

JOHN DICKEY IN TOKYO

In March I was a participant in a home stay program in the rural (let me stress rural) south of Japan. It was an incredible experience! I should, at this point, emphasize that this area of Japan (approximately 24 hours by train-ferry-bus from Tokyo) is not a highly touristy area. I would equate it to a town like Moose Factory Ontario. As a matter of fact, it would not surprise me if I was the first caucasian to have visited this particular area. If not the first foreigner, definitely the first who had to duck his head to avoid hitting street signs.

As part of my 2 week adventure I visited a local grade school with children ranging from Kindergarten age to Grade 5. I had to get up and introduce myself, and give a short speech on my home country. It didn't matter what I said because nothing was heard. I have a theory that Japanese children within this age range have a unique physiological condition. That is, when their mouths gape wide open (in this case at my peculiar looks and height) a nerve is affected and their hearing abilities are impaired. Judging from the response of my "Gapingly" attentive audience my theory has been verified. After my formal introduction - where I was introduced as Dickey John (three months later I'm still remembered by my community as "that very friendly chap from Canada, Mr. Dickey John") - I was off to join my six year olds for lunch. I settled down into my tiny desk and was about to take my first bite when I suddenly had that feeling of "being watched". I looked up and found twenty-six 6 year olds with eyes bulging and of course mouths gaping. I wish I could read more Japanese because it was obvious that one of their text books had informed these kids that Canadians don't eat Japanese food - I did my best to dispell that notion. I felt slightly guilty that these kids were so enthralled with my ability to use chopsticks and feed myself that they hardly touched their own meals.

After my lunch it was question period. One little boy named Nobuhide asked; "in Canada do they have bears?" This set the tone of the session - after exhausting the list of carnivores existing in Canada, we dabbled in insects, birds and fish. My favourite question was "Do you have snow in Canada?"

My afternoon was spent assisting the stunning Sensei (teacher) with my class' art projects. It was then off to the gymnasium where we played Volleyball and Basketball - I finally succumbed to the pressure and "dunked" a basketball. My knees are still hurting, and I'm sure my class' mouths are still gaping. I'm happy to report that Japanese youth

are just as refreshingly innocent and happy as our Canadian children.

Spending a day in a Japanese school was a fantastic experience in that the educational system here is almost totally opposite to that of North America. From the limited exposure I have had I would generalize that grades Kindergarten through Grade 6 are fundamentally the same as far as work load. The emphasis is different, but I shall discuss this shortly. The three years of Chyuu Gakko or middle school are significantly more difficult than the equivalent North American years. For Japanese school children this pressure filled three years culminates with extremely difficult entrance exams and competition for acceptance into high school. I remember fondly my 7th and 8th grades words like pressure and competition would definitely not be used to describe my academic endeavours at that time. However, the real divergencies in our two educational systems came at the high school or "Koko" level. The three years of high school are at least, if not more, difficult than Canadian University. I can picture fellow Canadians scoffing at this statement, but believe me it's true. Students take 11 or 12 courses per semester, and are faced with midterms (a word I didn't learn until my first year at the University of Guelph), and examinations in which they must obtain sufficient grades to continue to the next level. The competition, pressure, and workload are unfathomable. As if that wasn't enough, they then have to write rational examinations for each of the universities that they apply to. In reality, each university usually requires three exams - one in math, Japanese, and general. To put this in more concrete terms, Nobu, the 17 year old Japanese student I tutor in english (during his spare time - guffaw!), will have to write 11 examinations - one for each high school subject - in order to graduate. He is then applying to four Japanese universities for which he'll have to write three entrance exams each - that's another twelve exams. These exams are each 1½ - 2 hours long! It doesn't take much calculation on my part to realize that this kid in a two month span will have written many more exams than I have in my life. Roughly 50% of the high school students that attempt the National University entrance exams are unsuccessful. These unfortunate 17 year olds then have to wait an entire year in order to sit for the entrance exams once again. Most of these students enter what is known in Japanese as "Yobiko" or "Juku" - very expensive schools that prepare them for the next year entrance exams.

Another factor that differentiates North American and Japanese educational systems is the school week. Japanese go to school Monday through Saturday inclusive (i.e. 6 days) and their school days are on average 8 or 9 a.m. until 5 or 6 p.m. I recently read a statistic that stated by the time Japanese students graduate from high school they have been in school, in real terms, almost three years longer than their American counterparts. A clearly sobering thought.

A last difference, that in my opinion helps to necessitate the vastly different educational systems is our alphabets! In order to read and write english Northern American students must conquer all of 26 characters. In order to read and write Japanese, students must achieve fluency in all three Japanese alphabets. There being (i) Hiragana - 54 characters - a phonetic alphabet; (ii) Katakana 54 characters - a phonetic alphabet used specifically to represent english words i.e. (McDonalds - Makudonuradosu); (iii) Kanji - well over 3,000 characters - pictorial alphabet taken from the Chinese. (Actually the same "pictures", but the pronunciation in Japan and China would be unrelated, but the meaning would be the same.) The sheer magnitude of the feat of conquering 3,000 Kanji sheds a lot of light on the necessary differences in our educational systems.

Japanese universities those same institutions that the high school students worked so hard to get into are another story. After 12 years of exhaustive, pressure filled preparation for entrance into University, Japanese students are tired - very tired. From what I can judge from my not so limited exposure to Japanese Universities is that they essentially provide the location and environment for three or four years of good serious rest. I'm living in a Japanese University students dormitory with young chaps representing 42 (of the 2,000) Universities in Tokyo and I'm still looking diligently for a Japanese "Daigaku" with a text book in his possession. I don't want to say that Japanese University students do absolutely no work, but the academic endeavours and pressures faced by a Japanese University student are definitely less than the Canadian student must undertake.

If I was a psychologist I'd have some interesting revelations to share with you. I'm sure a lot of answers to a lot of questions about Japanese behaviour could be answered by a psychologist - however, I'm studying business. The economic success of Japan cannot be denied (although Canadians and Americans are making a concerted effort) and at some point that has to tie

in with a differently educated work force. It is a stated fact that the average Japanese person has an intelligence Quotient 11 pints higher than that of other industrialized nations. (111 vs 100).

I happen to be an advocate of a very wide definition for the word 'education' of which IQ's, exams, and class time play a significant but not all inclusive role. "Education" through my definition is achieved through challenging oneself in different surroundings. An educational system should provide an environment in which people can be challenged and pressured but not defeated.

Well, I apologize, that was a rather long-winded explanation of why "spending a day in a Japanese school was a fantastic experience".

As another part of my home stay program we had the opportunity to enter what I thought at the time was an informed speech contest planned for the second last day. I thought it sounded like fun so I signed up. I had some friends of my home stay family help me with a speech, and I read it over twice and considered myself prepared. Looking back on it I should have been suspicious about the "informality" of the affair when my home stay family appeared dressed to the nines ready for the picnic/speech contest. When we arrived at the site I'm not sure whether it was the five judge panel, the stage and sound system, the television cameras or the 800 Japanese spectators that I noticed first, but my notions of an informal gathering were quickly dispelled. I decided at this point that reading my speech over a few more times would be appropriate. The first two speakers were totally fluent, and gave stirring accounts on world issues. I approached the podium, (and prolonged the process of adjusting the mike two feet up as long as I could), and started my speech on "My Home Stay Experience" (show and tell anyone). The four minutes passed uneventfully, and I even managed to get a few laughs when I told of the time earlier in the week when I was walking beside the highway and a car driver was so preoccupied with me that he hit a telephone pole. Much to my surprise and delight I was awarded a gold medal for my speech. I would like to formally note that if my mother was anyone but the loveable Eleanor Mary Dickey, the preceding sentence would have ended this article. However, if I left it like that you people would enter the Gallagher House at some point in the future and in one way or another Eleanor would be 'forced' to say "oh, well, ...everyone who gave a speech was awarded a gold medal" - and unfortunately (or fortunately) that is how this article must end.

cont'd on pg. 21