Trends

Social Studies

WALTER C. PARKER

Learning About Japan

More than any other nation, Japan invites U.S. social studies teachers to learn firsthand about its schools, economy, history, and culture. Through an array of travel fellowships, K-12 teachers are making excursions to schools, factories, shrines, and temples. They stay in private homes, learn to bow, ride the "bullet" train, interview educators and corporate leaders, and sing at banquets held to honor them both as teachers and as guests. Here are three visiting teachers' observations:

"The pervasive internationalization I have seen this week ranges from my first escort, who worked for Purina, to dinner companions who worked for NCR, to the homestay son who teaches English."

"My homestay family and I walked their 5-year-old to the bus stop. The teacher was on the bus. She got out, and the teacher and student bowed to one another. The parents and teacher greeted each other."

"The whole impact of what we saw and heard at Hiroshima Peace Park needs to be conveyed . . ."[1]

Perhaps the finest travel-study experience is provided by Japan's Keizai Koho Center (Japan Institute for Social and Economic Affairs),[2] which invites 24 educators from schools in the U.S., Canada, and Australia to visit Japan for nearly three weeks each summer. Classroom teachers and principals, district and state social studies supervisors, and teacher educators are selected for the trip on the merit of projects they propose for the development of teaching materials.

There are many resource centers in the United States where teachers can learn about Japan. The flagship is the new National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan studies, started in 1990 to help classroom teachers, curriculum coordinators, and scholars obtain information about Japan and U.S.-Japan relations.[3]

The Clearinghouse has an impressive computer database, which includes journal articles, textbooks, filmstrips, videos, research studies, curriculum guides, and lesson plans. When I called the Clearinghouse recently to request a search for resources describing the Japanese educational system, I soon received, free of charge, written summaries of 18 resources along with ordering information.

One of the Clearinghouse's most popular search requests is for curriculum materials and lesson plans for teaching about Japan. Two valuable resources in this category are Linda Wojtan's *Free and Inexpensive Resources for Teaching about Japan* and Mary Bernson's *Modern Japan: An Idea Book for K-12 Teachers*. Other resources that will soon be available at the Clearinghouse include a report comparing the U.S. and Japanese constitutions and a compilation of lessons for teaching Japanese language and culture to elementary students. Interested persons may write or call the Clearinghouse for ordering information.

The U.S.-Japan Foundation supports nine regional centers in the United States, in Anchorage, Alaska; Honolulu, Hawaii; Northampton, Massachusetts; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Lawrence, Kansas; College Park, Maryland; Little Rock, Arkansas; Madison, Wisconsin; and Boulder, Colorado. These centers sponsor lectures, curriculum workshops, study tours, and information networks for educators. The Mid-Atlantic Region Japan-in-the-Schools program (MARJIS) in College Park, Maryland, for example, took 15 educators from Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., to Japan last June as part of MARJIS's fifth summer seminar. The Rocky Mountain Region Japan Project in Boulder, Colorado, sponsors study tours for teachers as well as student exchanges and school library projects. Addresses for the regional centers can be obtained from the Clearinghouse.

Why should U.S. teachers and their students study Japan? One good reason is that it can involve students in a powerful cross-cultural case study. While there are important similarities between the U.S. and Japan (for example, they both have a large middle class), Japan is a relatively homogeneous society where group cohesion, hierarchy, and respect for elders (including teachers) are valued to a substantially greater degree than in the U.S. Thus, in learning about Japan, U.S. students also might see their own society more clearly. This is the extraordinary pedagogical power of cultural comparisons.

One way to strengthen a study of Japan is to go into greater depth and use the Japan case to teach students a general model for studying any society. Then you could compare and contrast Japan with other countries. I would "mine the differences" by selecting nations with striking contrasts to the U.S. and Japan—societies located in other geographic regions that have markedly different economic, ethnic, religious, and political characteristics (for example, Iran, Kenya, Liberia, South Africa, Argentina, Peru or Guatemala).

Japanese officials want U.S. students to learn about Japan. As teaching materials and travel opportunities increase in number and kind, this will become more common. The key question, as always, concerns the challenge of quality control: How are we going to create or provide intellectually challenging as well as morally defensible Japan study programs that will engage our students?□

[1](Fall 1990), *Rocky Mountain Japan Project Newsletter* 3, 3: 6.

[2]The Keizai Koho Center Fellowships, 4332 Fern Valley Road, Medford, OR 97504.

[3]National Clearinghouse for US-Japan Studies, 2805 East Tenth St., Suite 120, Bloomington, IN 47408–2698; 812-855-3838.

Walter C. Parker is Associate Professor of Social Studies Education, University of Washington, 122 Miller Hall, DQ-12, Seattle, WA 98195.

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