

## Hot-housing, pressure-cooking and stress

I recently watched an animated film called *Henteko na Borantia* (*Strange Volunteers*) with students at a local junior high school. Words that were used in the film, such as *sabetsu* (prejudice), *ijime* (bullying) and *burakumin* (an historic underclass in Japan), conveyed much of what the film was about.

The action centered around some young people helping an old *burakumin* woman to read and write, as she had been prevented by discrimination from receiving a proper education. Anyone not understanding Japanese at all might be forgiven for thinking that the film was a comedy because the student audience laughed often and loudly throughout. However, afterwards, I heard many emotional comments from adults about the film's content; one said that it was

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hard to hold back his tears. Why did the young people react so differently from the adults about this film?

The youth audience ranged from 12 to 15 years of age, early adolescence, perhaps the most crucial time of development in a person's life. What sort of guidance are they getting regarding one of the most important aspects of maturity: caring and thinking about other people in the community around them? The answer appears to be none. The focus of Japanese education is upon another (admittedly important) aspect of maturity in this world, that of the overall social goal of maintaining economic prosperity via vocational advancement. In order to see if society validates this goal, they need only look around them, at the adults closest to them. Their parents, both working for greater material comfort, their teachers (the adults they see the most of) spreading out their attentions to over a hundred students in six day weeks while spending very little time with their own families.

Where do these kids get their ideas about life and how to behave? Besides television, it is other kids, their friends and peer groups. How do they make friends and what are the friendships based upon? Spending six days a week at school (and sometimes the Sunday as well) precludes opportunities to get to know anyone much different from them or from outside of the school population. Extracurricular activities, such as social and sports clubs, should serve to round out the individual and provide an opportunity to mingle and interact with others from different social and economic levels and backgrounds. But when these activities are subverted into the school system, they become simply another, mandatory, class. The students wear the same clothes (uniforms); they spend their extra time at the same place (school), and all the time is spent with the same leaders (teachers) and the same companions (other students).

In many other countries, it is parents who participate in the community by volunteering to lead such clubs. These young people often seem to not know how to think for themselves because they have never had a chance to, and they don't know how to feel because they have never been allowed to. The laudable move by the Ministry of Education to implement a five-day school week, focus upon usable English, and cut a lot of useless rote memorization (this is the computer age!) is just the first step in a process that began in Western countries thirty years ago.

The real challenge facing the parents and teachers of future adult citizens is to make it work. "What are we going to do with our children on Saturdays while we work, or otherwise spend time?" is a question foremost on the minds of many parents, apparently presuming that schools exist to babysit children until they are adults. "The cram schools (*jukus*) will take our students away!" is the reaction of many administrators, revealing the basic economic consideration of education. Private schools enroll a significant proportion of the student population, yet they do not intend to follow the new schedule. They will continue to require

attendance on Saturdays, to give them a business edge.

As an employee, I have personal reasons for welcoming the five-day work week. I want more time for my family, my friends and my self. I work to support my family; that is why I have a job. I have two young children; I spend time with them in the morning before school, and we have evenings together until 8 pm. I require more time to play with them, talk, teach them, watch them changing and growing and learning by the minute! I'd like to spend Friday evening with my wife; take her out to dinner, go to a show or a party. Saturdays, I want to go out with my family. Saturday evening I go to 'aikido' practice with my daughter, then out with my friends, drinking beer and talking, maybe shooting pool. Sunday morning I go to church, in the afternoon to the pool with my children. In short, I want a life outside of the world of school and work.

Why does one of the richest countries in the world have such a sad lack of understanding of quality time? That is, time spent with family, friends, or possibly time for reflection alone. The rise of bullying and meaningless killing in the schools and on the

streets of this country is a sign of the times, along with the rising number of "school refusers". The Ministry of Education has taken a very important first step in rethinking this society's values from one of strongest bases for social planning: the state-controlled school. Now society has to deal with the reevaluation, and reclaiming, of what should be its strongest base: the family. How effective can this be if private schools refuse to cooperate? ETJ

*Eric Wolsey*

*A concerned private school teacher and parent in Kyushu*

*The ETJ Journal invites contributions from all teachers of teenagers, college students and adults. If you have some ideas you wish to share or an opinion you wish to air, please contact the editors (see p2).*

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