

Lessons of *Les Grands Esprits* for a Diverse Society

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Introduction

Immigration has become a big political issue in recent times and has provoked a rise in anti-globalization sentiment around the world. It is often considered to be not only a threat to job security for nations but also a source of increasing income inequality between wealthy people and poor immigrant families, as well as a serious deterioration in education at schools with these poor immigrants' children. With massive inflows of immigrants into a nation, providing their children with a good quality education and integrating them into society will be crucial aspects of any successful immigration policy.

The Japanese government announced a new policy to expand the inflow of foreign human resources in 2018 in its "Basic Principles of Economic and Public Finance Management and Its Reform". In line with this, in April 2019 the revised Immigration Control Act came into effect aimed at boosting foreign labor during the next five years by a

maximum of 340,000 in 14 working areas, including caregiving and restaurants. It is hoped that this will help counter the decline in the labor force in Japan resulting from depopulation in an aging society.

But even before the introduction of this policy, we have seen a steady rate of increase in the foreign population in Japan, which reached 2.5 million on Jan. 1, 2018, the largest figure so far, and is predicted to reach 3.7 million in 2025, equal to the population of Yokohama. Among these foreign residents, around 30% are permanent residents. They have few work restrictions and are allowed to have their families live with them. Thus, they are considered *de facto* immigrants. The number of such foreign permanent residents has been increasing due to the policy of lowering the length of time required to qualify for permanent residence to 10 years since 1998. This was aimed at mitigating the labor shortage. The increase in the number of foreign permanent residents will possibly mean an increase in the number of their children, and so school education for children from diverse backgrounds is now an issue Japan must face too.

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Japanese poster for *Les Grands Esprits*

Les Grands Esprits

A French film, *Les Grands Esprits*, which premiered in cinemas in France in 2017 and in Japan in 2019, offers a good portrayal of the education gap in France between the children of wealthy Caucasian families and those from poor African immigrant families.

François Foucault, a veteran professor of French literature at the prestigious Henri IV institute in Paris who was brought up in a wealthy family and whose father is a well-known writer, tends to be a little pedantic and look down at students not doing well in his class. At the beginning of the film, he is returning essays he has marked to each of the elite students in his class, and does so with direct and harsh comments, such as "Anne, your work is wasteful, stupid and too pretentious!" or "Penelope, your work is too light, completely too light!" and so on.

One night, he gave a speech at a party about his idea to mitigate the education gap between those living in the central part of Paris and the immigrant families living in the suburbs. That was to send a veteran professor to the deteriorating schools in the suburbs to support the professors there. There was by coincidence a government official of the National Education Ministry listening to his presentation. She asked him to realize his idea by himself. So he ended up accepting a

position at a public school on the outskirts of Paris where many poor immigrant families lived and the students were not much interested in learning French literature.

The school is surrounded by burnt-out and abandoned cars, bushes harboring suspicious men, and apparently delinquent youths gathering in spaces between the apartment buildings. Foucault is at first very scared by these scenes of ruin around the school – a significant contrast to the surroundings of Henri IV. He is also shocked to see the poor results of the exams which he set to assess the students' academic level. They are all reluctant to study any subject and have little passion for improving themselves with knowledge and culture. He is embarrassed to see that he cannot even read the students' names correctly, since most of the names are Islamic or African ones. Though there is such a big gap between Henri IV and this school and it would seem to be a challenge to teach them and get them to learn about French literature, Foucault never gives up trying to improve them by education and tries to continue to be as sincere as possible in passing on his knowledge of French language and literature.

He realizes that he cannot apply the same method to them as he used in Henri IV, but by a different method he tries to stimulate their willingness to believe in their future and abilities. With his guidance, the students begin to acquire intellectual curiosity and start regaining their self-confidence. As time goes by, their interest in learning grows and finally the whole class has become indulged in reading *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, one of the great masterpieces of French literature in the 19th century.

Nevertheless, some serious trouble occurs on a school excursion to Versailles caused by Seydou, the worst troublemaker in the class. The professors at the school, as is their normal practice, try to dismiss Seydou from the school permanently. Foucault is the only one who tries to protect Seydou from being expelled, believing the school is the only place where he could try again to be a better person. Expulsion would take away his last opportunity to realize his potential as a human being. Foucault is determined to argue with the school's principal to protect Seydou's future.

Foucault does not look like a superhero working for the interests of the weak; rather, he looks like a conservative middle-aged professor and is even a little snobbish in having never thought seriously about poor people. But he is a devoted teacher and proud of being so, and believes in his sacred mission of leading students in the right direction in life through knowledge of French language and literature. He always tries to correct the students' verbal language for politeness, as the authentic polite expressions of the language are fading among the young generation. In sum, he is an excellent teacher, and more importantly his passion remains unchanged regardless of where he teaches, whether at a prestigious school for elite students or a school for poor immigrant families' children. He finally comes to trust the students' capacity to choose the right way to improve themselves at

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Seydou, a troublemaker in class, and François Foucault, a veteran professor of French literature

school, no matter how bad they may appear. The scene towards the end of the film highlighting the conversation between Seydou and Foucault reveals that Foucault's efforts are even more rewarding.

The film's title *Les Grands Esprits* suggests the encounter between great spirits – namely the professor and the students. A distinguished actor from the Comédie-Française, Denis Podalydès, plays the role of Foucault, but the adolescents playing the roles of the students are making their acting debuts, including Seydou. Director Olivier Ayache-Vidal, formerly a photo journalist, had long been interested in education as a key to future achievements, and was accordingly happy to work on this film.

Lessons from the Film

Immigration is not a key issue in this film. Instead, it highlights education. Education is a wonderful piece of human work that can show the way to happiness for young people. A good and devoted professional teacher must play a key role in education, and the lesson of this film is that education is even more important for a society with more foreign workers or immigrants.

While the percentage of immigrants to the total population in France was around 12% in 2017, in Japan the percentage of the foreign population was less than 2.5% in the same year, according to United Nations statistics. However, the numbers are continuously increasing and with the recently revised Immigration Control Act could increase more rapidly in the future. In this light, education for foreign residents' children will become an important policy issue for Japan as well. We should have professional teachers like Foucault, with passion and devotion and good trust in their students. We may have them already, but we may need more soon. Good teachers will be a necessity for a diverse society.

J.S

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