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Matching aims help both sides to realize effective cultural exchanges — U.S. teachers visit Hiroshima's Waseda Junior High School

A group of U.S. junior high and high school teachers paid a visit to Waseda Junior High School in Hiroshima on July 4 during a trip to Japan organized by the Keizai Koho Center (Japan Institute for Social and Economic Affairs), an organization affiliated with the Keidanren (Japan Business Federation).

With the American teachers having an interest in the Japanese school system, such as school lunch and cleaning time, and the Japanese public school seeking to improve its students' communication abilities in English, valuable exchanges were realized.

English only; origami cranes, school lunch and cleaning together

The 10 teachers had been selected from schools throughout the United States for the Keizai Koho Center Fellowship Program for North American Educators, which has been organized every year since 1980. This year, the group was in Japan from June 29 to July 9, traveling to Tokyo, Kyoto and Hiroshima, where they visited schools and companies.

For the U.S. teachers, the visit to Waseda Junior High School was an opportunity to get to know the realities of teaching in Japan. Meanwhile, the school asked the teachers to only use English to provide the students with the opportunity to communicate with native English speakers.

Students wearing *yukata* (summer kimono) greeted the U.S. party. After the welcome songs and tea ceremony demonstrations, cultural exchanges were held in classrooms.

In a class of seniors, 31-year-old Mark Dubois, who teaches international relations and Asian history at the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics, joined the students in making origami cranes. To begin with, a student explained in English the meaning of the cranes: "In Hiroshima, we make origami cranes every year to pray for peace and happiness."

Dubois, who was not able to make origami very well, said, "I am very slow." The students then encouraged him, saying: "No, no. Very OK!" The students continued to observe Dubois, adding instructions such as "*Sokode* open! (Open there!)" Finally, Dubois completed a beautiful origami crane and received much applause from the students.

Kyohei Takahashi, 14, who was dedicated in teaching origami to Dubois, was satisfied and said "He enjoyed our culture and we had fun."

There were also students who were inspired to learn more. When Dubois asked the students, "Don't you make other animals?" they wanted to convey how cranes have special meaning for Japanese people, especially in Hiroshima, and how the origami cranes are made with earnest prayer, but none of them succeed in saying it in English.

"I could not express concrete things, so I have become eager to study English more," said Mai Inokuchi, 14. "Also, I realized that through eye contact and gestures, not only through words, we can communicate better."

The students did their best and their communication ability was regarded with high esteem.

"They were very interactive and expressive," Dubois said. "I think it is all right so far as the achievement from three years of study."

For the American teachers, there were discoveries and surprises within the Japanese school system. The organizers included the school lunch and cleaning time in the visit program so that the guests could observe Japanese school life as it occurs daily.

Eric Langhorst, 39, who teaches American history at South Valley Junior High School in Missouri, had a choice of boxed lunches made by the school lunch provider. He ate his lunch with freshmen in their classroom. What Langhorst especially noticed was the variety. On that day, his selected lunch box included carrot pilaf, fried salmon with mayonnaise, sautéed green peppers and a carton of milk. According to Langhorst, U.S. students have lunch in cafeterias in school and many of them eat hamburgers or pizza, some of them only french fries.

"The Japanese school lunch is well-balanced. Also, it is good for the teacher and students

to create a sense of unity by having lunch together in the classroom,” Langhorst said, adding that he would report on this to his school after returning home.

During school cleaning time, the American teachers observed how the students worked together. Some of the American teachers joined in sweeping the corridors.

Marcy Grayson, 36, who teaches at Grand Haven High School in Michigan, helped the students clean the blackboard erasers.

“In the U.S., cleaning is a professional cleaner’s job, but the school remains dirty,” Grayson said. “I think students would not litter if they have to clean up the school by themselves. It is a good tradition.”

Hiroshi Kuwada, 54, principal of Waseda Junior High School, was happy his school had this chance at cultural exchange and was proud of his students.

“In addition to communicating in English, the students had a responsibility to introduce Japanese culture. For example, a student took an American teacher’s hand to show how to use a brush during a calligraphy lesson. The students could feel that they were helpful and needed by others,” he said. “I believe that this experience gives them confidence. I expect them to continue to actively work on whatever they do in the future.”