

Belonging and Othering in Japanese Schools: A Classic Grounded Theory Study

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Abstract

For the researcher with an eye for social belonging, Japanese schools are something of a paradox. On one hand they foster an environment of formidable collective solidarity; on the other, they give rise to some of the most extensively documented patterns of youth exclusion among high-income countries (MEXT, 2023; Yoneyama, 1999). This paper puts forward the findings of a classic grounded theory (CGT) study into the way belonging and othering mechanisms function within such places. The study examined how inclusion and exclusion are actively negotiated in the Japanese educational system. Data were gathered over an eighteen-month period at the elementary, middle, and high school level through interviews with teachers and school leaders, extensive non-participant observation of school life, and memo-writing, and were put through the constant comparative method. Students were not formally interviewed; their experience is approached through observation, informal conversations recorded in field notes, and educators' accounts. Adhering to the tenets of CGT, the researcher did not impose a theoretical framework on the field at the outset. Instead, substantive engagement with the literature was put off until a theory had been formed, after which that body of work was used as a point of comparison. What the data reveals is a core social process termed Calibrated Belonging. It is the ongoing and deliberate effort to modulate one's visibility and social presentation in the face of othering, all in the service of making a real connection. This process is broken down into four categories: Boundary Sensing, Narrative Negotiation, Structural Compliance, and Relational Anchoring. Having arrived at this theory, the study then set it against current scholarship—from the Othering and Belonging Institute (OBI) to studies on *ijime* and *tōkōkyōhi* and the wider culture of Japanese schools, to consider what it might mean for counseling practice and the kind of targeted universalist policy needed in Japan.

Keywords: Belonging and othering, Japanese schools, Classic grounded theory, Targeted universalism, Educational equity, *ijime*, Social conformity

1. Introduction

There is a certain choreography to a Japanese public school on a weekday morning that one cannot miss. A visitor will see students in synchronized groups tidying the corridors, or hundreds of children at a morning assembly moving with a quiet sort of precision; the homeroom rituals are so ingrained they appear to operate on their own. Such order has been the object of international admiration for decades. But what it exacts from some of the children who must take part in it, and the fate of those for whom the routine does not suit them, is a matter of less scrutiny.

In truth, Japan's schools have an array of problems that are as troubling as they are persistent. The numbers speak for themselves: in 2022 alone there were more than 300,000 elementary and middle schoolers put down as long-term non-attenders, a record figure for school refusal (*tōkōkyōhi*) (MEXT, 2023). Then there is the matter of bullying (*ijime*); while incidents run into the hundreds of thousands every year, most would agree the true toll is underreported. These are structural issues, not marginal ones, pointing to the way the demands of the Japanese system can come into conflict with student wellbeing.

This study was not set in motion by any particular theory of belonging or othering. In the manner of classic grounded theory, the researcher eschews a governing theoretical framework at the start. Glaser (1978, 1992) makes the point that if one goes into the field with a set of concepts in mind, there is a temptation to make the data conform to them instead of letting the categories that define the participants' experience come forward. The starting point here was an empirical puzzle: how is it that Japanese schools can exhibit such powerful collective solidarity while at the same time showing well-documented patterns of exclusion?

To get at the answer the study has turned to classic grounded theory (CGT) as put forward by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and given further shape by the methodological work of Glaser and Simmons over the years. The objective is one of discovery, not verification; the aim is a theory that reflects what is going on in these environments on the terms of the people there, rather than trying to fit things to an existing model.

Consequently, the paper is structured according to the logic of CGT and not the usual hypothesis-testing format. There is no comprehensive literature review to be found up front. Following Glaser's view that such a review is better placed after the theory has been made, the paper first covers the methodology before presenting the substantive theory that has emerged. The central question is left open: what is the basic social process by which educators and students in Japan navigate the lines between belonging and othering? Only after the theory of Calibrated Belonging has been fully articulated does the paper consider the relevant literature, from the Othering and Belonging Institute's framework to studies on *ijime* and *tōkōkyōhi*, to see where the new theory stands in relation to it. The discussion then turns to what this means for educational practice and scholarship in Japan.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Approach: Classic Grounded Theory

This study is conducted in accordance with the classic grounded theory (CGT) of Glaser and Strauss (1967), as further expounded by Glaser in a series of works from 1978 to 2001 and more recently by Simmons (2022). The approach is one of letting the researcher's theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1978) be the guide, which in practice means that data collection was undertaken without any preconceived hypotheses or a theoretical framework to govern it. Consistent with CGT, the substantive literature was kept at arm's length for the duration of the data gathering and initial analysis; the categories were to be formed by the data itself, not by notions borrowed from existing theory. Only once the core category had settled was the relevant literature put to use, and then as a point of comparison rather than a template for coding. Had the data indicated an entirely different set of concerns, the study would have followed them.

For those not well versed in the method, two aspects of CGT are of note. One is theoretical sampling: there is no fixed plan for who will be recruited or how data is obtained. Instead, the emerging theory dictates these matters, with the researcher in pursuit of information that can test or flesh out the categories as they come into being. The other is theoretical saturation, the state at which one ceases to collect data because new material is no longer adding any dimension to what is already in the categories. These are procedures that preclude a fully pre-specified study, and that is precisely the intent.

2.2 Research Setting and Participants

Over an eighteen-month period, fieldwork was carried out in a mid-sized city in Japan. Four schools made up the sample: an elementary school (grades 1 to 6), a high school (10 to 12) and two middle schools (7 to 9). The inclusion of institutions spanning the elementary, middle, and high school levels was a theoretical-sampling decision rather than a test of an a priori hypothesis: it allowed the emerging categories to be examined for variation across the elementary, middle, and high school levels, and recruitment of educators across these levels was pursued because early analysis suggested that belonging dynamics might shift as students progress through the system. In the spirit of classic grounded theory, this expectation was treated as a sampling rationale to be explored, not as a claim to be verified.

Introductions were made possible by homeroom teachers and school counselors open to facilitating access. In the end, sixteen educators provided the interview data: 10 teachers, 2 vice-principals, and 4 school counselors, including both *yōgo kyōin* and external SCs. But this was not a composition determined in advance. Theoretical sampling called for the inclusion of, say, a teacher who had managed serious classroom conflict, or a counselor with a caseload of socially withdrawn students, so recruitment was adjusted to secure that kind of range rather than demographic parity. These educators were chosen because their daily, close-range work with students placed them in an unusually strong position to observe and account for how belonging and othering unfold in the school. Of the four sites, the elementary school and one of the two middle schools were public institutions, while the second middle school and the high

school were private; the public elementary school, which serves the most socioeconomically mixed intake, is the site foregrounded in the Introduction. The composition of the sites and participants is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants and sites

Pseudonym	Role	School	School type	Level
T-01 to T-03	Teachers (3)	Sakura Elem.	Public	Elementary
T-04 to T-06	Teachers (3)	Kaede Middle	Public	Middle
T-07, T-08	Teachers (2)	Hinode Middle	Private	Middle
T-09, T-10	Teachers (2)	Aoba High	Private	High
V-01, V-02	Vice-principals (2)	Kaede/Aoba	Mixed	Middle/High
C-01, C-02	Yōgo kyōin (2)	Sakura/Hinode	Mixed	Elem./Middle
C-03, C-04	External SCs (2)	Kaede/Aoba	Mixed	Middle/High

2.3 Data Collection

The bulk of the interview data comes from teachers and school leaders. No formal interviews were conducted with students; the formal interview material derives entirely from the sixteen educator participants, though informal conversations with students during fieldwork contributed to the ethnographic field notes (see below). In the early going, these were unstructured affairs. The researcher might start with an invitation to “tell me about your work here and the students you see” and let the participant take the lead. Such a lack of structure is typical of CGT in its first stages; one wants the subject’s own preoccupations to come forward, not to have one’s own hunches confirmed. With the development of categories, the questioning became more directed, looking for variation in how certain concepts were put across.

Conducted in Japanese by the researcher, ethnographic field notes were recorded at the end of each interview. Because students were not formally interviewed, sustained observation—together with the informal conversations it made possible—was the principal means of attending directly to student experience. In the course of observation the researcher spoke informally with students, and these exchanges, though never formal interviews, fed directly into the ethnographic field notes. The researcher spent extensive time observing various parts of the school environment—the classroom, corridors, during *sōji* and lunch, at club activities and ceremonies, here again recording detailed field notes while the experience was fresh. Institutional papers such as anti-bullying policies and guidance handbooks were gathered and put under the same constant comparison as the ethnographic field notes. The fieldwork yielded a substantial body of material: some 160 pages of field notes and a body of theoretical memos amounting to roughly 85 pages of text across more than 200 individual

entries (see §2.5). In keeping with the study's approach, neither the educator interviews nor the informal student conversations were audio-recorded or transcribed verbatim; both were captured through detailed contemporaneous and end-of-day field notes. Quoted material in the findings is therefore reconstructed from these notes rather than rendered as verbatim transcript, and is presented as such.

2.4 Data Analysis: Constant Comparative Method

In keeping with the approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967), and Glaser (1978), the analysis was carried out in three overlapping phases of open, selective and theoretical coding. One starts with open coding at the first interview, looking at every line of data to ask what is going on, what the subject is doing and what it says of his or her principal concerns. The codes that come of this are many and provisional; they are meant to be so, for an early CGT analysis is supposed to cast a wide net before any sorting takes place.

With the accumulation of codes, constant comparison across the various sources of data would bring patterns to light. Some would cluster in a manner indicative of a common process, while others made for distinctions that the coarser initial codes had hidden. The researcher kept up a steady practice of memo-writing to follow these developments, putting down working hypotheses and hunches about how categories might relate. In time these memos provided the scaffolding for the theory.

From all the data came the core category of Calibrated Belonging. It was not found by design but by the sheer weight of the evidence, a concept that in one form or another presented itself in the broadest array of settings and participants. When it had taken shape, selective coding was used to hone in on its properties and how it related to the subsidiary ones. Theoretical coding, in the sense of Glaser's (1978) families of codes, then put order to those relationships and defined the social process at hand. The point of saturation was arrived at when the data were no longer testing the theory but simply confirming and adding to it.

2.4.1 An Illustration of the Analytic Trail

To make the grounding of the theory visible, it is useful to trace one short passage through the coding process. In an early interview, a middle-school teacher described watching a student who always seemed to know where she stood—"not too far ahead, not too far behind"—and who, whenever she did something different, would notice people looking and quietly adjust, day after day. Open coding of this fragment yielded provisional codes such as reading where you stand, monitoring for reactions, and daily self-adjustment.

Through constant comparison with similar fragments from other participants—a high-school teacher describing a boy who seemed to know "whether he was in or out" before a word was spoken, a counselor describing students who could not find themselves in the school's story—these open codes clustered under the selective code gauging one's social standing, which was later refined into the category Boundary Sensing. Theoretical coding then ordered the relationship between this category and the others: Boundary Sensing supplies the feedback that drives the wider process, linking to Structural Compliance (protective conformity) and Relational Anchoring (the ties that make the monitoring bearable), and thereby to the core

category, Calibrated Belonging. Table 2 records the resulting category with two of its properties and their dimensional ranges, as developed in the theoretical memos.

Table 2. The category Boundary Sensing, with illustrative properties and dimensions

Category property	Description	Dimensional range
Salience of monitoring	How present the reading of social cues is in daily experience	Backgrounded (centre)→relentless (margins)
Mode of registration	How boundary signals are apprehended by the student	Chiefly cognitive→strongly somatic (bodily)

2.5 Memo-Writing and Theory Development

Methodology sections do not always give due credit to memos, yet in CGT they are where the theory is made, not merely documented as an afterthought. After the very first interview the researcher would put pen to paper with some short, tentative notes to capture a reaction or a half-formed idea. As the study went on, they grew into more fully developed pieces of writing, weighing case comparisons and the suitability of category names. There were in excess of 200 such entries (totalling roughly 85 pages) by the time the study was done. Writing the final manuscript was largely a matter of taking what the memos had already put in place and putting it in order.

2.6 Methodological Rigor

Rather than look to other qualitative traditions for standards of quality, CGT has its own. The study followed the four laid out by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1978): fit, work, relevance and modifiability. Does the theory hold up to the data? Does it explain what is happening in the setting and have predictive value? Is it of relevance to the participants? Can it be modified if new evidence comes to light?

To ensure rigor, the researcher did not shy away from disconfirming cases, making use of theoretical sampling to find them. At times early participants were revisited to see if the developing categories rang true with their experience. An external view was maintained by the supervisory team, whose members have expertise in both Japanese education and CGT. And through the memos there was room for reflexivity, to consider how one's position as an outsider to the Japanese system and one's own assumptions about difference and belonging might colour what is observed and what is missed.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

The researcher completed the eAPRIN (e-learning Program for Research Ethics) training from the Association for the Promotion of Research Integrity, a course covering the responsible conduct and ethical principles of research on human subjects, and the study was designed and carried out in keeping with those precepts. It also received approval from the author's

university research ethics committee prior to any fieldwork, and access to each school was additionally authorized by the school principal in accordance with local requirements.

Although the interviews were conducted with adult educators rather than students, the study engaged sensitive subject matter—social distress, bullying (*ijime*), and school refusal (*tōkōkyōhi*)—and involved sustained observation in settings that included minors, so ethical safeguards were treated as central rather than procedural. Participation was entirely voluntary. Every participant received an explanation of the research purpose, the procedures involved, the intended use of the data, and their rights, including the right to decline or to withdraw at any time without penalty, and written informed consent was secured from each teacher, vice-principal, and counselor before data collection began.

Because observation took place in classrooms and communal spaces that included students, and because the researcher at times spoke informally with students in the course of it, this component was covered by school-level authorization and by advance notice to the families of pupils in the observed classes, in accordance with each school's procedures. No student was formally interviewed or audio-recorded; informal exchanges were noted only in de-identified form, without verbatim transcription, and any student could decline to talk or withdraw at any time.

Confidentiality was protected throughout. All participants were assigned pseudonyms (as used in Table 1), and any students mentioned by educators or appearing in observational notes were de-identified; identifying details of individuals and schools were removed or altered, and recordings and field notes were stored securely, with access restricted to the researcher. Because educators sometimes spoke about individual pupils in distress, a safeguarding protocol was agreed with each school in advance, so that any concern about a specific student could be referred promptly to the school's *yōgo kyōin* or counselor through the appropriate pathway; the limits of confidentiality in cases of risk of harm were explained to participants during consent.

3. Findings: The Substantive Theory of Calibrated Belonging

3.1 The Core Category: Calibrated Belonging

The present study has yielded a theory built around a process termed Calibrated Belonging. There is a reason for the nomenclature; calibration suggests an active fine-tuning, an adjustment to one's surroundings and to feedback. And that is what the educators in this research described, and what observation repeatedly showed, as students' daily reality at school. Students were not merely being let in or left out but were in a constant state of managing their social standing, modulating their presentation and to whom they showed it, all while gauging the limits of acceptable conduct.

One middle-school teacher was quite direct on the matter, describing a student who always seemed to know where she stood—not too far ahead, not too far behind. Do something different, the teacher observed, and people start looking; the student feels it, and makes the adjustment, every day.

There is a dual orientation to Calibrated Belonging that sets it apart from run-of-the-mill conformity. These students were certainly abiding by group norms, but they were doing so to secure something of substance—genuine recognition and connection—even as the structural conditions made that hard to come by. The chasm between what they wanted and what was on offer was the very engine of the process. To an outsider it may appear as smooth social functioning; from the inside it is often costly maintenance work. The paper will return to how this aligns with other theories of belonging.

3.2 Boundary Sensing

For there to be any calibration, there must be feedback. Boundary Sensing is the means by which that is gathered, the interpretive labor through which one determines where the lines of belonging are drawn and who is on either side of them.

In the micro-social world of a school, this takes the form of reading cues with some speed and accuracy: the tone change when a particular student joins a chat, the way a lunch table reconfigures itself post-bell, or the silence that can follow an unorthodox answer in class. One high-school teacher (T-08) described a student who had learned to read the room. As the teacher put it, “Before anyone says anything, that boy already knows if he’s in or out. The signs are small, but you can see he feels them in his body.”

That last part is telling. As educators described it, and as observation of anxious, withdrawn behaviour suggested, Boundary Sensing was for many students somatic rather than purely cognitive—a tightness in the stomach before school, or the restlessness counselors heard about before a student had to face a difficult social dynamic. In this way, othering does its damage to the individual psyche and body as well as at the structural level, a point of convergence with the scholarship reviewed below.

Moreover, the process is not experienced equally. Educators reported that students already at the margins—whether by virtue of ethnicity, disability, or some other factor—appeared to carry it as a kind of relentless background hum that drained their emotional reserves, whereas students more comfortably placed in the social centre showed little of this: they did not need to read the room, because the room was largely arranged for them.

3.3 Narrative Negotiation

Schools have their own stories to tell regarding community values and the sort of difference they can tolerate. In the Japanese context these institutional narratives are highly codified, found in the text of the rules, in the morning assembly and in the unspoken demands placed on students in discussion.

How a participant relates to this dominant story is what the study calls Narrative Negotiation. Some will perform the role of the harmonious, diligent student without a second thought, having internalized the script. Others are forced into a more strenuous code-switching, reserving a different self for outside the school gates. Then there are those in a tenuous position who cannot find themselves in the school’s self-image at all. One counselor summed up the predicament of the children who struggle most: the school has a story about who belongs, and

they are not in it; and when they try to put forward a story of their own, it gets edited out.

The metaphor holds up. When a student tries to put an alternative narrative to the fore, whether by humor or by some visible cultural difference, the institution has a way of quietly redirecting or absorbing it. The official line is preserved, and the student is left with no doubt as to where he or she stands. This would seem to indicate that transforming these narratives is a structural undertaking requiring leadership and resources, not something the disadvantaged student can achieve alone. The paper will develop that argument in relation to current frameworks later.

3.4 Structural Compliance

There is a structure to the way Japanese schools operate that is perhaps more in evidence here than in many other national settings. From the daily timetable and the cleaning rota to club rosters, homeroom groupings and the formal hierarchy of student roles in every class, these are more than just matters of organization; they are the very medium of school social life. One might say that in this milieu, belonging is largely a function of how well one conforms to those structures. To be part of the community is to take part in them; to be at odds with them or left out is to be socially marginalized.

For the majority of students, what the study terms Structural Compliance is simply the grain of the day's work. It is unremarkable, if now and then a nuisance, but hardly a burden. A good minority, however, see it as something quite different: an ongoing exercise in normalcy that demands effort and has its price when it fails. Consider the student with learning differences for whom the classroom's synchronized pace is hard to keep up with, or one from a family under financial strain who cannot put together the kit required for a club. Or the student whose own cultural background puts him at odds with the unspoken rules of the school. For such individuals, compliance is a visible and tenuous thing.

Teachers were open about the friction this engenders. One acknowledged that putting everyone to the same task at the same time is, in a sense, what excludes some students – and yet, as she put it, the structure is also what makes the class function. It is a constant tension.

The upshot of the study is clear. These schools have put in place elaborate and effective structures and for the most part let the student figure out how to fit in, instead of being soft on people and tough on the system. The comparison section will address how this pattern squares with current thinking on belonging-centered institutions.

3.5 Relational Anchoring

Then there is the matter of what kept most participants from finding the whole business of Boundary Sensing, Narrative Negotiation and Structural Compliance too much to bear. In almost every case it was a particular relationship. Not some vague feeling of community or the formality of a club membership, but a real connection. A teacher who had taken the trouble to get to know them, a friend who knew them for who they were, a counselor's office where one could put the performance aside for a while.

The study calls this Relational Anchoring. It acts as a tether to the school's social world when the rest of it is proving difficult. The loss of such a tie, whether by graduation or a falling out,

can be severe and disproportionate; several counselors and teachers pointed to it as the trigger for a spell of *tōkōkyōhi*.

Two things are worth noting from a theoretical standpoint. For one, these are dyadic affairs. Educators drew a sharp line between a student's being in a group and being genuinely known by someone; in their accounts, only the latter did the protective work. And they are not evenly spread around. Those already on the margins are less apt to have formed secure ties, since the very conditions of their marginalization stand in the way of the kind of trust needed to build them.

3.6 Integration: The Process of Calibrated Belonging

It would be a mistake to view the four categories in isolation. They are part of an integrated process in a continuous feedback loop. A student with a firm Relational Anchor has the latitude to put forward a slightly different narrative in class, safe in the knowledge the relationship will hold. Conversely, a student with his Boundary Sensing on high alert will put more stock in Structural Compliance as a form of protection. Change the institutional setup with a new seating plan or a reassignment and one may find a once-secure anchor is destabilized and the whole calibration becomes more of an ordeal.

The theory has a temporal dimension as well. The patterns one develops do not end at the school gate. This temporal dimension should be read with care. The students whose experience is theorized here are aged 11-17 and have no professional lives; the evidence for carry-over comes instead from the adult educator participants, several of whom, in reflecting on their own schooling, described how the hypervigilance and code-switching of their school years had persisted into their professional lives, along with a tendency to invest in a few close relationships at the cost of wider social engagement. These retrospective adult accounts are treated as suggestive of a longer trajectory rather than as direct longitudinal evidence about the students themselves. Schools are where much of this is first put in place, even if belonging is not exclusively a school problem.

4. Comparison with the Extant Literature

Following the precepts of classic grounded theory, one does not consult the substantive literature until after the theory has been put in place. The present work engages with related scholarship as a vantage point from which to locate, compare and refine Calibrated Belonging. Glaser (1978, 1998) would have this be a matter of weaving the literature into the sorting and write-up; extant theory is to be regarded as data for constant comparison with what is emerging, not as something to validate or supplant it. In the sections that follow, Calibrated Belonging is set against four areas of scholarship that the data have shown to be its closest kin.

4.1 The OBI Framework of Belonging and Othering

A side-by-side comparison reveals the framework of the Othering and Belonging Institute (OBI) at UC Berkeley to be the most congruent with the categories that have come forward. For the OBI, belonging and othering are social and structural affairs, not matters of individual psychology. They define belonging through four mutually reinforcing prerequisites: inclusion,

recognition, agency and connection (Powell & Menendian, 2024). What is distinctive about the framework is its refusal to see belonging as a feeling an individual might cultivate or shed; it is a condition institutions can either make possible or foreclose. Nor will it accept an additive model of inclusion. The question is not whether marginalized groups have been folded into what is there, but whether those structures were conceived with all in mind.

There is considerable common ground with the current theory. The participants' descriptions map well on to the OBI's four components: inclusion as membership in the school's key institutions, recognition as being valued there, agency as the real power to effect change and connection as the sense of affiliation. And as the framework would have it, the data confirm these are interdependent. Educators described students who were formally part of classroom life yet starved for recognition, and cases in which a single friendship made up for tenuous inclusion and a lack of agency. One could read *Calibrated Belonging* as a detailed rendering of the daily business students conduct where these conditions are in short supply.

At the same time, the emergent theory takes the OBI account further than the framework itself delineates. While the OBI speaks of othering in structural terms, the categories here point to the mechanisms by which schools bring it about, such as Structural Compliance, which makes of students' varying backgrounds and capacities visible signs of not belonging. The somatic aspect of Boundary Sensing is in line with the view that othering is a harm to the body and psyche. And if the OBI advocates for narrative transformation, the finding on Narrative Negotiation lays out the micro-level processes of resistance and maintenance that any such effort must contend with.

4.2 Japanese School Culture: Harmony, Hierarchy, and Homogeneity

The theory also fits into the established body of work on the cultural underpinnings of social life in Japanese schools and serves to give it some specificity. Central to this is the notion of *wa*. Though rendered as harmony in English, the term implies a smoothness of collective operation that "harmony" alone fails to convey, and it remains a cornerstone value in the schooling system. One can still turn to Rohlen (1983) for the most penetrating ethnographic analysis of the institutionalization of this value in Japanese high schools, from the very architecture of the school day and its attendant rituals to the expectations that hold students and teachers in a common bond. Shimizu (1992) has more recently put to the test how teachers deploy *shidō*, or guidance practices, to keep this collective order intact while at the same time directing the way students move through the system. In terms of daily practice, *Calibrated Belonging* is an account of what *wa* exacts from the student: the kind of ongoing adjustment needed to present a harmonious front.

Then there is *amae*, the notion of benevolent indulgence that underpins close ties in Japanese society (Doi, 1973), which throws light on Relational Anchoring. Students are called upon to pick up on social cues without them being made explicit, to put the collective norm before their own expression and to ensure a smooth surface even if it does not reflect what is going on inside. For many, this gives the school a sense of community and warmth; but it also means that to deviate is expensive, and that a secure anchoring relationship carries a protective weight out of proportion to anything else.

The material culture of the school makes the demands of conformity plain to see: the identical uniforms, the shared lunch protocols, the cleaning rotas and the unspoken rule that one belongs to a club whether the regulations allow for it or not. Such arrangements have a double edge, as scholars have observed (Yoneyama, 1999; Cave, 2007): they engender a solid solidarity with those who conform and marginalize the rest. This is the domain of Structural Compliance. The returnee with an accent, the child who misreads the room, or the student whose family is short on the funds for club equipment will find the school's norms to be demands rather than open invitations and must put in a performance of compliance at a price the well-positioned student is spared.

4.3 Bullying, School Refusal, and Belonging Failure

There is no shortage of writing on *ijime* and *tōkōkyōhi*, though much of it looks for causes at the level of the individual or the family. Yoneyama (2000) was instrumental in changing that perspective in her work on *tōkōkyōhi*, making the case that school refusal is often a rational reaction to an environment the student finds alienating, rather than some form of pathology. The present theory would concur and add specificity to that view. Counselors and teachers in this study repeatedly linked the end of an important anchoring relationship to the onset of a spell of *tōkōkyōhi*; in the language used here, it is a retreat from a place where the conditions for belonging have collapsed and the work of calibration is no longer tenable (Fukuzawa & LeTendre, 2001).

A structural approach also clarifies the matter of *ijime*. MEXT (2023) puts the number of incidents in the hundreds of thousands every year, but the statistics do not convey the social logic at play: the way bullying follows status hierarchies, or how the pressure to police deviance in the name of group conformity, combined with a reluctance to air conflict in keeping with *wa*, leaves matters in the dark until they are acute. Boundary Sensing provides an insider's view of this logic. The kind of asymmetric vigilance that educators observed in, and reported of, students on the periphery is at once a defence against being made a target and an indicator of the structural vulnerability of some children.

4.4 Diversity, Difference, and the Limits of Inclusion

The theory also has something to say about the body of work on difference in Japanese schools. For all that Japan has put itself forward as a culturally uniform society, with its schools mirroring that self-image, the actual situation is far more complex than it has been in the past. Today one finds children of *zainichi* Korean or Chinese stock whose families have been here for generations, new arrivals from Brazil or the Philippines, returnees (*kikokushijo*) who have made their way back after years overseas, LGBTQ+ young people and those with disabilities now being put in mainstream classrooms. All of them must make their way in an environment where the prevailing rules were not put in place to accommodate them (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999; Ishii-Kuntz, 2019). It is these students who, in the present study, bore the brunt of every category of Calibrated Belonging, at a higher cost and intensity.

One could point to policy shifts: the *tokubetsu shien kyōiku* system has broadened its scope for disabled pupils and some localities are coming to terms with formal recognition of same-sex

unions. Yet the research shows a persistent chasm between what policy intends and how institutions function in practice (Nakata, 2020). The present theory puts a name to that chasm as it is encountered day to day. Structural change is not accomplished by revised guidelines alone; it demands an ongoing scrutiny of the boundary signals and compliance demands, the institutional narratives, that serve to tell a student whether he or she belongs.

4.5 Classic Grounded Theory in Educational Research

It is worth addressing the methodological literature at this point, given that putting off any comparison is in itself a matter of principle. To bring a pre-made framework to the data and test it would be to miss the whole point of classic grounded theory, which is to let the situation dictate the theory and to find the categories and social processes that are of consequence to the participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978). As Simmons (2022) has argued from decades of experience with CGT, this insistence on emergence is no mere fastidiousness but the source of the method's ability to yield explanations that actually hold water.

This is an approach well matched to education, where official accounts can be worlds apart from lived experience and much of what is significant in a school will not be found in the records (Holton, 2010; Simmons, 2010). In the case of Japanese schools, a culture of surface harmony and an aversion to open conflict only widens that divide, making a discovery-driven method all the more necessary and justifying the decision to let the theory form before engaging the literature. If the categories that emerged here happen to align with the OBI framework and other scholarship on Japanese schooling, it is not an indication that the framework should have led the way, but rather proof that the grounded categories are a true fit for the setting.

5. Discussion

5.1 Targeted Universalism in the Japanese School Context

One can see in Targeted Universalism a sound principle for turning the theoretical results of this study into policy, and it is instructive to consider how the five-step TU process set out by Powell and Menendian (2024) would be put to work in this setting. Consider the first step: establishing a universal goal. It is an unassuming but vital part of the process. A goal stated as “improving attendance for at-risk students” or “reducing bullying” has the effect of casting some as the norm and others as the problem. A proper TU approach would put it another way: that all students are to have the structural conditions for a genuine sense of belonging, without it coming at a prohibitive cost. In so doing, belonging is treated as an entitlement for everyone, not a matter for remediation.

Then there are the second and third steps, the assessment of the general population and the identification of where they stand relative to one another. Here the study's findings have real utility. The categories put forward make clear which groups are operating under the most constraints. This includes students whose cultural or linguistic make-up puts them at odds with the school's dominant narrative; those with developmental or learning differences who find Structural Compliance exacting; students who have been subject to *ijime* and whose Boundary Sensing has become unsustainable; and those without a firm Relational Anchor, for whom the

end of one close tie can be a crisis.

The fourth and fifth steps call for an institutional specificity this research cannot supply; the suggestions offered below for these two steps are therefore illustrative applications of the framework rather than findings empirically derived from the present data. Take the question of structural supports and impediments. For the student whose Narrative Negotiation is limited, the answer is structural: institutions must make room for other viewpoints, not just put up with them. Where Structural Compliance is most onerous, schools might ask which demands are truly educational and which are mere tradition – a distinction they may be loath to make. As for those in danger of losing their Relational Anchors, the best response may be the simplest: a deliberate attentiveness from teachers and counselors to the relational terrain and a prompt reaction to any disturbance.

5.2 Implications for Practice

The theory yields three implications for practice, each with a different audience in mind.

Classroom teachers should take from this that the social field of the classroom is not something that just is; it is made by the norms they model and the arrangements they put in place every day. There is no need for radical overhaul to lower the cost of Calibrated Belonging. Some modest adjustments will do. Place seats in a way that encourages the formation of Relational Anchors; put in place regular structures for students to put their own views before the class; learn to tell the difference between the pupil who is merely going through the motions and the one who is truly present. Such practices have a cumulative effect on the calculus of belonging.

For *yōgo kyōin* and SCs, the notion of Relational Anchoring ought to change therapeutic priorities. In Japan a good deal of counseling is spent in crisis mode with students in acute social distress. An anchoring-informed method would put more stock in the early mapping of a student's relational world to spot those without stable ties before things come to a head, or to act swiftly when a class reassignment upends an existing anchor.

Policymakers and administrators face a question that is easy to ask but hard to answer politically: of the structural demands placed on students in Japanese schools, which are necessary and which are convention? Anti-bullying policy must move past the tallying of incidents and look at the conditions that create a vulnerability to *ijime*. That means confronting the link between what a school demands in the way of conformity and the targeting of the student who cannot comply.

5.3 Limitations

There are three limitations to acknowledge. First, while the theoretical sampling gave the study variation across student types and schools, the work was done in one city only. The theory may well appear in a different light in a large metropolis, in the country, or in schools with a different socioeconomic profile. It is offered as a beginning, not a final word.

Second, and importantly, students were not formally interviewed: their experience is approached through observation and through informal conversations captured in the field notes, together with the accounts of the educators who work with them, rather than through formal,

verbatim student testimony. This design protects a vulnerable group and draws on informants with a broad, comparative view of many students, but it also means the theory does not rest on students' own first-person testimony, and the perspectives of the most withdrawn or marginalised students—those least visible to staff—may be under-represented. Corroborating the theory with students' own voices, through an appropriately safeguarded design, is a priority for further research.

Lastly, the theory is substantive and rooted in a particular level of abstraction appropriate to its setting. It would be a mistake to treat it as a general model of school belonging. It is a conceptual resource, one that will likely require some modification if taken into a different cultural or institutional environment.

6. Conclusion

In the course of this paper, the author has put forward a Classic Grounded Theory to account for the dynamics of belonging and othering as they play out in Japanese schools. What has emerged is a substantive theory, Calibrated Belonging, which serves as a conceptual lens for an aspect of school life that is at once familiar and unspoken: the ongoing way in which students gauge their position in the social milieu and modify their behaviour, relationships and sense of self in order to secure a true sense of belonging.

The study puts forward a more exact vocabulary for this kind of hidden social work with such categories as Boundary Sensing, Narrative Negotiation, Structural Compliance and Relational Anchoring. These are not merely descriptive; they reposition the issue of belonging and othering in its proper institutional setting. One finds that a student's attempts to calibrate are driven by the very norms and structures of the school, which make belonging come easier for some than for others, rather than being a simple reaction to interpersonal contact. In this respect the theory is in keeping with the Othering and Belonging Institute's view of othering as something structural, and it would follow that any meaningful change has to be sought at the level of the institution, not the individual.

There is also a practical application here in the form of Targeted Universalism. If schools can treat belonging as a universal goal yet acknowledge the disparate structural hurdles faced by different pupils, they will be in a better place to build communities in which all can do well. The categories developed in this study give educators and leaders a way to see where the system is either supporting or, perhaps unintentionally, limiting a student's chance to belong.

Ofcourse the implications are wider than any one intervention might suggest. The institutional practices and cultural mores of the Japanese school have been in place for generations and are not easily altered by short term reform. Still, educators and observation have been candid about the emotional and social toll students bear in having to "read the room" and put in the labour to be accepted. Their accounts warrant a closer look at what makes such calibration so necessary.

The author does not claim to have the last word on the matter. Instead, this research is meant to open up a dialogue. Calibrated Belonging provides a basis for considering how a school might honour its traditions and at the same time be less dependent on a student's willingness to adapt in order to be included. It is an explanation of a significant social process, to be sure, but also a

point of departure for further inquiry into making schools places where no one has to set aside who they are in order to belong.

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Q.K. conceived and designed the research, collected and analyzed the data, developed the grounded theory, conducted the literature integration, and wrote the manuscript.

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