people's minds. This is how the language of instruction used in deaf education correlates with the *wa* concept. The use of JSL is seen as a form of support for Deaf culture, which is not in line with ideas of Japan's homogeneity.

The aspect of rigid orderliness does not only correlate with the perception of societal homogeneity but also with the general reluctance to stand-out or be different. For deaf children in mainstream schools, they experience pressure to assimilate. Japanese language acquisition is viewed to be necessary for their assimilation in these monolingual environments (McGuire & Tokunaga, 2020:293). In research by Jennifer McGuire and Tomoko Tokunaga, objectives in one special class for the deaf and hard of hearing in a middle school in Tokyo include training the students' speech, as well as regularly getting their hearing aids and hearing levels tested as an effort of hearing maintenance (McGuire & Tokunaga, 2020:299). This can be seen as an effort to prevent them from becoming 'more deaf', and fit them better into the mold of what a normative society member should be.



Through the language of instruction used in deaf education, and the emphasis put on oral language acquisition, values of self-reliance and sameness are reflected in deaf education in Japan. The way values within the *wa* concept affect the deaf educational policy and practice seems subtle, yet it affects deaf students nonetheless.

### The Effects of *Wa* on Japanese Deaf Children

The previous subchapter has elaborated on the ways the *wa* concept has permeated its way through the practice of deaf education in Japan. How, then, does the deaf education which has been affected by such cultural values, have affected deaf students in turn?

The educational practice for deaf children reflects values of self-reliance. There is an emphasis put on deaf children to adapt to the communication method of the wider society, as well as a compromise to let the children be engaged in signing at schools (albeit mostly in the artificial form of one rather than the natural JSL). Through the Total Communication approach, these schools are endorsed to use signing or other options of communication methods. The freedom that the Total Communication approach provides seems like the perfect compromise between letting deaf children be engaged in signing and becoming familiar with the ways of the wider society. However, it also creates an environment with no *lingua franca* or the shared language of interaction, or even if they did share a language, students may possess comprehension at varying levels (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014).

I previously discussed how much emphasis is put on acquiring spoken language within public deaf schools. Through the utilization of the Total Communication approach, deaf students may also use signing or other options of communication methods in classes. Although the approach seems like a perfect compromise that can provide flexibility and freedom of choice for the students, it is not without its own flaws. The Total Communication approach creates an environment with no *lingua franca* or the shared language of interaction, or even if they did share a language, students may possess comprehension at varying levels (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014).

In a research article by Akiko Hayashi and Joseph Tobin from 2014, it is stated that while teachers of mainstream preschools and Meisei Preschool (the only school in Japan that officially uses JSL as a language of instruction) do not interfere with conflicts among children, public deaf school teachers feel the need to do otherwise. Teachers at Meisei and mainstream preschools are able to stay back because their students share a language, but there are students who are good at speaking and ones who are good at signing at public deaf preschools (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:38). According to a Nara Deaf School administrator, each student most likely has a different way to communicate and possess different levels of linguistic ability, so teachers need to function as a bridge that mediates between them (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:38).

This non-intervention thing is actually a common cultural practice in Japan, which is also known as *mimamoru*. Holding back, watching, and not intervening between students seems to be seen as a strategy for supporting children's social and emotional development (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:30). Japanese teachers in Hayashi & Tobin's

research spoke about the importance of letting children be ‘childlike’, in the sense that teachers should minimize their intervention and allow children to express emotions and interact in the ways of a child (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:31).

Values of *wa* can be seen in the decision to apply the approach used in public deaf schools. However, the use of the Total Communication approach has instead created a paradox. While deaf children are expected to be independent and able to fit into the wider Japanese society, having teachers feel the need to mediate between students makes us question the approach’s efficiency for students’ social independence and development. Not using *mimamoru* for deaf children also means not giving them the chance to experience the cultural practice that others in Japan experience.

Language and communication seem to be the central issues surrounding deaf education. As discussed in the previous subchapter, Japanese deaf education generally emphasizes or prioritizes the acquisition of spoken language. This results in public school teachers feeling the need to put language acquisition over the students’ emotional or social development (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:40). Acquiring oral language is not natural for deaf children, for it is a laborious project that needs continuous interventions (Valente in Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:40). On the contrary, learning sign language is natural for deaf Japanese children; it can be learned simply by immersing them in a signing environment (Stokoe in Hayashi & Tobin, 2014:40). But while deaf children born from culturally Deaf families may immerse themselves in their natural language at home, or when they meet culturally Deaf peers at deaf schools, many deaf persons do not have that opportunity. Statistically, more than 90% of deaf children were born to hearing parents (Hayashi & Tobin, 2015:382). It is estimated that more than half of deaf and hard-of-hearing children spent most of their educational years attending mainstream schools (McGuire & Tokunaga, 2020:297). The reality of mainstream schools is that it has inadequate teacher training; negative attitudes toward disabled children; and a push for disabled students to assimilate (Forlin et al.; Sato & Hodge in McGuire, 2020:200).

In comparison to other disability-related activist groups, the Deaf community does not seem to be very supportive of the supposedly-inclusive education system (Mithout, 2016:181). The reform that birthed the special support education system made specialized institutions open to other types of disability groups and favored the mainstreaming of disabled students (Mithout, 2016:166-170). But Deaf schools have been essential in the transmission and dynamism of Deaf culture, which is contributed to by the community links built by deaf students in deaf schools (Mithout, 2016:181). Additionally, mainstream schools are hardly effective in giving deaf children access to Deaf culture. A survey held by the JFD in 2021, revealed that many deaf children in mainstream schools have not been exposed to a signing environment from a very young age (Zennihon Roua Renmei, 2022). Deaf children who are not exposed to sign language can be said to be in a state of language deprivation (Lillo-Martin & Henner, 2021:16). Depriving them of their natural language could result in a number of issues, such as impaired cognitive and social functioning (Lillo-Martin & Henner, 2021:16-17).

One research conducted by Jennifer McGuire and Tomoko Tokunaga includes the lives of three medically deaf children who are enrolled in a mainstream middle school; in the article, it is stated that all of these children only have a basic grasp of signing (2020:298-303). In the special class, these children partake in, they are given fifteen minutes per day to learn and practice signing in the form of Signed Japanese (McGuire & Tokunaga, 2020:303). While these children are not completely deprived of sign language (even if it's an artificial form of one), it is doubtful that fifteen minutes per day is enough to be considered immersing these children in the world of Deaf language and culture.

The lack of connection with deaf or Deaf identity, the lack of exposure to sign language and deaf peers, and the pressure put upon deaf children in mainstream school to prioritize spoken language acquisition may take a toll on deaf children's linguistic, social, and emotional development.

A survey held by the JFD in 2021 revealed that many deaf children in mainstream schools have a hard time accepting their deafness (Zennihon Roua Renmei, 2022). The insecurity regarding their hearing ability and deaf identity creates several problems, namely in relation to their confidence and self-presentation, which potentially leads to communication issues. In the research conducted by McGuire and Tokunaga, one medically deaf student chooses not to wear his hearing aids out of embarrassment (McGuire & Tokunaga, 2020:301). This phenomenon is not rare or new, for McGuire's previous research also stated that many deaf students try to mitigate their differences through various tactics, such as concealing their hearing aids (McGuire, 2020:206). Another student in McGuire and Tokunaga's research 'bluffed' or performed 'communication competence' when conversing orally with McGuire (McGuire & Tokunaga, 2020:301). Pretending to comprehend spoken conversation, which can be done as an effort to not stick out as 'the deaf kid', is also not a rare or new occurrence; another medically deaf individual from McGuire's previous research also reported having done the same tactic (McGuire, 2020:207).

Deaf children's lack of confidence in their hearing ability and deaf identity potentially results in communication and relationship problems. The need deaf children feel to not stand out may make them reluctant to tell others when they do not comprehend something. This could lead to communication issues and affect their relationship with others. Indeed, many deaf students in mainstream schools struggle to make friends with hearing peers and tend to be socially neglected (McGuire & Tokunaga, 2020:301). On the surface, the special support education system is very supportive of its mission to push disabled children to mainstream settings. The system wants deaf children to be able to participate in the wider society but has not quite succeeded in the empowerment and confidence department that could ensure the success of their social participation.

## CONCLUSION

This research shows that values of the *wa* concept regarding self-reliance and rigid 'sameness' are reflected in the Japanese deaf education practice. The *wa* concept, or the traditional Japanese notion of harmony, is supposed to create some type of group

harmony. However, values of *wa* that have permeated their way through the deaf education practice have created conflicts instead. The *wa* concept has created numerous issues for deaf children, mainly relating to their linguistic and communication skills, as well as their social and emotional development. The *wa* concept aims to build societal harmony and champions collective needs. However, the benefitting 'collective' does not seem to include deaf children as a marginalized group, but only the hearing majority which deaf children are expected to assimilate to. It can be said that norms and values tend to not be in favor of marginalized groups of people.

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## STATEMENTS OF COMPETING INTEREST

The author declares that this article is free from any conflict of interest regarding data collection, analysis, editorial process, and publication process in general.

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