

JAPAN: FIRST HAND FOR FIRST GRADE

By

Mary Kathleen Schneider
Instructor, Malcolm Price Laboratory School
University of Northern Iowa

"Now boarding Flight 2600 Express to Minneapolis with connecting Flight 7 from PLS Unit II to Narita Airport, Tokyo, Japan. Please be prepared to present your passport, ticket and seat assignment to the steward at Gate 1...Please see that all carry-on luggage is securely stored under your seat or in the compartments overhead..." With these words, Unit II first-graders took flight for a four-week April adventure to Japan and a new world of culture, traditions, history and customs.

Our unit began with a simulated flight to Japan. Our local airport was very helpful in providing information for actual flight numbers, departure and arrival times, destinations, as well as donating flight tags, ticket packets and wing pins. The children designed the airplane front panel, elected a pilot and co-pilot and we arranged their chairs, complete with seat numbers, into two isles. Upon boarding the children presented their passports, located their seat assignments, stored their luggage (which they packed the night before) and thumbed through travel brochures and magazines as they waited for take off. During the flight they watched a "Welcome to Japan" movie, selected a soft drink, and munched on peanuts. Following take-off, students learned a traditional Japanese greeting and were introduced to a travel log in which they entered daily responses to their trip. This introduction to our unit was very successful in motivating and setting the stage for the weeks ahead.

Upon "arrival" in Japan, students were introduced to the geography of this island country. The children created relief maps (using a basic salt dough recipe and tempera paint to add details) with their sixth grade friends, reinforcing the concepts of islands, mountains and volcanoes. Although not always to scale each child's main focus on their relief map was Mt. Fuji. We also arranged the children's desks in the shape of the four main islands of Japan, and throughout the four weeks the children were called to group or line up by their island name.

For young children, studying another culture such as Japan affords rich opportunities to compare and contrast their daily experiences with that

of children in other parts of the world. Coming from a rural Iowa community, the children were amazed to learn that due to the extensive mountain regions in Japan many farms are the size of one of our city blocks. Japanese farmers use every inch of their rich land to its full potential. Fishing is important to the people and commerce of this country, just as it is for many of our coastal areas here in the States. The importance of tea and rice to Japan's agricultural economy was also discussed.

During week two schools in Japan were explored. Education is a priority in Japan. Although the children didn't think going to school on Saturday was a great idea, they did find the many similarities and differences interesting. For example, children in Japan take a much more active role in the workings of their schools, e.g. lunchroom and janitorial duties. They also prepare extensively to pass entrance exams into high school. Yet Japanese children love sports and games just as American children do. Baseball is the national sport of both of our countries. Better known as scissors, paper, stone, Jan Ken Po is one game familiar to both American and Japanese students. Another popular game is Hanka Chi Otoshi, or, as we know it, Drop the Hankie.

Japanese homelife was also discussed this week. Students learned that the Japanese take off their shoes before entering their home. They also noticed that Japanese homes are much smaller than typical American homes and that the Japanese value simplicity of design.

We spent the last two weeks exploring some of the celebrations and festivals of Japan. One of the students' favorites was Children's Day which is celebrated in Japan on May 5. Originally this festival was called Boy's Day, and a carp kite was flown for each male in the family, representing their strength and courage. Today these kites or wind socks may be flown for girls as well, and as one of my young female liberals put it, "of course girls need to be as strong as boys." After learning about the history of this festival, the students designed carp wind socks which they hung on display. Girl's Day, which is celebrated on March 3, was also explored. One of our guest speakers shared her traditional Girl's Day doll collection and explained how the dolls are displayed on red tiered shelves and that mothers pass their dolls down to their daughters. She also shared that tradition stipulates that the dolls must be put away by midnight of March 3 and that if the girl fails to follow this custom she will not get married. Many eyes were glued to our speaker as she told how one year she did not put her dolls away, and that same year her engagement was broken! Each child then created their own

doll using fabric scraps, cotton balls and dish soap bottles. These dolls were then displayed on tiered blocks covered with red paper. Even the boys enjoyed making the emperor and guard dolls for our display.

The children worked with a high school child development class in sewing individual kimonos. These were worn at our culminating festival. The organization of this festival was like that of a Japanese fair, as there were centers which the children set up and ran as parents and other honorable guests visited our unit. For example in the origami and kirigami centers (paper folding and cutting) one child demonstrated how to make simple creatures out of paper. At another center a child performed a simple tea ceremony in which tea and rice candy were served. The children loved the "slurp" which is proper decorum at the end of drinking the tea. Other favorite centers were Ikebana (flower arranging), goldfish, Japanese authors and literature, food and chopsticks, and ceremonial clothing. The children also dramatized the folktale Tasaku, using a variety of string and percussion instruments.

The Japanese unit was integrated throughout our curriculum. Writing reports was one traditional skill area we focused on. The children learned that there are many resources available for gathering information. Guest speakers were an integral part of the unit of study. I was amazed at the number of people available who had artifacts and personal experiences to share. One mother brought a twelve foot carp wind sock which was sent from Japan at the birth of her first son. A child's kimono and Japanese marbles were other examples of the many items on display. UNI graduate student Kaori Eidomi demonstrated traditional ceremonial clothing, emphasizing that on a daily basis the Japanese wear western clothing like Americans but that on special occasions they dress in traditional costumes. UNI Professor Junko Lewis shared her experiences of growing up in Japan. Thanks to these many generous people, our unit was rich in personal experiences and facts that could never be found in more traditional resources. Books, filmstrips, videos and magazines were also utilized. The children learned to gather data on subjects such as animals of Japan, family life, foods, ceremonial clothing, folktales and Japan's many elaborate festivals and ceremonies. The reports were written through the eyes and words of seven-year-olds which made them all the more enchanting.

The children were introduced to many Japanese authors and their literary gifts. Mitsmasa Anno, Kazue Mizumura, Masako Matusuno and Taro Yashima were a few of the authors we celebrated. The Paper Crane by Molly Bang and The Little Island by Golden MacDonald and Leonard Weisgard were also focused on during literacy.

Many art forms of Japan were enjoyed during this unit of study. After reading many examples of this poetry form unique to Japan, the children wrote simple yet beautiful haiku poetry which were then hung on our cherry blossom tree (a tree branch and pink kleenex blossoms.) They also practiced making Japanese letters and designs, which were then used to decorate paper lanterns and scrolls.

The concept of base ten naturally progressed as we introduced the Japanese abacus. We also had a math center in which the children manipulated felt numbers and number words that were written in both American and Japanese. A number of Japanese counting books captivated the children, and some enjoyed the challenge of decoding math problems written in Japanese numbers.

Throughout the visit to Japan, students learned much about the culture and rich heritage of this beautiful country. But more importantly, they learned that most cultures have more similarities than differences. When the four weeks were over, the children safely arrived back home wiser and more respectful for the experience, attributes that are very descriptive of the Land of the Rising Sun. Sianora!