

## Passing Thoughts and Impressions



What about education in Japan ? It is a question that I have been asked time and time again. Still, always I find myself struggling to answer that question, trying to decipher just what my thoughts and feelings are. The subject matter is too broad, and my experience limited to my encounters within eight months time while working in Jr. High schools in one wonderful yet small city. However, as I think, I realize that there has been many things which have left strong impressions on me, and it is these passing thoughts I will attempt to write about.

Looking back, one of my first and lasting impressions was how well behaved and polite the students are. When I first heard that I would be working with Jr. High students I was a bit apprehensive. Knowing well the bad reputation students of the same age had in America, I wondered if I could survive the year. How surprised I was when the students greeted me politely and even bowed !!!!

Not only are most students well behaved and obey the rules, they seem to study very diligently. Perhaps one of the primary motivators behind these studious youngsters is the existence of an entrance examination. Another reason may be fear of not being successful, or pressure from parents. None-the-less, the student in America that went to "after school" school, (juku), would be hard to find indeed ! In America elementary and Jr. High level students need only to be sure to pass all the required courses, there is no entrance exam until college. Furthermore, there is no doubt in my mind that students in Japan are taught much more complex mathematics than children of the same age in America.

I wish I had taken my studies more seriously before I entered college. I think Japanese students learn early how to study

efficiently. Through their hard studies they can develop a most important tool; self-discipline.

Another lasting impression has been the remarkable skill of Japanese students in music and art. Sometimes I can hardly believe my eyes and ears when I realize how much students know. It is still hard to believe that most students can read music !

In America after Elementary School, music and art become elective courses. Students are given a choice, and more often than not they choose not to take music or art because they are too shy, or worried about being skillful or not. Another reason may be that such classes are not considered "cool" and thus not popular among their peers. But in Japan music and art are among the required courses, and since students must participate they have the chance to develop skills they perhaps otherwise would never try to. It is my belief that everyone can sing or create a piece of art if he/she tries. I'm so impressed that Japanese educators recognize this and do much to encourage students to excell in the area of art and music.

I'll never forget going to one of the Jr. High's chorus competition, every class in the entire school was involved. Each class had practiced and prepared a song to perform, and it was spectacular ! I'd never seen anything like it before. What's more, most of the classes sounded better than the whole of my Jr. High school choir !!

I've also been quite impressed by the strong ties between the student and teacher. The relationship encompasses many things for the student. Teacher is parent, older brother/sister, advisor, counselor and friend. I think the home room idea is fantastic. It allows the teacher to get to know the students better so then their needs can best be met. It is interesting that in America, students change classrooms each period, going to the teacher's classroom. In Japan the classroom is the students', and the teachers move from class to class. I find it amazing how teachers are personally involved with their students lives, even to the extent of helping to plan a child's future with the parents.

On the same note I am equally impressed by the Principals I have met. As a child I remember being so afraid of our school Principal. Although they may all have been kind men on the inside, they always appeared so gruff and unapproachable on the outside. It doesn't seem to be the case here in Japan at all, Principals are such nice, grandfatherly types. I've watched Principals laughing and joking with students, giving a tender pat on the head or shoulder, even seen one Principal playing soccer with his kids. The Principal in Japan always seems to make himself available to students. I've seen the easy way in which students relate with respect but relaxed friendliness towards their principal. This is so important in order to teach young people that authority is not something to be feared, only obeyed, (with in limits of course), and respected. It is a good lesson to learn

because all during our life we need to be able to take orders and follow them. Likewise the youth of tomorrow with such a kind figure of authority to model themselves after can best become benevolent leaders and bosses of the future.

Another thing that caught my attention was that students help clean their classrooms and school grounds. I was so startled when one afternoon everyone, (teachers included), changed into work clothes and proceeded to go about scrubbing down the school. I thought it was wonderful that students took care of their own school and cut down on the cost of school upkeep and school janitors. Yet, now I realize much greater merits behind the practice. Students are learning to value their school and take care of it as a public property. In addition they are learning to work together in order to benefit the whole. Working together, and group effort seems to be a cornerstone within Japanese society. I suppose it is no wonder then how so many people can live in such crowded places so peacefully together.

Another factor within Japanese school life that I find impressive is the high membership within club activities. It was when I was a foreign exchange student in the Kansai Area that I first became aware of the popularity of belonging to a club. Inevitably the 2nd question to be solicited from me was, "What club are you a member of?" Everyone seemingly belonged to one club or another. I think this is especially good for young children. In America, less than half of the student body takes part in a club or an after school activity. At times I have thought that Japanese students spend too much time at school. Yet I'm beginning to realize that this just might keep young people out of trouble. In addition I guess staying after school for club activities is much more beneficial than staring at the T.V. all afternoon !!

Of course not everything I have seen within the educational system in Japan has made me want to stand up and cheer. A few things have been rather difficult to get used to. One of the minor of these has been the "sameness" that prevails in every school from the architectural blueprints to the blue/black uniforms. In fact it took me some time before I realized that all of the schools looked very similar. No wonder I had difficulty remembering which school I was in..... if it is Tuesday, this must be Nishi-chu..... Yet the monotonous oneness is carried out within the building as well. To be perfectly honest, I think the students look neat and tidy in their uniforms, but it does seem a bit out of date and militaristic. Often times I wonder if it might take away from a young person's creative spirit ?

I was even more surprised about the school lunch. Everyone, teachers and students alike, eat the exact same thing for lunch. Even the Principal !! In America there are school lunches but there is always one or two menu choices. So, everyone eats the

same, dresses the same, and enters the same style building everyday, six days a week !!! I think that I would have an identity crisis, but perhaps that is just from my American point of view.

On a more serious note, there is the difficulty of language education. During my first visit to Japan as a tourist, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that some Japanese could speak English. Later as a college student I was surprised and a bit amused to learn how long my friends had studied English, 6 - 10 years ! Now, working in Japan and involved with English education I am surprised yet again and somewhat troubled. English is a mandatory subject within the curriculum, just as Mathematics, History, and Science. Furthermore a highschool graduate will have to have studied English for six years. English is a very important key to passing the entrance exams, and can even determine whether a student can enter a higher level school or not. But it is only offered three times a week. Last but not least, English is the only foreign language offered until college. The things listed above are hard for me to understand and they differ quite interestingly from America.

First of all, a student in America can choose between two or more languages beginning at the Jr.High level. I wonder why this is not true in Japan as well ? Perhaps if a student doesn't like English there may be another language that interests him. In my opinion what is important is that a foreign language is studied, whether it be English, French, or Swahili. Secondly only two years of foreign language study is necessary for high school graduation. Most students go beyond to a third or fourth year, yet after two years of study it becomes an elective course. In this way students who don't have the desire to learn a foreign language can choose another course which may be more rewarding personally. This certainly would solve the problem of having students in the classroom that don't want to learn English, and it may make teaching the difficult subject easier for the teacher. Nothing is more frustrating than trying to teach English to half a class who loves it, and half a class who hates it.

In regards to language education these things are the most difficult for me to get used to. But I do admire Japan's education system's recognition of the importance of foreign language study. I think it wonderful that such a great effort is made to better international communication.

There are two circumstances which I find unfortunate, extremely busy teachers, and immensely pressured students. Earlier I wrote that I was impressed by the many roles that teachers play for their students. But, I was impressed that they must handle the vast amount of work. I realize that being a teacher is not an easy job. The moment one enters the world of education he/she must take on a myriad of responsibilities, yet, in Japan those responsibilities seem to be doubled.

In America, the job of counseling and discipline is divided between many people hired by the Department of Education. Student counselors, Deans, school psychologists, and school security workers to name a few. These specialists undoubtedly lessen the burden on teachers. In Japan no such employees exist as far as I know.

I'll never forget a related incident when one of my teacher friends told me he had to go out that night and "patrol" the downtown area to make sure that his students were not getting into trouble. I couldn't believe my ears, yet from what I understand this is not at all uncommon in Japan. My first reaction to this was to wonder why in the world the students' own parents were not looking after their own children. Basically it is my thought that a teacher's responsibility ends when the student leaves school. After all, if a teacher must leave his home at night to "patrol", who then is looking after the teacher's children ???

So, in this sense I find it unfortunate that a teacher has so many jobs and duties. I worry that these things may take away the energy needed to be the best teacher possible. Very busy teachers don't have enough time to make class as interesting as it could be.

The other thing which troubles me is to see even young children pressured by the "study bug". During my college days in Japan I would often stay on campus to study then take an evening train home. I was always shocked and concerned to see elementary age children on the same train still in school clothes, with their little caps and book bags. I'd be the first person to admit that one can never learn enough, but when it involves such young children it seems quite unnatural. I'm sure there are rewards reaped from a childhood of study, but I can't help but wonder what the repercussions will be.

So then that concludes for now a few of my thoughts on Education in Japan. Most of the students I work with are very bright and cheerful, and I truly enjoy my school visits within Ashikaga City. In fact this city itself is a place where education is progressive, with the people committed to preparing today's youth to best be able to survive and grow in tomorrow's world. That is not difficult to believe when one remembers that it is here in this historical city that Japan's very first educational institute was established. I have been proud to be a part of education here, even for a short time, and I will take home with me many happy memories and valuable experiences. Hopefully, with the things I've learned while observing Education in Japan first hand, I can become as good an educator as the people I have had the opportunity to work with in Ashikaga.