



LESSONS LEARNED: A Glimpse into Japanese Schools and Life

By Marla Muntner

Two months after the September 11 terrorist attacks, I joined 199 other teachers from the United States on a trip to the land of our former World War II adversary. We left for Japan the morning of a subsequent plane crash in Queens, New York, knowing of that crash but not knowing what had caused it. For many of us, what had begun with an application over one year earlier had assumed a heightened urgency as a peace mission. We boarded our plane feeling purposeful and afraid, like children scared of heights about to jump off the high dive, eyes closed, arms out. Together we were making this trip for ourselves, for our nation, for Japan, and for our students.

What we experienced in Japan challenged our beliefs about education, collective responsibility, individuality, and forgiveness.

Selection

The Fulbright Memorial Fund Teacher Program was founded by the Japanese government to foster intercultural understanding and to show appreciation for the approximately 6,000 Japanese who have come to the United States as part

of the Fulbright program. Educators are selected based on proposals for sharing their Japanese experiences with students and colleagues at home. Applicants must create detailed plans, and those selected revise and implement their plans upon returning to the United States. Awards are fairly competitive and accountability high.

There were as many plans as there were educators on this trip. My proposal included plans for pen pal exchanges with Japanese students, making public presentations about my trip, and publishing articles in education journals. Other teachers' projects ranged from bringing boxes of disposable cameras for Japanese students to fill with photos and send to U.S. students, to collecting Japanese ceramics for use in American-made art, to buying and shipping calligraphy kits to a Washington school in order to foster self-discipline and attention to detail in elementary students. The variety of plans was an inspiring testament to the teachers' creativity.

Background:

Examining the Past to Clarify the Present

In comparison with the United States, Japan is a nation of one culture. Home to the longest-reigning dynasty in the world dating from the first century B.C., Japan has seen civil war, the rise of the merchant and samurai classes, and highly structured systems of government.

From 1638 to 1853 the Japanese closed their borders and ports to outsiders, further cementing their monocultural tendencies. Prior to and during World War II, Japan allied itself with the Nazi and Fascist regimes in Europe and began to aggressively expand its territory in Asia. The

Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 led to the United States becoming directly involved in World War II and our government's eventual use of atomic weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Following the war, the U.S. government occupied Japan, redesigned the government, wrote the Japanese Constitution, and created the current school system. As a result, many Japanese institutions resemble our own in structure and intent.

Observations:

A Closer Look at Japanese Schools Today

Despite these similarities, Japan is not the United States. To us visitors, Japan seemed a nation where the collective good is the collective goal. This was shocking and nearly incomprehensible to those of us accustomed to the U.S. focus on the individual. Our assumptions and expectations were continually challenged by this emphasis on the group. Time after time we were startled by the graciousness, hospitality, and teamwork we encountered.

We learned early in our trip that Japan's nearly 100 percent literacy rate is built on an ancient foundation of temples serving as village schools, and its success in mathematics stems from a centuries-old tradition of math puzzles serving as entertainment. We contrasted this with our nation's short history, its many languages, and its many vibrant cultures that feature oral—not written—modes of communication. We began to see the fallacy of comparing these two places.

Because of the focus in the United States on Japan's excellent test scores, we anticipated seeing an education model we would want to emulate. What we saw was much more complex. We were continually torn by our discomfort with conformity and our adoration of the collective. The schools were filled with students whose collaborative sensibility and sense of responsibility stunned us.

The junior high school we visited had a self-service school store; students chose their supplies and left the proper amount of money in their stead. Teachers in all the schools worked in one shared workspace—giant rooms stuffed with desks, books, papers, and people preparing and evaluating lessons. They were able to work there before and after school while students were in the buildings unsupervised. The Japanese schools we saw did not employ janitors because the children scrubbed the floors, sinks, and toilets daily. Students at the junior high level and above organized themselves into elaborate soccer drills, brass bands, and judo practice during after-school clubs without adult supervision.

In one school, while engaged with a small group, we left our photographs and pictures from home in the hands of excited Japanese students. We expected they would later be abandoned and strewn about as would typically be the case in our own classrooms, but instead we returned to find the students gone and our photos sorted and neatly stacked.

One member of our group asked an older student what would happen if she did not wear her school uniform. She appeared not to understand the question, as if this were a complete impossibility. After several attempts to rephrase, she finally answered incredulously, "My teacher would be disappointed."

As dazzled as we were by the level of shared responsibility we saw in Japan, we were also uncomfortable with the level of uniformity. There were classes of 40 at all ages where instruction was delivered primarily using texts and where the focus on the collective led to many students moving through schools in a lockstep fashion. We saw few signs of the differentiation and individualized instruction we typically embrace. There appeared to be little room for students who didn't fit in either culturally or academically, while many who did seemed stressed by the level of conformity demanded.

As we progressed through the elementary, junior high, and high schools, we witnessed vivid transformations that coincided with age. We saw elementary school students so excited by our visit that our welcome assembly was filled with dizzying clapping and shrieking. Then, we saw junior high school students with enthusiasm so contained that after a polite smattering of applause they stood completely motionless, arms at their sides, throughout 40 minutes of

welcome speeches and music. The only break in their silence came when one coughing student was briefly joined by a symphony of others all seeming to need permission to clear their lungs. Finally, we visited an academically rigorous high school with students so diligent they did not even look up as 20 American teachers paraded through the middle of their classrooms.

The pressure to pass entrance exams for high school and college is so great that teachers regularly work until 8 or 10 P.M. and students of all ages leave school in the afternoon to attend *juku* (private tutoring schools) in the evenings before returning home for late dinners, homework, and bed.

We were told and shown that most behavior problems in Japanese schools occur with younger students and diminish as students age. This increasing desire to focus on the academic and collective appeared to be the opposite of the ways sometimes rebellious behavior increases as students progress through schools in the United States. We were stunned, and we repeatedly asked our hosts how they gain this level of compliance. Each time, the answer was the same: "We teach them to be quiet." We remained baffled.

Interestingly, representatives from local and national governments, teacher colleges, and parent-teacher organizations as well as educators we met all bemoaned the lack of creativity and ingenuity they battle in the schools and in the culture at large. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology is the governing body for the nation's school system. It is recognizing the economic and cultural costs of striving for factual knowledge at the expense of creativity and sensibility. They hope to begin the difficult process of depressurizing the curriculum and reducing the number of school days while increasing student excitement about learning and self-expression.

Observations:

The View from the Streets

Similarly, outside of the schools the focus on the collective incited in us both discomfort and wonderment. We visited homes where each night, following a thorough cleaning, hot baths are taken. The shared bath water is left in the heated tub for the next person to enjoy.

We expected Tokyo, with a metropolitan area of 35 million people, to be noisy, full of blaring horns and wailing sirens. In 12 days in Tokyo, we heard just a handful of horns and half a dozen sirens.

On the streets we occasionally saw people walking with cotton facemasks like surgical masks. We assumed these people were protecting themselves from fumes and pollution and could not fathom any other reason for the masks. We learned that, in fact, the masks are worn by the sick to protect *others*.

Pedestrians consistently waited at crosswalks with no cars around, unwilling to cross because their light was red. Some of us impatiently assumed this to be an unnecessary nicety. In time, we learned that there is no jostling on Tokyo streets, that intersections as complex as New York City's Times Square can be as calm and graceful as a ballet when everyone

follows the same rules.

These inspiring lessons were extended beyond national boundaries to us. We expected to face some anger, mistrust, or animosity for the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Instead, in the ultimate acceptance of shared responsibility, we were asked for forgiveness for what the Japanese had done in Asia and Hawaii.

Reflections

In time, we understood the deeper meaning of an old Japanese expression: *If we eat from the same pan and bathe in the same bath, we will be friends.* And we remembered why we were invited and why we came. The pan and the bath are now the nation and the world; our fates are intertwined. The modern era has blessed us with the tools to reach out across oceans, to interact, to communicate, and to understand. Simultaneously, it has cursed us with the ability to destroy one another and to destroy ourselves. We came home determined to use the former to prevent the latter, to remind our students and each other of our common humanity.


The United States and Japan have much to learn from and teach one another. If we can mix the evolving U.S. comfort with diversity with a broadened Japanese vision of the collective good, we will move toward a sane and safer world.

Call to Action

Our experiences in Japan were overwhelming, and our challenge upon returning was in how to communicate what

we had seen and felt. My fourth grade students surprised me with their enthusiasm and openness, though they did need some guidance. Of all our shared forays into Japanese culture, one stands out as the most compelling: cleaning.

This unplanned activity and its result added a level of meaning to my trip that I never could have orchestrated. On returning, I had real difficulty with the egocentrism of my students. But when they saw my slides of Japanese students cleaning their school bathrooms, a transformation began. They begged to clean our classroom, and I said yes. I didn't think that nine years of ignoring fallen pencils could be easily erased; I knew they would need some structure.

I created cleaning teams with assigned tasks and rotating captains. Each Friday we would spend nearly an hour dusting, scrubbing, and organizing our classroom. Two things happened that give me hope. First, eventually my students no longer needed the structures I had created. On Fridays, at the appointed time, they would simply get busy. Second and most compelling, they began to see the hidden worth in this collective endeavor. I heard them say things like, "We're working together...we feel like more of a team." I can only smile and hope that this lesson in collective responsibility spills, with my students, into the hallways of our school... and beyond. 

Marla Muntner traveled to Japan as a guest of the Japanese Fulbright Memorial Fund Teacher Program. For more information on FMF Teacher Fellowships, contact the Institute of International Education at (888) 527-2636.
