

Japanese Education

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Impressions and Cultural Differences



The Japanese classroom is not new to me. Five years ago, I spent a year as an exchange student, attending a Commercial High School in Saitama-ken. Now, back again, this time as a teacher of English(Mombusho English Fellow), I am enjoying a fresh new insight, a chance to view Japanese Education from a different perspective. Once again, I've been surprised by many cultural differences. In the past eight months, I have been impressed and confused by many aspects of Japanese Education, in particular: school regulations; classroom behavior; group spirit; and especially, the role of the teacher.

School Regulations

Japanese students are strictly supervised by school poli-

cies. These policies regard many aspects of student behavior, including dress and activities outside of school. The school dress code, for instance, usually calls for short haircuts and the wearing of the school uniform(with particular lengths and widths). The students are subject to periodic inspections of such. As a high school student five years ago, I became accustomed to the school uniform, but felt the dress and hair inspections were humbling and rather degrading experiences. Now, no longer a wearer of the school uniform, I see the dress code in a different light. I see the members of the baseball club, young boys with closely shaven heads(looking so cold on snowy winter days), whose hair is a symbol of their strength, their ability to endure. Quite opposite, I see the Tsuppari student, his wide-legged slacks and wild haircut setting him apart from the rest. Perhaps he is the beginning of a new generation wishing to be able to express themselves? Perhaps, his strange dress is his way of rebelling against the strict and structured system? Or perhaps, he is just a bad boy!

By the way, someone once asked me if there were Tsuppari in America. My first reaction was to say "no", because American students are allowed to dress as they please and therefore, variety in styles is the rule. 'Being different' in America is perfectly acceptable and part of expressing oneself whereas, 'being different' in Japan is unacceptable behavior. However, if we consider the Tsuppari as a misbehaving student, then my answer would be "yes". There are students that misbehave in America.

But, let's compare what is regarded as misbehavior in Japan and America. Personally, I find many of the 'unacceptables' in Japan quite innocent(carrying a bookbag that doesn't fit the proper description or wearing the wrong type of socks)

compared to the trully bad, disruptive behavior termed 'unacceptable' in American schools.

Unacceptable Behavior

1. Truancy and Unauthorized Absences
 2. Vandalism or Theft of School Property
 3. Physical Assault
 4. Verbal Assaults
 5. Threats and Disruptions
 6. Minority Concerns
 7. Possession of Dangerous, Harmful, and Nuisance Substances
- (taken from the 1982/83 Student/Parent Handbook of Plymouth Junior High School, Minnesota)

Of course, I realize that breaking rules is breaking rules, no matter how trifle the behavior. And, since rules of behavior are especially important to Japanese society, the implications of rebellion mean much more.

Another aspect of Japanese school policy that is quite different from America, is that there are rules and regulations applying to the students after school hours. This divergence seems to lie in the differences in definitions of Education. Since, in Japan, the schools are responsible for not only formal education, but also moral and ethical training, the school is responsible for the students' conduct both in and outside of school. In America, the students behavior after school is the responsibility of the parent.

Classroom Behavior

As an American teaching in Japanese schools, I've had to make many adjustments due to the differences in classroom behavior. For example, the first time I walked into a classroom and forty-some students stood up and bowed to me, I was quite overwhelmed(it seemed strange). Bowing to show respect for one's superior is a unique characteristic of Japanese

society. In America, students do not stand up or bow to the teacher. In fact, usually there is only a brief, casual greeting if any. The closing of class is much the same, the teacher says something like, "that's all for today", and the students get up and leave the classroom.

Another example of unique behavior, is the unwillingness of students to volunteer answers. In America, students are encouraged to raise their hands if they know the answer to a question. Active participation by the students is an integral part of the lesson. Yet, when I ask a classroom of Japanese students a question, I am often faced with blank stares and no raised hands. I believe this is due to the fact that most classes are conducted as lectures and therefore, the students are not accustomed to speaking out. For an American, accustomed to student participation, this is quite frustrating and probably the greatest challenge for a foreign teacher.

Yet another common behavior the foreign teacher must adjust to, is the consulting with friends before answering a question. After asking a question, I usually must wait several minutes while the student asks those around him the proper answer. In America, this is considered cheating. Is this a result of the 'group ethics' philosophy? Or are the students just afraid of making mistakes?

Attitudes and behavior towards the opposite sex in Japan, will always be a mystery to me (so modest in some ways and yet so open in others). I was especially impressed one day in school:

The class had just come in from P.E. class and were in the process of dressing when Miss X and I walked in. Many of the boys were in their underwear. None of the female students were embarrassed but I was. In America, this situation would be unheard of. American students are very sensitive about the opposite sex and could not dress so nonchalantly (casually) in front of them.

Last, but not least, I am impressed by the cooperation and sharing of responsibilities by the students in the preparation of school meals and the cleaning of the school. American students eat a meal that was prepared by a school cook in a cafeteria and leave the cleaning of the school to the school janitor.

Group Spirit

Cooperation and sharing of responsibilities is most impressive in the students incredible group spirit and ability to work together for school activities. Many special programs and competitions are held each year to generate this feeling of group effort and competitiveness. The chorus competition is a good example. Each class worked very hard to transform their class into a beautiful choir. No matter what their actual ability, each group worked together to perform with great professionalism and pride. It was very inspiring! American students, with so much emphasis on individual ability, do not shine so brightly in group events. They also don't have the advantage of being grouped together as homeroom classes as Japanese students are (each individual student has a different schedule and therefore doesn't study with the same students in the same room as in Japan).

The Role of the Teacher

Different social customs, philosophy and school systems, not only make the behavior of Japanese students unique, but also effect the role of the teacher. Perhaps what I've learned most, is the extent of the responsibilities Japan's teachers hold and the special student/teacher relationship thereof.

At first, I was shocked that teachers were responsible for the students activities both in and out of school. I had heard of teachers searching the different 'hang outs' in town (department store game rooms etc.) to find missing students, apologizing to a store owner for the student's shoplifting, and even driving a child to school because he wouldn't come on his own.

Gradually, I became familiar with the extent of the role of the teacher. I realized that the teacher does much more than teach lessons. He is also responsible for the social and moral character of all his homeroom students, for teaching them moral and ethical values, advising and counseling them on personal and social affairs, disciplining them, not to mention coaching a club activity and preparing for special school activities. In America, these responsibilities are divided among many:

Teacher

School Counselor--assists in working out problems, counsels

School Social Worker(deals with social and family problems)

School Psychologist

Parent

Yet, because the Japanese teacher is also a friend, parent and counselor to the child, there is a unique relationship between student and teacher. This relationship is certainly to be envied. Nevertheless, for one person to be responsible for forty-some children seems a very heavy load. Many teachers must sacrifice their lesson planning time for 'SEITO SHIDOU'. With the changing attitudes and lifestyles of Japan's youth and the growing problems with discipline, I think Japan may soon realize that its teachers might break under such a load. Sooner or later, parents will have to take more responsibility for their own children. The special relationship between student and teacher need not change. Don't you agree?

In conclusion, I must admit that due to my different values and limited exposure to Japanese schools(I make daily visits to the eleven Junior High Schools in Ashikaga-shi), I may very well have misunderstood the true meaning of or reasoning for the characteristics of Japanese Education I have mentioned above. However, my purpose was not to make judgments, but to record my impressions and ideas of some of the differences in Japanese Education. I think it is necessary for the foreign teacher to familiarize oneself and understand these basic differences before one can be an effective member of the education system in Japan. It is also helpful, if the host country realizes the adjustment problems the foreign teacher may face. Once we understand the differences in our cultures and particularly, our systems of education, we will be in a far more favorable situation to learn from each other.