A Japanese Experience

by Peggy D. Bennett

For some time now, I have been given the impression that, when comparing test scores, self-discipline, and the "work ethic," our American students frequently come out shamefully "behind" Japanese students. Our politicians and our news media report that in the global "education race," the students of Japan are seen as setting the standard for academic achievement. Therefore, it came as a surprise to me that, when I spoke of this competition to some Japanese teachers, they were quite amazed that their system was seen as a standard of excellence for our students. They have seen the casualties of the Japanese approach toward education and are worried for their children.

The teachers with whom I spoke are working hard to minimize and to counteract the regimentation and test-orientation that characterize and worry for their children.

The philosophy of teaching that guides and shapes the song activities is one that challenges teachers to create an environment in which students are "free" to learn. This is done by: capturing students' attention so that they are intrigued and challenged to participate; 2) ensuring that students are safe from ridicule and embarrassment as they offer their responses; and 3) creating a setting in which the worth of and the respect for an individual is recognized as he or she learns to cooperate within a group.

Some Statistics

The enjoyment factor of the activities and philosophies is no small matter to the teachers with whom I worked. They voiced sadness that many students are "going through the motions" of classroom in their regular classes, with little vitality for what they are learning. Concern for students' interest was documented in the Ministry of Education survey, conducted each year since 1948. The survey showed that "48,000 elementary and junior high schools, a record number, missed more than 50 days of classes during the year because they 'hate school.'"

Even though motivation may be a problem in the elementary and junior high schools, more students than ever (50.2%) aspired this year to enter college after high school graduation. Although 50.2% wanted to enroll, only 37.7% (771,451 students) were permitted to enter college this spring. This is the highest number of students entering colleges and universities since 1979, bringing the national population to over 3.2 million.

For the third straight year, a larger percentage of women (39.2%) than men (36.3%) entered college or junior college. The percentages change drastically, however, when four-year universities alone are considered (34.5% of males and 16.1% of females).

Interesting as it is to see the percentages of Japanese students who are seeking higher education, the key to achieving that education is still the imposing "exam." The headlines read, "Most high school graduates aspire to college but one-third fail exams." Although about 4000 more students passed the entrance exams in Spring 1991 than last year (because universities and junior colleges accepted 51,000 more students), a total of 435,271 students failed the exams.

Press to pass the exams looms over students' heads from the time they enter school. According to the teachers with whom I spoke, however, the intense barrier that the exam represents has a counterproductive effect on students' motivation once they finally do gain entrance to the university. I was told that, for many students, college is treated rather flippantly. Because higher education is actually antithetic to the exam, many students do not take their university education seriously and often use that time to relax and enjoy themselves rather than to study and continue their education.

It was this kind of story that caught my attention and prompted me to pursue personal glimpses of life in Japan beyond the numbers of a report.

The Rest of the Story

Not until I arrived in Japan and began talking to teachers about their concerns, did I become aware of some of the stories behind the statistics of Japanese students' achievements. The stories had a substantial impact as they served to remind me that "things aren't always as they seem." The numbers of educational reports can sometimes make the "gras" seem "greener" than it really is for the people who are in that "field" on a day-to-day basis.

Lack of play.

Japanese teachers were extremely concerned that children learn to relax and "play"... in and out of school contexts. They are searching for ways to "liberate" students' minds and ideas, because children often spend the entire day at school then take classes after school, sometimes staying busy until 10:00 p.m.

The teachers themselves played the singing games with absolute abandon and were delighted with the opportunities to enjoy themselves in this way. The regimentation of the public and private school settings has the effect of diminishing children's opportunities and confidences in making choices and voicing opinions without fear of failure or rejection.

Fear of failure.

Parents and teachers are concerned that children are preoccupied with the fear of making mistakes. Many teachers told me that it is difficult to get children to respond and to express themselves freely because they are worried about being "wrong." When undue emphasis is placed on asking questions that require a "right" answer, then, getting the "right" answer becomes a priority for students' responses. Exploring ideas, toying with alternative perspectives, and recognizing the possibility of several acceptable answers is superceded by the need for accuracy.

Recognizing the potentials within children for a variety of talents and intelligences that are not necessarily "academic" in nature seems not to be common practice in many Japanese school settings. Consider the impact on lives if a major contributor to children's self-esteem amounts to the sum proportions of accurate and inaccurate responses they give in the classroom.
Passing the test. Because "passing the test" is all-important to entering college; because future employment is based on which college students attend; and because employment is like instant tenure (firing is rare), the entrance exam becomes the most important measure of success: for employers, for schools, for parents, and for students. Many students in Tokyo go to private schools, and the reputation of the school is dependent on how well students perform on the exams.

Because I was there during a vacation, I was not able to see a Japanese school in session. I was told, however, that the "best" schools (those with highest test scores and/or most students passing the test) are very difficult to enter, are very expensive, and have a long list of names waiting to be considered for enrollment.

The work ethic. Night after night, I noticed huge buildings with all the office lights on and businessmen still in the offices at 7:30 and 8:00 in the evening. Ethics, in general, were very impressive. Little or no crime rate means that a native or a "foreigner" can travel anywhere alone and feel completely safe. I was told that it was even considered bad manners to count your change when you receive a cash refund or exchange. Ethical behavior, good manners, and hard work are norms in this culture.

One woman with whom I spoke is the wife of a university professor. The couple has an apartment close to the campus, and their adult son and daughter live with them. After the husband returns home from his work for dinner (usually around 8:00 p.m.), he often returns to campus for two or three hours because there is not enough room in their home for his papers and books. In talking with several wives and one businessman, I was told that it is not uncommon for the men to leave work about 7:30 p.m., then go to socialize for a couple hours, then go home for dinner about 10:00, and begin the same routine the next morning about 7:00 a.m.

The word karoshi has even been coined in Japan to mean "death from overwork." Certainly, the work ethic is strong, yet we must recognize what leisure, family, and health compromises may be the costs of such powerful motivations.

Reflections
The gentleness, the graciousness, and the integrity of the Japanese people had a profound effect on me. After I returned home, many thoughts formed within me and have remained as questions, reminders, and insights. Three, in particular, are shared here. Again, these represent my limited exposure to a select group of people for whom I felt an immediate comradeship.

Getting to know the people. Because my experiences with international travel have been limited, I found it even more valuable to reinforce something that I have long suspected about other cultures. Getting to know the people of a country can give us quite different impressions than those we gain from books, articles, and news reports.

Teachers work with hundreds of individuals and, consequently, first-hand joys, sorrows, and meaningful events in the lives of the "everyday citizen." This day-to-day interaction helps us realize that, if we rely solely on media reports that focus mainly on government and business dealings, then we seldom sense the real spirit of the people from another culture.

Just as interpersonal communication styles, life styles, and global priorities of our government and business leaders may seldom effectively reflect our own preferences, the same is true for other cultures. There is no substitute for getting to know the people of another country in order to be sensitive to and appreciative of their ideas, their traditions, and their behaviors.

Pride vs. Superiority. In a surprising number of conversations, my expressions of the word "the war" were made. I am not sure whether this happened because I am an American, because it was the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, or because the topics we discussed seemed to need that reference point. After World War II, many of the Japanese people were convinced that everything American was superior. Even now, a surprising number of advertisements in subways, train stations, newspapers, department stores, and television commercials feature "beautiful" white men, women, and children.

We chuckled as we realized that times have changed to the extent that now it is common to have Japanese products touted as being superior to American products; yet, 25 years ago "Made in Japan" was a common joke about the "cheapness" of a product.

These shifts in perceived superiority made me begin to ponder the effects on individuals and groups of being convinced that someone else is "better." What does it do to us when we are told that someone else is "better" or more worthy? Is this kind of comparison to others just "a part of life" or does this type of self-perception have some seriously detrimental effects on our quality of life?

Is it possible for us to develop a sense of pride in ourselves, groups, schools, states, countries, ethnic origins, religions, and heritage without also developing a sense of our superiority and consequently, others' inferiority? As we help our students develop pride in themselves and their work, is this pride dependent on identifying the inferiority of others?

We all know the value of recognizing models and standards of excellence. At what point, however, does the use of a standard of excellence to promote growth and achievement become the use of a standard of excellence to categorize people and their accomplishments as either inferior or superior?

The Costs of Freedom. The safety, courtesy, graciousness, and integrity that seemed to be basic to the behaviors of these Japanese people were pleasant reminders of the power of manners and of innate respect for others. To what extent are these qualities a positive result of the control and regimentation that these women are working to minimize? As students learn to express their opinions and feel free to make choices, will respect and courtesy be casualties of this new freedom?

In one conversation, a teacher was surprised to hear that the freedoms of children in America cannot cause dilemmas for the schools. As we spoke of the attempts to standardize curricula and student achievement, the safety, courtesy, and regimentation that these women are working to minimize, she commented, "It only makes sense that our students could be, "What am I getting? What am I giving up? Is it worth it?"

The paradigm of a continuum comes to mind. If one end of the continuum is an example of complete lack of freedom and the other end is the extreme opposite, total freedom, we may see that neither extreme on the continuum is desirable for more than a short length of time. And in the medium range, how do we see us placed at or choosing different points on the continuum?

Although I found myself cheering the changes that these Japanese teachers are interested in making, I also want to help prepare them for how to deal with the behaviors that will probably result from children's newly discovered independence. When the pendulum swings too quickly in either direction on the continuum, a period of disorientation and imbalance can result. And, this can be a time of discomfort for everyone involved.

Perhaps the "grass" always seems "greener" because we cannot see very far past our own position on this imaginary continuum. Few of us want more control placed on ourselves, but, many of us at (times) probably wish more control were placed on our students (or others).

With freedom comes disillusion. What positive attributes of an individual, a school, a classroom, or a culture can be irredeemably lost when freedom of choice is too quickly dispensed? On the grand scale of a culture, how can values that began as "control" be maintained when control changes to "freedom?"

 Freedoms of choice for teachers and for students in classroom settings are highly valued in our culture. Teachers want to be free to choose what and how they teach. Total academic freedom, however, can be overwhelming and frustrating to some teachers, especially to those who are inexperienced. It also plays havoc with attempts to standardize curricula and student achievement.

Freedom of choice without structure and limits can make classrooms chaotic for those students who will not of can not cooperate and initiate self-discipline. On the other hand, tight control of teachers or of students can result in bitter resistance or defeated compliance, neither of which is ideal for education.

How do we find a balance of freedom and control in our lives and our classrooms? Do we recognize the costs of our choices for ourselves and our students? With issues of freedom and control, as with any choice we make, reasonable checkmarks for reflecting on the wisdom of our decisions for ourselves and our students could be, "What am I getting? What am I giving up? Is it worth it?"

Announcement for College Division

Fall Conference
See you in San Antonio on October 17-19? Please consult the September issue for all the information about this once-a-year event that gathers the College tolisten together with the TEA's Conference on Teacher Education. RSVP to me at 817-273-3471, so we will have enough space and refreshments for the size of our group.