

〈隨 想〉

Japanese and U.S. schools— Some Differences

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For the last eight months, I have been employed as the Mombushō English Fellow of Fukushima Prefecture, and I have now visited around 65 schools. I'm often asked about general differences that I've noticed between schools in Japan and the United States. This is a *very* big subject, because if I wanted to discuss this subject, I would have to talk about differences in the whole educational systems. But, if I may, I think I'll talk a little about differences in customs between our two countries, and how these customs affect the physical structures of the schools and school grounds.

First, to get a few miscellaneous points out of the way . . . In Japan, you take off your shoes before you enter the school, so, you have a *genkan* for that purpose, and you have small lockers for the shoes. In America, we wear our shoes in school, so there's no need for *genkan* or shoe lockers. Sliding doors are very common in Japan, and accordingly, most classrooms have sliding doors— but I've never seen a sliding door going into a classroom in America. American high schools almost always have very large parking lots. The teachers, of course, come by car (public transport in the U.S. is poor outside the biggest cities). But, the largest part of the parking lot is for the *students*— in America, the car being much more a necessity of life than in Japan, drivers' licences can be, and *are*, in most cases, obtained at the age of 16— so, many students drive their own car to school for about 2 years!

One big difference I've noticed is that there are still many wooden schools left in Japan. Of course, such schools are being phased out, but even so, I've never seen a wooden school in America. And, even the new schools in Japan have one similarity to the old wooden schools— they are not made air-tight. U.S. schools are. This reflects a difference in the customs of heating the schools, I think. In the U.S., all homes, stores, and buildings have some sort of central heating. Americans never have to worry about the air in their room becoming dangerously polluted. Japanese seem to always be very concerned about fresh air in their rooms, even if their schools have vented heaters or even central heating. Americans seal up a room against the cold. A typical American might shut the windows very carefully in fall, and not open them again until the next spring!

Another heating-related difference is that in Japan, windows are often very large, to allow the sunlight into the room to light and warm it. American classes all have windows, but they are there mainly for decoration, and are much smaller. The central heating duct is usually directly below the windows. In many places in America, most winter days are cloudy, and the temperature might often be below freezing even during the day in the north. Thus, the windows are the cold spots, and must be compensated for with the heaters.

In Japan, students are sent, at lunch-time, to get the food and bring it back to the classrooms, where the students eat. The food has usually been prepared someplace other than the school. In America, the lunches are almost always prepared by the schools' cafeteria staffs, and the students eat in the "multi-purpose-room," which is adjoining the place where the food is made and served. In this multi-purpose-room, there are collapsable tables and benches built into the walls, which the students use when eating. This room is also used as the school gym, and as the room with the stage for theatrical or musical productions.