

PRIMARY SCHOOL VISITS!

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It is that time of year for the exhilarating primary school visits. Every year in March, at the end of the school year another duty of the AET is to visit primary schools in Ashikaga. We visit 26 schools in two and a half weeks. It is a very rewarding experience.

We usually visit only the year six class but in some of the smaller schools we see all the pupils. The purpose of these visits is to introduce the students to English, a new subject they will study in junior high schools. And also to introduce them to the teachers – we foreigners, that will team teach with a Japanese English Teacher.

Primary school pupils also have other opportunities to meet with us during various UNESCO activities throughout the year. There is a UNESCO summer school in August and a winter program in January. During these opportunities the pupils are not in a regular classroom environment so they feel more at ease being in the presence of teachers/foreigners. This also enables the pupils not to be so intimidated by us. We are free to do any activities we like, so these times are usually more fun for all around, i.e; there are no academic pressures.

It is a fact of life that teenage years can be very trying on an individual. By the time students reach third year of junior high school they are very withdrawn and self conscious. Peer group pressure is abundant and fear of failure or even making mistakes is a major concern for students. I often think what has happened to the bright eyed inquisitive children that were in primary school only three years ago.

I was very overwhelmed the first time I visited a primary school. The whole process follows a procedure starting with tea and introductions with the principal upon arrival, and ending with tea with the principal after the lesson. These times can be more nerve racking than the actual class. Everyone is nervous and trying their best to speak in a foreign language i.e: foreigners speaking Japanese and Japanese speaking English. We are greeted with a warm welcome by the students and usually a hand made sign by the students. A special thrill for me is when they sing a farewell/thank you song.

Teaching is not a profession that everyone is suited to. First of all you need to have a strong commitment to education and of course a love of children. In junior high school the daily pressures such as meetings, teaching and preparing lessons and extra curricula activities leaves the teacher and students exhausted. It is a treat when something special is prepared for the teacher in return.

I really believe that Japanese students are more art/craft oriented. They make wonderful hand made

pop – up cards, origami, dolls etc... Their drawing skills are very advanced too. The school day is longer in Japan thus enabling the students more time and freedom to express their creative skills.

Every classroom is equipped with a keyboard and even little second year pupils learn to play proficiently. Perhaps it is just my preference for primary education, but the young person is less inhibited and open to new thoughts and ideas than they are when they get to teenage years. Primary school children have a stronger desire to learn it seems. Some of the questions they prepare and ask are very insightful like, "What was your first impression of Ashikaga when you first arrived?" Then you get "Do you eat sushi?" from the junior high students.

Younger children accept one for what they are. They are not yet exposed to stereotypes. I don't think there is as much bullying in primary schools as there is in junior high. This bullying is a major concern in the education system. Pressure to conform in all levels of Japanese society is very strong. But with a large western influence infiltrating Japanese society, individualism is becoming a major part in life, beginning in the all important formative years in primary school. Primary students can also see through facades and make up their minds very quickly whether they like you or not. They are not judgemental so one would have to be a very harsh person to be rejected by the pupils.

The education system in Japan is very different from that of Australia. A student's daily life is more demanding in a way here. Students not only have "day" school but attend "juku" as well. Even primary school students go to juku. I was very surprised because a young child's attention span is shorter than adults and so therefore by the time students go to juku many of them fall asleep in class. Junior high students' hours are longer. It is common for students to go to juku from 10pm – 1am. Foreseeably these students then fall asleep in school. In addition to the educational part of life, schools are in charge of club activities which occur after school usually from 3:30pm – 6:00pm. All in all it is a very long day for the child.

Primary school visits can be very exhausting but there is nothing like the attention and genuine thirst for knowledge that encounters one. Students these days are very aware of the world around them. Japanese primary pupils' knowledge of English is something that all nations can learn from. With the help of juku these young pupils have the confidence to speak a completely foreign language in order to communicate and most importantly make friends. We take it for granted that English is our mother tongue and that it is a very important tool to have if you want to function in the wider world.

The JET Program is a great benefit not only to the Japanese society but also to us, the assistant English teachers. One can learn from ALL things and people. I find the most thrilling encounters with little children. I always learn something new everyday and so much more from young people.