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THE “EDUCATION OF COSMOPOLITAN CHILDREN” IN A JAPANESE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Angelika Kretschmer, Erlangen

A rapid process of internationalisation is taking place in numerous fields of Japanese life. While Japanese businesses successfully compete in a global market, demand for executives who can successfully act in an international environment increases. However, the education system appears to be lagging behind in the process of internationalisation. Japanese returnee children who have spent large portions of their education at non-Japanese schools have been considered a group handicapped rather than favoured by their experience abroad. Besides not being up to par concerning their mother tongue or the contents of the Japanese curriculum, they were felt to have lost their Japanese social skills such as correct patterns of behaviour or interaction. Furthermore, those children’s foreign language skills were not only not esteemed, they even placed them in an outsider position.¹

The following contribution describes and discusses experiences at an Elementary School² with a relatively high number of returnee children in the city of Nagoya. First, I will give an account of the school’s history, location and its educational focus. Subsequently, personal impressions about the school’s involvement with “the education of cosmopolitan children” will be presented. A brief discussion and concluding remarks will sum up the paper.

I. The School’s Profile

Higashiyama Shōgakkō is a municipal Elementary School, located in the eastern part of the city. Its history dates back to a school founded in 1937. In 1947, it was named *Nagoya Shiritsu Higashiyama Shōgakkō* (Nagoya Municipal Higashiyama Elementary School). Two branch schools, established by *Higashiyama Shōgakkō*, became independent in 1962 and

1 See WHITE, MERRY (1987). *The Japanese Educational Challenge*. New York: The Free Press, p. 175.

2 After World War II, Japan introduced a new education system, based on the American model. It consists of 6 years of Elementary School (*shōgakkō*), 3 years of Junior High School (*chūgakkō*) and 3 years of Senior High School (*kōtōgakkō*).

1982 respectively. The school building is located between a busy shopping district and a residential area that partly consists of detached houses, partly of blocks of flats. A large part of the flats and some of the houses are company housing, accommodating many Japanese who have returned to their country after having worked for their company overseas. For this reason, Higashiyama Elementary School was designated a centre for promotion of returnee children admission and education in 1993. In 1995, the school was appointed by the Nagoya Board of Education to conduct a study on "Education of Cosmopolitan Children". The school publishes a bilingual annual report in Japanese and English.³ The following information is based on the annual report for 1996 and on personal interviews with a number of school executives and parents.

In September 1996, a total of 923 pupils were enrolled in 25 forms. 42 of the Japanese pupils had resided overseas. Another 17 pupils were foreigners, all of them Asian, most of them coming from South-East Asian countries. The staff consisted of 42 members, 36 of them employed as teachers, the remainder assigned to administration or kitchen staff.

II. The Educational Aims

In order to illustrate the educational aims and the intended means to put them into practice, I will cite and discuss remarkable and typical passages found in the 1996 annual report.

*Mizukara manabi
tagai ni hagemashi
minna nakayoku
genkina ko*

This school motto expresses the cornerstones of young children's education throughout the world:

- fostering independent study (*mizukara manabi*)
- appealing to solidarity and mutual supportiveness (*tagai ni hagemashi, minna nakayoku*)

3 *Nagoya Shiritsu Higashiyama Shōgakkō no Gaiyō 1996* = OUTLINE of Higashiyama Elementary School 1996. Nagoya 1996.

- Achieving these educational goals should create an atmosphere in which children can build up and maintain “high spirits” (*genkina ko*), i.e. a happy, healthy and successful school life.

However, while the school motto merely describes what, in the principal’s words, “all people of the world always desire”⁴, the school’s focus on the education of cosmopolitan pupils is reflected in what the annual report calls “unique school education”, consisting of the following five elements.

1. Education of Returnee Pupils

The aim of the education of returnee pupils is to help them to adapt to classes and the Japanese lifestyle, while at the same time enabling them to maintain and develop their experiences in different cultures. Provided returnee pupils can adapt to Japanese school life and customs, they are placed in classes according to their age. It is understood that their proficiency in written and spoken Japanese does not equal that of their classmates and that special efforts to improve their proficiency are called for. Educational projects centering around personal experiences made overseas are organised. The school provides education counselling for families who will stay, or have stayed, abroad for an extended period.

Nonetheless, the scope of these activities remains limited by the conventional curriculum and the lack of additional teaching staff and extra language teaching classes for returnees. The teacher-student ratio is the same as in other Japanese Elementary Schools, with one teacher for about 40 pupils.

2. International Understanding Program

The «International Understanding Program» aims at an understanding of lifestyles both in Japan as well as overseas in order to “develop the capacity and preparedness to participate in and contribute to international society.”⁵ Meetings with parents of returnee pupils and a volunteer organisation called “Boomerang-no-kai”, organized by parents of returnee pupils, are important features in the task of creating a greater awareness for the Japanese and foreign cultures. These activities usually take place on

4 OUTLINE, Preface by the principal (1996:3).

5 OUTLINE (1996:13).

the occasion of Japanese festivals, like *Tanabata* or *O-Bon*. In September 1996, a “gyōza party” was organized to promote contacts with the parents of foreign pupils.

An important part of the «International Understanding Program» is to conduct the study “Education of Cosmopolitan Children Through Intercultural Understanding”.⁶ Its aim is to provide opportunities during regular classes and at school gatherings to learn about various cultures and foster intercultural communication.

Another issue is the ability to communicate in foreign languages. Thus, in 1996, Higashiyama Shōgakkō established relations with a school in Sydney, Australia.⁷ In the near future, the principal is planning contacts with schools in Nagoya’s other partner cities, Mexico City, Nanking and Los Angeles. Due to the distance between the countries and the young age of the pupils, however, contacts with the Australian partner school can only take place in the form of pen-friendships or the occasional visit of a school executive.

The school keeps a special room for cross-cultural gatherings, and some showcases contain school equipment and toys from nearly all parts of the world.

3. *Team Teaching*

Students are grouped into teams of two to promote reciprocal coaching.

4. *Computer Education*

Children learn to process information by using a computer.

6 Precept: “The Official Guidelines of Teaching places emphasis on strengthening respect not only for our nation’s culture and traditions, but also for understanding the culture and history of the world to foster cosmopolitanism in Japanese people living in an international society. This enables us to rear children who will be able to recognise the responsibility and role of the Japanese people in the world and therefore make a contribution to international society within the progress of global internationalisation.” (OUTLINE, 1996:6).

7 Sydney is Nagoya’s Australian partner city.

5. Club Activities (*Marching Band*)

The school's marching band has participated in major athletic meetings and several festivals.

III. Personal Observations

In the summer of 1996, our family lived in a rented apartment within walking distance of the school. First contacts with the school had already been made prior to our arrival in Japan by our local contact person. He had arranged for our two sons (then nine and seven years old) to visit the school for a few weeks. In mid-July, he accompanied us to an appointment with the principal to arrange further details. The school would have agreed to a longer term of visit, but as we arrived shortly before the beginning of the summer holidays, a visit of one week at the beginning of September was agreed upon.

There were no bureaucratic obstacles to the project. Fees for insurance and school lunch were calculated for the length of the duration of the stay, based on standardised tables. According to their ages, our sons were assigned to 2nd and 4th grade forms, even though they scarcely had any Japanese language skills.

During the summer vacation, we were invited to participate in the local *O-Bon* dance that was conducted on the school grounds. The invitation, and a personal greeting by the school's vice principal, already signified the level of interest and the will for fostering our integration that we were about to experience.

The first day of school was Monday, September 2nd, 1996, the first day of the second school term. On this day we attended the opening ceremony and took part in the exercise to prepare for the event of an earthquake.

For the next five days, our daily routine was as follows: In the morning, I accompanied my sons to school where, for about half an hour, the principal talked to me over a cup of coffee. Before the regular school day began, I met the teachers of my son's classes. They informed me about any upcoming special activities, e.g. swimming lessons during physical education hours, arts and crafts classes that required special equipment etc. The question of communication was easily solved: the teachers had prepared written sentences containing information or instructions for the

children and asked me to write the German translation under the Japanese text. Thus, by pointing to a certain sentence, the teachers could pass on the information to our boys. At about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, after school lunch and cleaning up the classroom had taken place, I met our sons at the principal's office, where we were asked if any problems had occurred, and the teachers commented on the school day in great detail, even briefly discussing the food consumed at lunchtime.⁸

During one of the morning lessons, the fourth grade organised a talk on Germany, and I told the class about German festivals, food and the school system. Afterwards I acted as my son's interpreter during a question and answer session about German children's favourite toys, games, food and pets.

On the last day of the visit, both grades organised farewell-parties with games, songs and self-made presents. I had to be present for the occasion as well. Judging from the reactions of my two sons, their short stay at the school was a great success. They always looked forward to going to school in the mornings, and after the first day, when they were somewhat shy and anticipated problems because they lacked knowledge of the Japanese language, they very much enjoyed meeting with Japanese children at school, or in the afternoons. Throughout the duration of our stay, schoolchildren sometimes showed up at our apartment "just to say hello" or to invite our sons to participate in some game.

As for the contents of study within the prescribed curriculum, the teachers acted very independently and with a great amount of commitment and imagination. For example, during a *kokugo*⁹ lesson, the fourth grade teacher conducted a calligraphy session, an exercise in which my son could easily participate. During a geography lesson on the Aichi Prefecture, she made the children draw a map of the region. Thus, relying on activities that did not require too much language skills they successfully integrated a foreign child into the classroom activities.

Of course, I am aware of the fact that our sons' visit at *Higashiyama Shōgakkō* took place under good auspices. First of all, it was arranged by a

8 It is necessary to recall here that in summer 1996 Japan was hit by severe cases of *O 157* food poisoning, the most notorious one being caused by the consumption of school lunch in the city of Sakai.

9 I.e. Japanese language education.

Japanese contact person of high social standing. Secondly, it was the short duration itself which enabled the teachers to respond in such a flexible way. Had our sons stayed for a longer time at the school, Japanese language classes would inevitably have had to be carried out as usual. Furthermore, the fact that I speak Japanese provided the opportunity for communication on the parent-teacher level, which alleviated any problems of organization and made it possible on our part to contribute to the school's mission by giving information about our country.

IV. Discussion

Higashiyama Shōgakkō with its special educational focus seems to find itself in a dilemma. On the one hand, its mission is to create cosmopolitan children, on the other hand it has to operate within the framework of the Japanese educational system. I will briefly point out what is in common with the traditional model of education, and then specify differences.

The curriculum, as well as the student-teacher ratio (40:1), is the same as in other Elementary Schools in the country. Even though computer education and club activities are listed as features of “unique school education”, they certainly do not contribute greatly to the school's profile. There is no extra staff for teaching Japanese to returnee children, nor are there teachers – Japanese or foreign – for teaching foreign languages, which are not part of the course of study. Returnee pupils are integrated into normal classes on condition that they promptly adapt to the Japanese lifestyle, a principle that gives way to a certain amount of freedom. Anyway, as their re-integration seems to remain the eventual goal, it means that in the course of time they have to catch up with the rest.

Differences, on the other hand, can be found in attitude rather than in structural aspects. The pressure for conformity seems to be much lower than in other schools, even though the actual percentage of returnee pupils (less than 5%) and foreign pupils (less than 2%) does, by Western European standards, not seem exceedingly high. Experience made abroad in other social settings and educational systems is valued positively and is made the subject of special activities or events. Problems are understood, though they are not solved by means of organised activities, but through a high level of personal involvement on the teachers' part. On the basis of

dedication and commitment of the principal and the classroom teachers alike, *Higashiyama Shōgakkō* appears to be succeeding extremely well.

Education of cosmopolitan children, one of the school's foremost projects, works on two levels: One is the education of Japanese pupils towards tolerance and understanding¹⁰, the other is a better understanding of Japan that foreign pupils acquire during the time they spend in the school. *Higashiyama Shōgakkō* in that respect serves as a forum for foreigners to achieve an inside view of Japanese everyday life. For example, I experienced how high expectations are regarding a mother's involvement in her children's school education. There were numerous instances in which my presence and co-operation was called for: Meetings with staff twice a day, participation in the opening ceremony, the cross-cultural question and answer session and the farewell parties. Also, while Westerners typically view the communal classroom cleaning as a deliberate means of social education, my sons thought it was "great fun". Thus, the concept of reciprocal learning proved to work unexpectedly well.

We must be aware of the fact that this project of integration of returnee and foreign children is undertaken at the elementary school level, i.e. with children aged 6-12. Consequentially, it would not be appropriate to set standards too high. Even though foreign languages are not taught at this level, songs and basic greetings as first ways of making children familiar with foreign languages are a first step to lessen fears of using a foreign language. This provides, to my mind, an excellent example of an approach that sees international understanding as a frame of mind, and not as an accumulation of facts to be studied and examined.

10 In one of my talks to the principal, I was told that *Higashiyama Shōgakkō* experiences no cases of gross ill-conduct or bullying. This is attributed to favourable conditions in the pupils' families, and especially to a high proportion of academically educated parents.