

Secondary Teachers Study Tour 2006

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My impressions of Japan and vision of life in the country were fairly limited having been formed from textbooks and the Japan 2000 education videos. As I teach an S2 unit on the country and often refer to her in other year groups and topics such as earthquakes and population, a trip to the country has been hugely influential in my knowledge and delivery of the subject matter.

Throughout the tour my ideas and impressions of Japanese culture, society and schools changed from meeting my initial ideas to me being surprised and realising that some aspects were very similar to my own culture, but then at the time of leaving I had swung back to realising that the country is in fact very different to ours.

One of the preconceptions I had before arriving in the country was that of the fabled work ethic that applies in industry and in the education system. Rumours that children spent many more hours in school than our youngsters in the UK have been circulating for years. However during the second day of the tour we were given the opportunity of hearing Prof. Hidenori from the International Christian University speak about changes to the education system over recent years. He told us that Japanese children actually spent less time in school in terms of set classes than most countries in the world. This was a surprise to me. However as we progressed through the tour and visited some schools it became apparent that some schools still expected youngsters to participate in after school activities. Although these were 'optional' it seemed that they were strongly encouraged, almost to the point that it was expected that pupils attended. So having had one set of expectations on arrival these were changed during the first week only to be reverted back to at the end of the tour.

The welcoming nature of the people of Japan was fantastic. Nothing was too much trouble and I certainly felt like a VIP with the treatment of the tour participants being second to none. We were looked after at every step of the way and even given suggestions as to the best way to spend our limited free time.

The balance between sightseeing and educational establishments combined with the chosen cities gave a great insight into the country and has of course has wetted the appetite for more. Having caught a glimpse of the mountains and hearing group A's stories of Miyagi has made me keen to visit to the north of the country in the future.

The fourteen days of the tour were very hectic. A continual round of packing and unpacking as we moved from hotel to hotel, traditional inn, home stay and back to hotel. With one or two nights accommodation in each place it made for a busy fortnight. The Japan Foundation certainly planned a packed itinerary with schools to visit, lectures on education, and a variety of cultural visits : Shinto shrines, shogun palaces, Buddhist temples, all were covered at some point as well as trips on the shinkansen and a home stay weekend.

As the trip was so packed there is much to be mentioned. Therefore I will attempt to give a brief overview of the education system and highlight any obvious differences with that of the Scottish system.

It seems that Japanese education is changing. Youngsters and staff are concerned about the pressures of school life and so school hours have been reduced to help. However, the country is seeing problems such as bullying and anti - social behaviour from adolescents

beginning to increase. Academics and government ministers are trying to find reasons for this worrying trend.

The schools visited were very different, not just in the obvious age ranges; primary, lower secondary and upper secondary, but also in catchment area, affluence of area and teachers expectations. However, it seems that the schools are on the whole very similar to our own. One particular activity observed was that of the pupils cleaning the school after classes. This is traditional in Japan and not just a bid to save some cash! - what a great idea, which UK schools could learn from.

All the schools visited seemed to have large class sizes. In one instance thirty-four pupils were counted in a chemistry class, surely at best not conducive to learning and teaching and at worst a recipe for disaster.

I began to realise after a short time in the country that Japanese culture is very different to ours. The old and the new that we often hear about is very obvious to see. Kimono clad women speaking on mobile phones, skyscrapers towering over ancient wooden shrines and conductors wearing gloves and bowing to the customers aboard the Shinkansen. The manners of the people are second to none, much bowing, smiling and seemingly eternally grateful. The fact that tipping is not expected and actually almost seen as an insult. The entire country feels 'safe'. Crime figures back this up and it certainly felt safe when walking around streets and using the subways.

Possible follow up work or applications

Equally as good as visiting schools, shrines and seeing Mount Fuji whilst whizzing along at 220kph on the shinkansen was the opportunity to converse, share and swap ideas, stories and information with other educators from around the world. The ideology behind having mixed international groups is a fantastic one. So much can be and has been gained by sharing knowledge and experience with the other nationalities. The friendships I formed with Australians, Indians and many Europeans will be long-lasting both on a personal level but also on a professional level and will benefit the education of our respective pupils. Written exchanges through pen pal e-mails can easily be set up and thus spreading the influence of the study tours and meeting and furthering the aims and objectives of the Japan Foundation.

Advice for study tour programme

The mixture of culture, education and sightseeing was excellent. It gave enough information to learn a little about the country but also left us hungry for more. The accommodation was superb - some of the best hotels I have ever stayed in! However though I myself had a great home stay experience some participants on the tour were not so lucky. Perhaps this could be an area where more pre stay checks are made and where some feedback from the participants could be gathered.

Some kind of organised follow up would be a really useful way of tapping into information and experiences. The creation of a web page where we could add our experiences and also find out about how the Foundation is progressing. Perhaps the Foundation could fund some trips for Japanese English language teachers to visit English speaking countries and gain valuable language practice as well as learning about the culture of that particular country.

Conclusion

I feel very honoured to have been a participant on the Study Tour of 2006 and wish to express my greatest thanks to the Foundation for allowing me the experience. I know that I am now a better teacher and am able to truly give an informed account of life

within the country. Furthermore I have been able to meet and set up links with many other international educators which will benefit many children around the world. I have also been able to inform other teachers in Scotland about the experience through an article for the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers' journal. The whole experience of the trip and the follow up has had such a positive effect on my professional and personal life.

Sakawa Elementary School welcome

