

# 日本の生徒はどうですか

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*As an AET in Ashikaga for nearly 3 years now, one can easily imagine how many times I have been asked a question such as “How are Japanese students?” Whether the question is in English or Japanese, I still am perplexed as to how I can summarize my feelings. I usually take a diplomatic approach by saying “まあ、本当に真面目で、頑張っていますね。” I do feel that most students and Japanese people are honest, sincere, kind, and diligent; however, this doesn't tell the entire story. Perhaps the best way for me to answer this question is to inform others of my experiences and lessons from working within Japan's education system.*

*Although I had studied Japanese language, history, and culture in America and as an exchange student in 関西, I now realize that 3 years ago I knew very little about how things really are. Perhaps I still don't. Like most people who enter a foreign society, I was a proud possessor of many preconceptions.*

*Perhaps the most prevalent of my preconceptions was that Japan is a homogeneous society where a nail that sticks up gets hammered down. From a complete outsider's eyes all students dress the same, look the same, and eat the same school lunch. Please allow me to introduce you to some of the individual students on the inside.*

*In the 9 junior high schools where I have taught, almost every school has had from 1 to 10 students who looked different. I'm not referring to the students with dyed hair or pierced body parts. I mean they do not look “Japanese”. One of these students was a second year girl who was born in Brazil and moved to Ashikaga at the age of seven. I took an immediate interest in this girl. I thought that maybe she could speak the best English, we would have common interests, or we could talk about similar troubles with being a foreigner in Japan. I soon discovered that she is bilingual and speaks mostly Portuguese at home, but the only common language skills we share are Japanese. She doesn't know much about life in the USA and can't speak English at all. In fact, she doesn't remember her life in Brazil very well and is most comfortable speaking Japanese. After talking to her she didn't appear different to me.*

*At the very same school there was a third year handicapped student whom I became very close to. Most people might wonder what a 25 year old AET from the USA and a mentally handicapped 15 year*

old Japanese boy have in common. Almost everyday I would go and play with A 君. We ate together, cleaned together, played games, talked about his love for trains, and even studied 漢字 together. What I saw in A 君 is what I saw in myself. You see, no matter how hard we try, neither one of us can write 漢字 very well; we can't effectively express our feelings to others because our speech is different; and sometimes our inabilities and unique qualities make people around us feel uncomfortable. However, when we were together, we didn't have to worry about making mistakes. On my last day at that school A 君 approached me, bowed, said "Thank you" in English, and handed me an envelope. Inside was a short message in Japanese :

「ブランドン先生へ、いつも僕と先生を楽しくして、わらわせてくれたり、一緒に給食を食べたり、おそうじを手伝ってくれて、ありがとうございました。朝僕が学校に来ると「A 君、おはよう。」と言ってくれました。僕はとてもうれしかったです。ありがとうございました。」

I still have that letter today and often read it over and over to reassure myself that I am making a difference. Thank you A 君.

Although the good experiences far outweigh the bad, I can't say that every student has given me an inspirational memory. One day at a different junior high school I entered a second year English class and saw "Die Brandon" written on the blackboard. Needless to say, I wasn't happy, but what made me more angry was that class's chaotic, disruptive, and unpolite behavior. In the very same school only one period before the students clapped when I entered the classroom, listened attentively, and lined up for my autograph after class.

Going from a hero to a villain in less than ten minutes is enough to give anyone adverse emotions. But those times have taught me to take every individual student as just that, one individual, regardless of family name, social status, gender, race, or nationality. In the U.S.A., Japan, or any country every person is different. That is why I can't answer "How are Japanese students?"

At the time of my writing this piece, nearby Nagano is hosting the 1998 Winter Olympiad. I can't think of a greater honor than earning the chance to represent one's nation in competition with the best athletes from around the world. Well, this year Japan has a participant who will serve as a test jumper in the ski jump competition. His name is 高橋 and he has a hearing disability which makes his speech very difficult to understand. After trying a variety of sports, 高橋 concentrated on ski jumping because it is virtually the only sport that does not require the ability to hear.

During the opening ceremony Japan will display to the world its national sport, 相撲, in hopes that someday it will become a worldwide, Olympic sport. The main representative wrestler is 曙. He was

*born in Hawaii and came to Japan to pursue his 相撲 career. His hard efforts have allowed him to climb to the top of Japan's national sport and last year he officially became a Japanese citizen.*

*As the world watches the 1998 Olympic games, many may be surprised by the diversity of Japan's athletes. Hopefully some people, including Japanese, will realize that even Japan's society has many unique, talented individuals. After all, the spirit of the Olympics is to take pride in where we are from and share our cultural differences in a friendly atmosphere. Thanks to A 君, the truly Japanese girl born in Brazil, and all of the special, unique students in Ashikaga, every day of my life during the past three years has been an Olympic experience.*