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Learning To Be A Child Again

Justin Nightingale

As an English teacher, it's all too easy to find methods that work well and just coast through the year without stretching oneself too much by doing bothersome things like experimenting and trying to innovate a little. Striving towards this plateau of a near maintenance free curriculum may not necessarily be negative in itself, but it can take the fun out of things.

The connection with the children is always a pleasure by making them smile afresh with a new, successful activity or way of doing things that I have stumbled upon in my research. This is reason enough for me to want to stay sharp and continue to make an effort by trying something new.

But, not being a home teacher and dealing with them throughout the day, communicating with their parents and basically being their parents while at school, leaves me at a disadvantage: I can't fully appreciate what it's like for them to be at school, going from lesson to lesson and the social problems they may have within the class. In short, I'm missing something as a teacher because my contact window is so small – something that may well help me be better at what I do.

With this in mind I decided to become a kid, for real this time. I took my teacher's cap off and followed Umezaki sensei's 5th grade class for the whole day last summer to see how things look from down there. I joined their classes, did what they did (as much as I could) and tried not to get in their way too much.

8 : 20am : Reading

The day starts with private time and their favourite book. As I've discovered over the years, many family homes are not conducive to studying or simple reading. Little brothers and sisters, juku pressures and family issues often deprive children of the simple pleasure of picking up their favourite manga. There was not a sound in the class.

8 : 30 – 8 : 50am : Christian Message

The style of this segment varies widely from teacher to teacher with no officially set pattern. Sensei took out his wallet and removed various credit cards, point cards, etc, one by one showing them to the students, much to their amusement. When he came to his driving license he drew the analogy of the card allowing him to drive, and how his faith as a Christian allows him to enter heaven by God's love.

The students were absorbed by the metaphor. The pleasure of everyone being part of the class family and enjoying the story was palpable.

9 : 05 – 9 : 50am : PE (体育)

Moving between classes was a lot more laid back than I had imagined. I often heard the question, 'What's next? what's next?' from within the group as they, en masse, drifted through the school. As an adult I forget the fluffy world of low responsibility they dwell in. Everybody followed the minority that were in the know. Forgotten homework started to make sense.

Once in the gym, there were very few instructions from the teacher as dodgeball preparations began. Everybody knew what to do and the game continued smoothly and automatically.

Every now and again the teacher would signal to a student, pull him or her to the side and give a little advice on how not to get tagged so easily, etc – personal care.

Having the whole class look after (read: teach) themselves while I focus on a few high or low level kids during an English class continues to be my holy grail. I need to have activities that engage them that they can do under their own steam, automatically.

9 : 55 – 10 : 40am : Home Economics (家庭)

This is where the contrast between my style of lesson and the traditional Japanese style became readily apparent. As they found their seats, the books were opened, the teacher started talking and the class was, on the whole, quiet in a surprisingly short space of time. The transition from the frenzy of PE to study mode was impressively calm. Now it's a sit and listen time.

The day's subject was money and how to sensibly use it and not use it - buying vegetables and not, for example, using it all at your favourite pachinko parlour. Maybe I expect too much from a 10 year old but I remember wondering to myself why this wasn't already common knowledge among them. In the UK, children seem to be very aware of the meaning of money at an early age due to the (over?)responsibility parents place on them. Could it be that Japanese children are shielded a little more from the realities of everyday life than

in other countries?

I was surprised how much the children fiddled – pens, pencil cases, rubbers – anything that was close at hand. I think I may well be over – sensitive to not having the 100% attention of everyone during my class so this kind of thing stands out to me. As long as they are producing, maybe I should give them a little more leeway.

They seemed interested in the books and keen to answer the questions.

11 : 00 – 12 : 35pm : Lesson 3 + 4

A break from the normal routine, two periods were set aside for games and activities organised by the primary school for the kindergarten children who made the trek over to have some fun and also to catch a glimpse of their possible future in a few years time.

Each class had various activities and crafts going on led by the older children: bowling, origami, board games, etc. The youngsters were assigned a minder that would take them from classroom to classroom, introduce the activities and help them in every way they could. The fact that the teachers were, after things had started, completely absent from the proceedings and a merry time was had by all is a fine testament to the school and everyone's behaviour.

Seeing a relatively large 6th grader constantly hold the hand of a little 'un is a very Japanese thing – in a good way. I can't see that ever happening in the UK. They would also patiently explain and help them through each activity with an impressive maternal maturity, too.

In a broader meaning the overall sense of responsibility (thus not requiring the presence of teachers) and the lack of desire to let loose in this 'free time' is a realistic reflection of Japanese culture in general: respect those above, look after those below.

During my class I have allowed bright children who had finished everything to walk around the class and help others (I call them 'mini sensei' which they seem to like). After seeing this lesson, I believe it's a philosophy I should foster more.

12 : 35 – 1 : 20pm : Lunch

With the minders continuing their role, everyone made their way over to the kindergarten's main hall to have lunch, sitting in circles on the floor without issue or complaint.

1 : 20 – 2 : 05pm : Social Studies (社会)

Everyone read an article on 水俣病 (Minamata disease) and were encouraged to write their opinion about it, a way of proceeding I'd like to see more of in Japanese schools. The pattern was the same: arrive, listen to what page number, open the books and focus on the teacher. When writing their opinions, the scratching of pencils was the only sound to be heard.

Final Thoughts

As I had hoped, I really did see something different walking around in their shoes all day. In short, it was educating to see how small their world was. They drifted from class to class sometimes not even knowing what the class was. They rarely seemed aware of the time, unless the lesson was boring or they were hungry. Most didn't even know what day it was when asked. I say this not

out of despair but out of a slight guilt of not being more aware of the obvious beforehand: children are children.

As an adult I live by the clock and my days determine the difficulty of my work (i.e. whether I'm teaching grade 6 or not) so I'm very aware of the calendar and of course, as a teacher, I'm prepared. It's a healthy reminder to see what it was like when I was younger: children live minute to minute, hour to hour. Their world is what they immediately see and perceive.

Being someone who never really enjoyed school that much it was touching to see that the children liked school. They wanted to be there, together, doing whatever the curriculum required of them. Whenever there was a gap during the day, they instantly fell into game formations using objects around them to pass the time. Boredom wasn't an option.

The flow of lessons through the day was a lot easier and calmer than I had expected. When I walk into a class on the chime, I expect everybody to be there, on time, waiting for English to start, and with very few exceptions, this is always the case. I start and finish on time and for some reason I expected their whole day and mindset to be like this, too. The reality, as I discovered, is that most of them just follow others, thus giving the appearance of everyone arriving on time and ready for action. This of course changes as you go up the grades, but in a positive sense, the herd mentality was ever present.

I was impressed by the delegation of responsibility that guided their day, particularly so because it's a

method I'm trying to rely on in the class to do more than one thing at once. There are various 'chores' during the day such as collecting the milk for lunch, saying the prayer in the morning, etc, and everyone knew what and when to do it without being told.

Having 30 years of life between myself and them will always mean I'm relatively clueless as to how they are feeling, but that day was a day I'll remember for a long time. If I were to choose one thing to take away with me it would be to recognise how small and responsibility – free a world they live in. They will forget, they will be miles away but I have to sensitively use my 45 minutes in a way that doesn't unnecessarily load stress on their young shoulders due to my lack of understanding of the simple fact that they are just children.

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