



Math in the Middle

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Laura Parn (Cohort 2) eats lunch with some of the students she befriended while visiting Japan last fall.

The following article was written by Laura Parn.

Last October I had the opportunity to participate in the Japan Fulbright Memorial Fund Program. Through this amazing experience, I had the privilege of traveling to Japan for almost three weeks to learn about the Japanese culture, community, and educational system. The Japanese people are wonderfully hospitable, gracious, and humble. As I learned about the school system, it was very important to first understand the community-minded attitude that was at the core of the Japanese culture and then acknowledge the importance of this belief within the schools.

I expected to see a poised, polished, and perfected educational system – and to some extent I did – consider their zero illiteracy rate! However, I also felt a sense of dissatisfaction from each educator that I encountered. I had the opportunity to hear from and meet with educators on all levels of the educational system. Each person that I learned from – whether it was a classroom teacher at the elementary school, the professor at Tokyo University, a member of Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Sci-

ence, and Technology (MEXT), or even a member of Japan’s parliament – shared with us what they were working on to improve education for the students of Japan. I was impressed by the humility and honesty of the educators that I encountered, especially when, from my viewpoint, they do already have a top-notch educational system!

Some of the issues that educators in Japan are working on improving are probably quite familiar to many educators in Nebraska. Such issues include bullying, students cramming to pass high-stress tests (in Japan there is a prevalent existence of “crammie” schools), unsupportive (“monster”) parents, and personal skills such as an underdeveloped social and moral side and a delayed development of independence. I was shocked to find out that two of the objectives listed in the new Japanese national curriculum are to give children “room to grow” and instill within students a “zest for living!”

I was so thrilled for the opportunity to observe a Japanese lesson study lesson that was taught to a group of students in the elementary school. After the lesson, the entire staff of the building met to debrief on the lesson that was taught and revise the plans for the next teaching, just like I have learned to do in a lesson study cycle! I also was amazed to see the small size of the mathematics materials. Although I knew better than to expect to see a full textbook like we use in the states, the two small, consumable, magazine-like books that I reviewed definitely solidified my understanding of the Japanese curriculum. In Japan, spiral teaching does not exist. Students are taught a concept in depth and are expected to have mastered it when the curriculum moves on.

Participating in the Japan Fulbright Memorial Fund program was truly the experience of a lifetime. I would highly encourage you to consider such an opportunity. To learn more about this program, or apply for one of the two trips next year, please visit the JFMF website at <http://www.fulbrightmemorialfund.jp>.