

Japanese University Students as Teaching Assistants in U.S. Multicultural Elementary Schools: A Qualitative Study of Experiential Learning Processes

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Abstract: This qualitative study examined learning processes and changes in awareness among Japanese university students working as teaching assistants (TAs) in multicultural school settings in the United States. Data were collected from Japanese university students who participated in a three-week TA training program at a public elementary school. Using Kolb's experiential learning theory as the theoretical framework, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on three open-ended written responses collected after completion of the training program. The analysis revealed that the student TAs progressed through a learning process involving experience, reflection, and the development of new understandings. First, through direct participation in classroom activities and interaction with children, the students developed awareness of relationship-building and reflected on their experiences in multicultural and multilingual contexts. Second, these reflections led to changes in their views on education, a deepened understanding of children, and a re-evaluation of teachers' roles, particularly regarding diversity and instructional practices. Third, the students formed concrete ideas regarding their future involvement in education, indicating the development of career perspectives and intentions for action. These findings suggest that working as a TA can promote learning and personal growth over a short period. This study highlights that university students' TA activities function as structured learning opportunities within institutions and not simply as support work. It also offers insights for rethinking educational support approaches in the Japanese context.

Keywords: Teaching assistant (TA), experiential learning, multicultural

education, university students, field-based learning

1. Introduction

Recently, elementary and secondary schools in Japan have faced increasing challenges in providing adequate academic and social support owing to a growing number of students from foreign backgrounds and those requiring language instruction. According to surveys conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), support for foreign students should address their academic learning and overall adjustment to school life. However, the surveys also indicate that the response continues to rely heavily on individual teachers because of insufficient school-level systems and limited human resources (MEXT, 2024, 2025). In contrast, in multicultural societies, such as the United States, university students are employed as teaching assistants (TAs) in various school settings to provide academic support and serve as cultural mediators. These practices have been shown to benefit children by supporting their learning and school experiences and offer university students opportunities to deepen their understanding of educational practices and engage in reflective learning (Furco, 2002).

In Japan, university students in some areas provide learning support for children from foreign backgrounds through volunteer or extracurricular activities. These activities are not clearly positioned within the institutional frameworks of higher or school education. Previous studies have examined student participation in support activities and their educational value (Ichikawa, 2011; Kojima et al., 2021; Tanaka, 2023). However, these experiences have not been sufficiently examined, particularly in the context of Japanese university students in overseas multicultural school settings as structured learning processes based on a theoretical framework. Moreover, few studies have used experiential learning theory to examine the experiences of Japanese university student TAs in overseas multicultural school settings. Furthermore, the literature provides a limited understanding of how short-term field experiences, including programs lasting approximately three weeks, can lead to meaningful learning and internal changes when combined with reflection opportunities. Prior studies have not sufficiently examined how insights from these experiences can inform the design of TA programs for Japanese university

students, including defining students' roles and incorporating reflection into these programs.

Considering these challenges, this study focuses on Japanese university students' experiences working as TAs in multicultural school settings in the United States. This study aimed to clarify their learning processes and awareness changes. This study addressed these research gaps in three ways. First, it examined the types of experiences that student TAs have in multicultural school settings and how they reflect on and interpret them. Second, it analyzed how these experiences and reflections influence students' views on education, understanding of children, and perceptions of teachers' roles. Third, it investigated how these learning processes connect to students' future career perspectives and considered the implications for developing student TA systems in Japan. This study used experiential learning theory as a framework to qualitatively analyze open-ended data provided by Japanese university students. Through this analysis, this study sought to clarify the role and educational significance of the student TA experience and the potential of a student TA system in Japanese elementary and secondary schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Issues in Multicultural and Multilingual Schooling and Support Systems in Japan

The number of children with foreign backgrounds and those requiring Japanese language instruction in elementary and secondary schools has continued to increase. This trend is recognized as an important issue in educational policy and school practice. MEXT has reported that an increasing number of students require Japanese language instruction nationwide. This issue is not limited to specific regions or schools, with many schools facing the need to respond to increasingly multicultural and multilingual educational environments (MEXT, 2024, 2025). In this context, MEXT has suggested that support for foreign students should extend beyond supplementary academic instruction. It must be comprehensive and include assistance with adjusting to school life, forming interpersonal relationships, and understanding future educational and career pathways. However, the current school system struggles to respond adequately to these diverse needs. According to MEXT (2025),

support for foreign students continues to depend heavily on teachers' individual efforts and experience. Furthermore, MEXT has noted the lack of personnel in schools with specialized knowledge of Japanese language instruction and multicultural understanding. Under these conditions, teachers' workloads are likely to increase, and disparities in support content and quality may emerge across schools and classrooms.

From this perspective, Banks and Banks (2019) argued that multicultural education should not be viewed merely as the addition of support measures or an issue of individualized responses. They emphasized the need to position it as an effort to reconstruct school culture and educational practices. Thus, responses to multiculturalism and multilingualism should not be limited to providing special support to specific groups of students but should instead be considered in the context of a broader review of school culture and instructional systems. Previous Japanese studies have reported that support for children with foreign backgrounds is insufficiently integrated into institutional frameworks. Consequently, teachers face increased burdens, and support quality varies across schools and classrooms (Hattori, 2018; Murakami, 2024; Sakuma, 2014; Usui, 2016). Overall, these studies indicate continuing structural challenges to multicultural and multilingual support in Japanese schools because of a reliance on individualized responses and non-systematic practices. Responses to multiculturalism and multilingualism in Japanese schools should not be completely dependent on internal efforts or individual teachers' expertise. The use of new educational resources, including personnel from outside the school, such as university students, must be considered. An important issue in the development of future educational support systems is how to position and utilize individuals who can continuously engage with school settings.

2.2 Learning Support by University Students in Japan: Practices and Issues

In Japan, university students have participated in various learning activities and provided Japanese language support to children with foreign backgrounds through community-based Japanese language classes, after-school support programs, and collaborations with external organizations. At universities, these initiatives are commonly positioned as volunteer or extracurricular activities,

thereby providing opportunities for students to engage with and contribute to local communities (Ichikawa, 2011; Kojima et al., 2021; Tanaka, 2023). Studies have reported that students' participation in these initiatives provides opportunities for them to deepen their understanding of different cultures and develop an interest in educational practices. However, many of these practices have been implemented without well-developed institutional frameworks. In particular, university students' roles and responsibilities in school and community settings and the positioning of their activities are often not clearly defined. Moreover, systems for collaboration and information-sharing with schools tend to be individualized and informal. Consequently, university students' involvement is often temporary and fragmented, making it difficult to ensure continuity of support and achieve sustained educational outcomes.

In this context, policy discussions and previous studies have highlighted the potential benefits and limitations of including university students in educational support initiatives. MEXT (2024, 2025) has emphasized that improving educational support for children with foreign backgrounds requires collaboration among teachers, community members, and external support personnel. Although policy documents emphasize the importance of schools and communities working together and utilizing diverse human resources, they lack sufficient detail on how external personnel, including university students, should be positioned in school education with respect to institutional design and operational models. According to Tsuchiya et al. (2014) and Yazaki (2011), when university students provide support to children with foreign backgrounds, their roles and responsibilities are often unclear. They further note that these activities are largely left to the discretion of individual universities and local communities. These studies have suggested that although involving university students can potentially have positive effects in educational settings, a lack of systematic organization and institutionalization makes it difficult for these practices to become sustainable initiatives. Based on these discussions, Furco (2002) argued that community involvement for university students should be incorporated into the educational curriculum, supported by clear learning objectives, and include opportunities for reflection. This perspective offers an important framework for improving the quality and continuity of support and provides a useful lens through which the roles and educational significance of

university students can be reconsidered in relation to a structured TA system in Japan.

2.3 International Perspectives on University Students' Engagement in School Settings and Learning Outcomes

Internationally, particularly in English-speaking countries, research has systematically examined practices in which university students participate in school settings as part of service learning, field experiences, and practice-based teacher education. These studies approach university students' participation in schools as educational experiences that promote growth as learners, rather than merely supplementary or service-oriented activities. In line with this research, Bringle and Hatcher (2009) defined service learning as a form of experiential learning that develops through collaboration with communities and schools. They have demonstrated that university students deepen their understanding of professional knowledge and develop reflective thinking and a sense of social responsibility by repeatedly engaging in practice and reflection. Through collaboration with schools and communities, students must consider theories and knowledge learned in the classroom in relation to concrete issues encountered in real school settings. These experiences enable learning to evolve from mere knowledge acquisition to consideration of how knowledge can be applied to actual educational practice. These school- and community-based experiences provide students with opportunities to reconsider their responsibilities and values as individuals engaged in education.

Studies on teacher education have repeatedly argued that learning experiences involving movement between practice and reflection play an important role in developing an understanding of teaching as a profession and shaping professional identity in school education. Darling-Hammond (2006) analyzed effective teacher education programs and demonstrated that classroom-based field experience not only deepens understanding of theoretical knowledge but also strongly influences teachers' role recognition and the formation of their views on education. These findings suggest that in teacher education, practical experience should be understood not merely as skills training, but as a learning process that involves internal transformation on the part of learners. Likewise, Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) have emphasized the importance

of connecting school-based experience with theoretical knowledge in teacher education research. Overall, these international studies have demonstrated that participation in school settings is an important learning experience that promotes growth in university students as learners.

In particular, the notion that learning is deepened through engagement in practice and reflection aligns closely with this study's analysis of student TAs' experiences as learning processes based on experiential learning theory. Thus, this study adopts an approach that views student TAs' practical experiences not only as activity reports but also as processes of learning and transformation. This study used Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory because it closely aligns with the four stages of the experiential learning cycle: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. This alignment can be viewed in the combination of short-term field experience, reflective written data, and students' articulation of future action. Thus, this perspective situates this study within the broader body of international research on experiential learning and university students' engagement in school settings.

2.4 Learning through Field-Based Experience in Multicultural Educational Contexts

Field-based learning experiences in a school environment with learners from diverse cultural backgrounds can affect the educational views and values of university students and prospective teachers. According to Nieto (1999), engaging with learners from diverse cultural backgrounds encourages teachers to reflect on themselves and re-evaluate the assumptions and values underlying their educational practices. Gay (2010) noted that achieving culturally responsive education requires an understanding of the theoretical knowledge related to culture and learning and a deepened understanding of learners through practical experience in actual classrooms. Field-based learning experiences and reflections in multicultural environments are considered to influence the formation of current and prospective teachers' views on education and professional identities. These discussions provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how engagement in multicultural educational settings can transform learners' perspectives and values, which is central to this study's

focus.

Public materials, including reports published by MEXT in 2024 and 2025, have empirically documented the progress of multiculturalism and multilingualism in Japanese school education and the challenges facing support systems. Furthermore, a substantial body of international research addresses the practices in which university students participate in school settings and their educational significance, particularly in service learning and teacher education. However, few studies have closely examined the experiences of Japanese university students working as TAs in multicultural school settings abroad, particularly from the perspective of experiential learning theory. Specifically, few studies have analyzed these experiences as learning processes connecting practice, reflection, and intentions for future action. Thus, this study focused on student TAs' practical experiences and reflections. Using experiential learning theory as an analytical framework, this study aimed to clarify these learning processes and consider their implications for developing educational support systems in Japan.

3. Research Questions

This study focused on the experiences of Japanese university students who worked as TAs in multicultural elementary schools in the United States. Using Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory as the theoretical framework, the purpose of this study was to clarify how these practical experiences influenced the students' learning and personal growth. Additionally, by referring to local teachers' perspectives, this study examined how TA experiences are perceived in school settings to derive implications for introducing a TA system in Japan. Based on these aims, the following research questions were formulated.

Research Question 1:

What types of experiences do university students have when working as TAs in multicultural elementary schools in the United States, and how do they reflect on and make meaning of these experiences?

Research Question 2:

How does working as a TA change university students' views on education,

understanding of children, and perceptions of teachers' roles?

Research Question 3:

How do the learning experiences and values developed while working as a TA influence university students' future career choices and intentions to pursue a career in education?

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Experiential Learning Theory as a Framework

This study aimed to conceptualize the practical experiences and reflections of Japanese university students who participated as TAs in multicultural school environments. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory was used as this study's analytical framework. According to this theory, learning is not passive knowledge acquisition, but rather a cyclical process in which learners engage in Concrete Experiences and develop an understanding and values through reflection and interpretation. Kolb (1984) posited that learning is a process of developing learners' understanding of their experiences through a continuous cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and action, with a specific focus on their internal transformation. Experiential learning theory has been widely applied in fields such as teacher education, service learning, international education, and practice-based educational research. According to Kolb (1984), this learning process comprises four stages. First, learners participate in real situations and gain direct experience, referred to as Concrete Experience. Second, learners reflect on these experiences in a process called Reflective Observation. Third, through reflection, learners reconstruct their understanding, values, and conceptual frameworks, which is referred to as Abstract Conceptualization. Finally, learners attempt to apply their newly formed understanding to future actions and practices through Active Experimentation. This model views learning as a flexible continuous process in which these stages are closely connected and may occur in different sequences depending on the learner's context.

This study considered TA experiences in school settings as opportunities for Concrete Experience, and students' written reflections were examined to understand how they interpreted and made meaning of their experiences.

Based on this perspective, experiential learning theory provides an appropriate framework for analyzing how university students develop their understanding and undergo internal changes through practice and reflection. The analysis focused on segments of text representing a single idea or reflection related to the participants' experiences. Each segment was analyzed in relation to the four stages of the experiential learning cycle to examine how students described, reflected on, and developed a new understanding of their experiences. Each segment was assigned to one of the four stages using specific criteria. Descriptions of concrete classroom activities and interactions were classified as Concrete Experience. Interpretations of or reflections on these activities were classified as Reflective Observation. Statements indicating changes in understanding, values, or perspectives were classified as Abstract Conceptualization. Finally, statements describing future intentions or planned actions were classified as Active Experimentation.

4.2 Analysis Based on Experiential Learning

This study conceptualized the experiences of Japanese university students who worked as TAs in elementary schools in the United States as Concrete Experiences, in line with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. The open-ended responses obtained from the students were considered data corresponding to Reflective Observation because they represented the process of reflecting on and making meaning of experiences. Descriptions of students' changing views on education, deepened understanding of children, and reconsideration of the role of teachers were analyzed at the Abstract Conceptualization stage because they reflected the reconstruction of understanding and values. Furthermore, descriptions related to future career choices and intentions to pursue a career in education were linked to Active Experimentation because they demonstrated intentions to apply learning to future actions. Thus, the analysis focused on how the students' experiences, reflections, and future intentions corresponded to the stages of the experiential learning cycle, and how these stages were connected within each participant's learning process.

Regarding data analysis, the written responses were organized into text segments, which were each examined in relation to the four stages of

experiential learning. Through this process, the analysis clarified how student TAs' awareness and understanding changed over the course of their learning experiences. Each segment's category assignment was carefully examined to ensure the quality of the analysis and avoid forcing the data into the theoretical framework. When a segment did not clearly fit into one stage, it was assigned based on its main idea, considering the overall context of the response. The open-ended responses obtained from a local elementary school teacher were used not as primary data to analyze students' learning processes but as supplementary data to provide a contextual understanding of the school setting. This narrative is primarily used in Section 7 to illustrate how student TAs' experiences are understood within a school setting.

5. Methodology

5.1 Participants and Data Collection

This study included two Japanese university students who worked as TAs at a public elementary school in a suburban area of Los Angeles, California. For confidentiality and clarity purposes, the two participants are referred to as Student A and Student B in the following analysis. Both students were enrolled in Japanese universities and interested in education. For approximately three weeks, the student TAs participated in a training program at a local public elementary school. Each student TA was assigned to one grade level and worked in the same classroom. They participated in daily school activities from the first period to the end of the school day. Under classroom teachers' guidance, the student TAs assisted with lessons, supported individual students, and helped manage classroom activities. Their role was clearly defined as supporting the teachers' instruction rather than leading lessons independently.

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and written consent was obtained before data collection. The data were anonymized, and this study does not include any information that could identify the school, teachers, or children. The children were not direct participants in this research, and no data were collected from them. The data were stored securely and used only for research purposes. The author also participated as a TA at the same school for several days to better understand the context of the program. However, the author's observations were not used in the analysis. Considering

that the author participated in the field, the analysis was based solely on students' written responses to minimize potential bias. A teacher at the local public elementary school that hosted the student TAs provided responses to an open-ended questionnaire as supplementary data. These data were collected to understand how the school perceived the student TAs' activities.

5.2 Open-Ended Survey Used to Address the Research Questions

An open-ended questionnaire was administered to the student TAs after they had completed their training program. The questionnaire aligned with this study's three research questions. Participants were asked to provide a written response to each question. The questionnaire was administered in Japanese to enable participants to clearly and thoroughly express their thoughts and experiences. The responses were analyzed in Japanese to preserve their original meaning during the coding process. The questions presented below were designed to capture different stages of the experiential learning process. Question 1 mainly relates to Concrete Experience and reflection. Question 2 focuses on reflection and changes in understanding. Question 3 focuses on future intentions and actions. Thus, the questions correspond to the stages of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. In contrast, the open-ended questions given to a local elementary school teacher focused on instructional practices in classrooms with children from multicultural backgrounds, as well as the roles, educational significance, and challenges of introducing university student TAs. The teacher questionnaire was not designed to analyze students' learning experiences directly, but was intended to supplement and contextualize students' reflections from the perspective of the school setting.

Question 1: Which experience during the elementary school training contributed most to your personal growth, and what did you learn from it, including any changes in your views on education?

Question 2: What specific episode arose from cultural or linguistic differences and what did you learn from that experience?

Question 3: How did your experience in this TA training program influence your career choices and views of your future?

5.3 Data Analysis

This study used Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory as an analytical framework and basis for the qualitative content analysis. The four stages of the theory served as analytical categories, and the open-ended data from the student TAs were organized and interpreted in relation to these categories. This process was used to clarify how learning and changes in awareness occurred in the TAs. First, the students' written responses were carefully read to understand their overall content. The text was then divided into segments, each representing a single idea or reflection. Each segment was assigned to one of the four stages of the experiential learning cycle. The author conducted the coding. After the initial coding, the data were reviewed again to check the consistency of the classifications. If a segment did not clearly fit into one stage, it was assigned based on its main idea, considering the response's overall context.

6. Results

6.1 Experiences of Growth and Changes in Educational Views

Question 1 asked students to describe experiences from their work as TAs that led to personal growth and changes in their views on education. The analysis revealed that concrete classroom-based TA experiences catalyzed changes in student TAs' self-understanding and views on education, particularly through daily interactions with children and teachers. All excerpts were originally written in Japanese and translated into English by the author for reporting purposes. Some were slightly paraphrased to preserve anonymity while maintaining their original meaning.

6.1.1 Key Themes in Student A's Responses

Student A described leading an origami workshop and conducting a quiz on Japanese culture for elementary school students. The origami workshop was a hands-on activity that introduced traditional Japanese paper folding. Student A identified this experience as a central event through which they perceived personal growth. As shown in the following excerpt, Student A emphasized their initial anxiety and the confidence they developed throughout the process:

I conducted a quiz about Japan and led an origami workshop for about an

hour in front of elementary school students. Being able to present in front of nearly 30 children gave me great confidence. At first, I was worried that the fourth-graders might not be interested, but they were actually very welcoming. On the final day, even students I didn't expect expressed sadness when we said goodbye. (Student A)

This excerpt shows that presenting in front of a large group of children contributed to Student A's sense of confidence and self-efficacy. Student A also reported feeling concerned before the activity that the children might not be interested or respond. However, Student A found that they did not need to worry because the children responded positively and engaged with the activities. Student A found it particularly memorable that some children expressed sadness when saying goodbye on the final day.

These findings suggest that Student A experienced a gap between their expectations and the children's actual responses when building relationships with them. The following statement further illustrates this realization in the following statement:

I realized that even students I could not directly support could sense my sincere attitude. (Student A)

Working as a TA helped Student A perceive attitudes and engagement as essential elements of educational practice.

6.1.2 Key Themes in Student B's Responses

Student B described being motivated to participate in TA training by a desire to further explore and clarify their future as a teacher. They initially felt uncertain about their future as a teacher and viewed the experience as an opportunity for self-reflection, as indicated by the following excerpt:

I decided to participate in this program to reflect on and clarify my future professional identity as a teacher. I also felt that I could not clearly explain what kind of teacher I wanted to become, so I joined the program to reflect on myself through an experience abroad. (Student B)

Student B found the difference in educational views between Japan and the United States to be a particularly memorable aspect of the training, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Through this training, I learned about the differences in educational views between Japan and the United States. In the U.S., the curriculum, classroom design, and evaluation methods are more flexible and often tailored to individual students. I had only experienced education in Japan previously and believed that it should follow a fixed model. However, this experience helped me realize that education can be flexible. (Student B)

Thus, Student B's responses suggest that the TA training helped them develop a more flexible and comparative view of education rather than from one fixed perspective.

6.1.3 Common Patterns in Responses to Question 1

Both participants reported that engaging in concrete TA activities and training experiences facilitated changes in their self-understanding and views on education. These changes were grounded in their direct experiences and reflections. For Student A, interacting directly with children resulted in a growing appreciation for relationships and engagement in education. Student A's reflections emphasized how their initial anxiety transformed into confidence through positive interactions with children, fostering a deeper understanding of the significance of sincerity in educational practice. Their narrative primarily focused on changes in their attitudes toward educational practice. In contrast, Student B emphasized a shift in perceptions of educational systems. Their reflections show that experiencing differences between Japanese and U.S. education led them to rethink their ideas about education. Working in a multicultural educational environment led Student B to view Japanese education from a more relative perspective and recognize that there are multiple approaches to education.

Thus, the students' responses to Question 1 demonstrate how they articulated their personal growth and changes in their views on education from different perspectives by reflecting on their experiences as TAs. While Student A's

learning centered on interpersonal engagement and attitudes toward teaching, Student B focused on understanding the different ways in which education can be organized and practiced. These findings suggest that the TA experience functioned as a learning opportunity that prompted changes in self-perceptions and shifts in views on education. Overall, the results show that when students have real experiences and reflect on them, they can change how they understand education and their roles in it, even in a short-term program.

6.2 Learning through Experiences of Cultural and Linguistic Differences

Question 2 asked students to describe specific events related to cultural and linguistic differences that they experienced while working as TAs, as well as the insights that they gained from those experiences. The analysis revealed that both participants experienced differences in classroom culture and educational practices in various situations. They reflected on these experiences in relation to their interactions with children and classroom learning environments.

6.2.1 Key Themes in Student A's Responses

Student A described differences between Japanese and American schools in terms of rules and instructional practices based on concrete classroom experiences. For example, Student A mentioned practices that are less common in Japanese elementary schools, such as rewarding children with snacks or treats for answering questions correctly and letting them share snacks freely. As illustrated in the following excerpt, these practices were perceived as reducing the distance between students and teachers:

School rules were more flexible, and I witnessed situations in which children were given snacks for answering questions correctly. I was also able to give out snacks as prizes during quizzes, which quickly reduced the distance between us. It was also new to me that children could freely share snacks.
(Student A)

Student A noted that distributing snacks as prizes during quizzes reduced the psychological distance between them and the children. These descriptions of classroom practices demonstrate how cultural norms can influence relationships

with children.

Student A described another situation in which a child talked to them in Japanese out of consideration for their background. This experience is reflected in the following excerpt:

A student who could speak Japanese spoke to me in Japanese to make communication easier for me. However, during that time, other students found it difficult to join the conversation. (Student A)

Student A observed that the other children were less able to join the interaction, leading them to realize how language choice can influence relationships within a group. Through this experience, Student A learned that differences in language and culture can affect interpersonal relationships and the importance of engaging with children in ways that allow more of them to participate.

6.2.2 Key Themes in Student B's Responses

Student B recognized the differences in evaluation methods and instructional approaches in classroom activities and school life. They were particularly struck by the emphasis on individual evaluation and competition, as shown by the following excerpt:

I felt that there were many individual evaluations during lessons, and many activities encouraged competition. Since I had thought that Japanese education focused more on equality, I noticed a clear cultural difference. (Student B)

Student B noted that individual-based evaluations were frequently used during lessons, and situations encouraging competition were common. By comparing these observations with their understanding of Japanese education as emphasizing equality, Student B identified differences in approaches to student evaluation.

When describing how students spent their free time, Student B mentioned school rules, such as not being allowed to leave the classroom until all tasks and meals were completed. This is reflected in the following excerpt:

Students could not take a break unless they had finished their work or meals. This suggested that they were expected to manage their tasks independently and take responsibility for completing them, thereby emphasizing independence. (Student B)

Through these experiences, Student B learned that U.S. schools encourage children to be independent and allow them more freedom in class. Observing everyday school life made Student B more aware of the differences in how education is understood and practiced. Student B also showed a positive view of the U.S. approach, suggesting that they were developing their own perspectives on education.

6.2.3 Common Patterns in Responses to Question 2

Both participants' responses reflected cultural and linguistic differences through Concrete Experiences in classroom settings. These experiences were observed and interpreted through students' interactions with children and classroom practices. As the above excerpts illustrate, these experiences influenced classroom management, school life, and relationships among children and between children and TAs.

Student A examined how language choices and cultural practices affected psychological distance and the formation of relationships within groups. Student A's experiences with providing snacks as rewards and language use demonstrated how classroom practices and communication styles can influence inclusion and participation among children. Thus, Student A understood cultural and linguistic differences at the interpersonal level. In contrast, Student B recognized differences in educational culture through school systems and views on education, such as evaluation methods and instructional approaches. Student B's reflections on individual evaluation, competition, and rules about free time show how these differences are part of everyday classroom practices and how schools are organized. Overall, the responses to Question 2 indicate that the student TAs reflected on the roles of cultural and linguistic differences in educational settings at multiple levels, ranging from interpersonal relationships to broader educational frameworks based on concrete events. Student A's learning emphasized interpersonal dynamics and communication,

whereas Student B's learning highlighted structural and systemic differences in educational practices. These findings demonstrate how students moved from direct experiences to a broader understanding of how education works.

6.3 Effects on Career Decision-Making and Views of the Future

Question 3 asked students to provide open-ended responses describing how their TA training experience influenced their career choices and perceptions of their future careers. The analysis revealed that participants had clear intentions about their future career paths and how they would engage with education based on their understanding developed through their training experience.

6.3.1 Key Themes in Student A's Responses

Student A's initial impression of the teaching profession was negative, as they perceived it as too demanding and difficult to pursue. However, after directly observing a school setting during training, Student A developed more positive feelings toward education. The following excerpt illustrates this shift:

I used to think that becoming a teacher would be too demanding and difficult for me. However, through this training, I experienced working in a school setting and began to feel more positive about education. (Student A)

This change suggests that Student A moved from understanding education in theory to understanding it through real experience. Student A further noted that exposure to creativity and flexibility in U.S. education prompted them to consider applying such approaches in Japan. This idea is reflected in the following statement:

By experiencing the creativity and flexibility of education in the U.S., I began to think about how such approaches could be applied in Japan. (Student A).

When discussing future aspirations, Student A mentioned multiple ways of engaging in education, including conventional career paths, such as teaching and school counseling, and roles related to developing educational materials and supporting children who do not attend school. This expansion of career

perspectives is evident in the following excerpt:

I can see myself being involved in education in many ways, such as becoming a teacher or a school counselor, or developing educational materials and supporting students who don't attend school. This experience became a major turning point that broadened my career choices. (Student A)

These descriptions suggest that Student A began to consider more career options in education.

6.3.2 Key Themes in Student B's Responses

When answering Question 2, Student B expressed surprise about the differences between educational practices in Japan and the United States, which influenced their intentions for future educational practices. As the following excerpt shows, Student B aimed to integrate insights from both contexts:

I was surprised by the differences in education between Japan and the United States. When I become a teacher, I would like to develop teaching methods that combine approaches from both countries. (Student B)

Specifically, Student B expressed an aspiration to develop teaching approaches that combine educational methods from Japan and the United States. These responses suggest that insights gained from a multicultural educational environment may influence future instructional practices. Thus, Student B appears to be considering specific ways of teaching while also developing a clearer concept of themselves as a future teacher.

6.3.3 Common Patterns in Responses to Question 3

Both participants indicated that their understanding of education and values developed through TA training manifested as concrete career choices and intentions for future action. Student A considered various ways to engage in education beyond teaching, while Student B aimed to incorporate multicultural educational experiences into their future teaching practices. Student A's responses emphasized the expansion of possible career paths, whereas Student

B's responses focused on shaping specific teaching approaches.

These findings suggest that the students transitioned from a general interest in education to concrete plans through their TA experiences. This process reflects the Active Experimentation stage of experiential learning theory, in which learners connect their experiences to future actions. The results also indicate that short-term experiences can influence students' future thinking and professional development.

7. Discussion

7.1 Experiential Learning Perspective

This qualitative study examined the experiences of Japanese university students working as TAs in multicultural school settings, focusing on how their learning processes and awareness changed during a short-term program. Analysis based on the three research questions showed that the student TAs' experiences developed into continuous learning processes involving participation in classroom activities, reflection on experiences, changes in understanding, and intentions for future action. The students participated in school settings as TAs, which involved supporting classroom instruction and interacting with children. According to Kolb (1984), these experiences correspond to the Concrete Experience stage, in which students engage directly with educational practice and school culture. Subsequently, the students reflected on these experiences, interpreting them in relation to cultural and linguistic differences, building relationships with children, and approaches to educational practice. Their open-ended responses to Questions 1 and 2 demonstrated their reflection on children's reactions, school rules, and the effects of language use, which corresponds to Reflective Observation. Furthermore, through this reflective process, the students re-evaluated their thoughts and values related to education. Their experiences and reflection enabled the students to recognize the importance of relationships in education, become aware of differences between Japanese and overseas educational views, and develop more flexible teaching perspectives. These aspects can be considered to reflect abstract conceptualization. Finally, the career choices and plans to work in education described in response to Question 3 showed that the students intended to use what they had learned in their future actions. Interest

in teaching and other education-related careers, as well as plans to develop instructional approaches informed by multicultural experiences, corresponds to the Active Experimentation stage.

Considering the small number of participants ($N = 2$), the aim of this study was not to make general claims. Instead, it developed a possible model of how learning processes can occur during a short-term TA experience. The findings show how participation, reflection, and thinking about the future are connected, even within a short period. These findings further suggest that meaningful learning can emerge when students engage in real classroom practice and have opportunities to reflect. Therefore, this study contributes by showing that student TA experiences function as structured learning processes without making broad general claims. These results suggest that student TA activities should be viewed as more than support work and considered educational experiences that promote learning and personal growth. This study also demonstrates the applicability of experiential learning theory to short-term practice-based international educational programs.

7.2 Educational Value of Student TA Experiences

This study's findings suggest that university students' experiences in school settings contribute to their growth as learners and the development of their views on education. The combination of classroom experience and reflection appears to foster changes in students' understanding of education and their roles therein. This pattern aligns with previous studies emphasizing the need for practice-based learning. International research has shown that collaborations between university students and schools or local communities, often referred to as service learning or field experiences, can foster professional knowledge, reflective thinking, and social responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; Furco, 2002). Similarly, the narratives of the student TAs in this study suggest that they re-evaluated their understanding of education by connecting their knowledge to situations they encountered in an actual school setting.

The responses provided by the local elementary school teacher are used here to provide background information for the analysis rather than as independent evidence. The teacher stated that they aim to consciously create inclusive lessons in multicultural and multilingual environments in which all children

can participate, which they achieve through visual materials, gestures, and scaffolding. The teacher also indicated that coordination is ongoing, both inside and outside the classroom, including collaborative activities and communicating with parents through multilingual support using ICT. These descriptions help contextualize the students' reflections, particularly their attention to relationships and awareness of cultural and linguistic differences. Furthermore, they provide examples of learning that emerged within a classroom environment shaped by teaching practices.

Teacher education researchers have repeatedly argued that learning experiences involving movement between practice and reflection are essential for developing an understanding of the teaching profession and forming a professional identity (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006). This study's findings also suggest that the students re-evaluated their views on educational practice and perceptions of teachers based on their TA experiences. They also began to consider how they might engage with education in the future. These results suggest that TA programs can provide university students with learning opportunities that deepen their understanding of education, even for those who are uncertain about their future career paths. Notably, this study suggests that these learning processes can occur during a relatively short TA experience. This is consistent with experiential learning theory, which emphasizes combining participation in practice with reflection. As the local teacher indicated, daily practice in multicultural classrooms is highly reflective. Thus, participation in those environments as student TAs may provide conditions that support meaningful learning in a short period. This study highlights the potential educational value of structuring TA experiences to include participation and reflection instead of generalizing the findings.

7.3 Implications for the Design of Student TA Programs in Japan

This study's findings suggest that university student TAs' experiences have implications for students' learning and awareness, as well as the reexamination of educational support systems in Japan. In Japanese schools, the growing multicultural and multilingual composition of student populations has increased the demand for support in learning and adjustment for children from foreign backgrounds. However, the response to these needs continues to rely heavily

on individual teachers (MEXT, 2024, 2025). In this context, the results of this study offer initial insights into university student TAs' potential roles in such educational settings. Furthermore, the local teacher's responses provide background information that helps explain the complexity of classroom practice in multicultural and multilingual environments, including lesson design, classroom management, and communication with parents. The teacher emphasized the importance of small-group instruction and individualized support, particularly for English Language Learners. Although the teacher did not directly collaborate with the university student TAs, they viewed this type of support positively and noted that it could make small-group and individualized instruction more feasible. These observations illustrate the classroom needs that student TAs could address. However, many educational support activities involving university students in Japan are considered volunteer or extracurricular work, and systems that clearly define roles and responsibilities remain underdeveloped (Tsuchiya et al., 2014; Yazaki, 2011). These findings suggest the need to integrate student TAs into formal educational systems in Japan more clearly.

Moreover, this study suggests that TA activities for university students should be viewed as learning experiences that bolster student development and classroom support. From this perspective, Furco's (2002) argument that student engagement should be incorporated into the curriculum is an important foundation for program design. Furthermore, based on these findings, several components are important for designing TA programs for students in Japan. First, clearer role definitions are required, including learning support, language support, cultural mediation, and small-group assistance. Second, programs should include basic training in areas such as confidentiality, understanding children, and support strategies. Third, structured opportunities for reflection should be incorporated, such as regular written reflections and feedback. Methods for assessing learning outcomes, such as reflection-based evaluations or rubrics, are also necessary. Finally, school-level coordination systems should be established, including designated supervising teachers and clear communication channels. Incorporating reflection into program design is essential because, as this study indicates, reflection connects experience with changes in understanding and future intentions. This study does not propose

a universally applicable program model. Instead, it presents a tentative framework for designing TA programs that support classroom practice and student learning, thereby offering a foundation for future research and program development in Japan.

7.4 Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study had several limitations related to its design. First, it was a qualitative study based on a small number of cases. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. This study did not aim to make broad generalizations, instead offering an exploratory explanation of how learning processes may occur in a short-term TA program. Future research could benefit from increasing the number of participants and conducting comparative studies across multiple schools and regions. The short duration of the TA program also limits the ability to examine how students' learning and awareness develop over time. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to examine the long-term impact of TA experiences by tracking students' subsequent career choices and continued engagement in education.

Second, this study had limitations related to the data and analysis procedures. This study analyzed open-ended responses collected after the training program, which relied on students' self-reported narratives. The data were collected within several weeks after program completion; thus, the findings reflect students' retrospective interpretations of their experiences. Furthermore, the analysis was based on written responses translated from Japanese to English, which may have resulted in a loss or oversimplification of meaning despite efforts to preserve the original intent. Future research could capture learning processes more effectively by combining additional data sources, such as observation records from the training period, interviews, and reflective data collected at multiple time points. Future studies could also strengthen the credibility of their findings by analyzing the data in both languages or presenting selected excerpts in Japanese and English.

Finally, this study has theoretical limitations. Although it primarily relied on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, other relevant perspectives, such as intercultural competence and culturally responsive education, were not examined in depth. Future research should integrate experiential learning

theory with these additional perspectives to more closely examine how student TAs' experiences contribute to developing specific competencies and attitudes. Furthermore, future studies could examine how specific program design elements, such as structured reflection and clearly defined roles, impact learning outcomes. This would help refine the tentative framework proposed in this study.

8. Conclusion

This qualitative study examined the learning processes and changes in the awareness of Japanese university students serving as TAs in multicultural school settings in the United States. The findings revealed that students underwent a continuous learning process involving participation in activities, reflection, changes in understanding, and formation of intentions for future actions. By participating in classroom practices and reflecting on their experiences, students developed a new understanding of education, children, and the role of teachers. Their experiences also helped them begin to form ideas about their future engagement with education. These results imply that TA experiences can serve as valuable learning opportunities, even within a short-term program.

This study makes three main contributions. First, it demonstrates that Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory is a useful framework for explaining how learning develops through short-term practice-based experiences that combine action and reflection. Second, it provides empirical evidence through a case study of Japanese university students who served as TAs in multicultural schools in the United States. This type of experience has not been widely studied. Third, as a practical contribution, this study proposes key considerations for designing TA programs for Japanese university students, including role definition, structured reflection, and coordination between schools and universities. Overall, these findings suggest that TA activities can provide structured learning opportunities for university students.

In Japanese schools, where multiculturalism and multilingualism are increasing, using university student TAs to support education is important for two reasons. First, it strengthens support for children. Second, it helps develop future educational professionals. To achieve this, universities and schools must work together to design programs that clearly define students' roles and

provide opportunities for reflection and evaluation. In conclusion, this study presents TA programs for students as educational support mechanisms and structured learning opportunities. This study also offers guidance for future research and practice aimed at sustainably integrating these programs into Japan's educational support system.

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