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Schools aim to cultivate returnee students' 'second culture'

By KATRINA GRIGG-SAITO

Yuki, 7, zooms around the school lounge in her neon T-shirt, hugging teachers, gesturing wildly, making jokes and chattering away in perfect English. Yuki is Japanese and learned English when her family lived in Los Angeles for two years. She is affectionate and expressive, or at least she is on Saturdays when she attends Kikokushijo Academy, a school for returnee children. But after her day at K.A., when she sets foot on the Tokyo subway, Yuki's demeanor changes. Her shoulders hunch inward and she becomes reserved and shy, whispering occasionally in English and constantly monitoring the people around her. Even at seven years old, she knows how to alter her behavior to fit into Japanese society.

"Kikokushijo" are children of Japanese nationals who have spent a period of at least a few months abroad, usually because of a parent's job. They come not just from the U.S., the U.K., and Australia, but also Singapore, India, Brazil and Dubai. What they have in common is that they have been educated — usually in English — in Western school systems or international schools.

Coined in the 1970s as a special government dispensation, the category of kikokushijo was established to help returnees reintegrate into the Japanese school system. With the economic boom of the 1980s and amid a growing interest in internationalism, kikokushijo children began to be seen as an economic commodity — children who were bilingual and, more importantly, bicultural, comfortable with the social norms of the West. The government has shown an eagerness to cultivate this group of elite workers, authorizing alternative tests for universities and high schools to accommodate these students. However, this has not been backed up with corresponding measures to address returnees' emotional needs: Most schools lack counseling or other programs to ease the difficult transition, and there seems to be little interest in fostering the second culture that children have absorbed through their time abroad.

On their return to Japan, the students quickly notice differences between the two school systems. Wakako lived in Singapore, and at her Western school she learned to debate, participate and ask questions. Back in Japan, however, Wakako, 15, says she feels like to be a good student she has to "listen to teachers and not say my opinions."

Tom, 14, puts it another way.

"You have to act Japanese, you know. You have to be the 'same height' as everyone else. If you're too tall, you get chopped off."

K.A. Principal Charles Knudsen believes it is only natural that students very quickly "learn to hold back, to blend in. They learn to adopt a different personality that will help them survive in this new environment."

Maki, 14, calls this skill "reading the air," and says kikokushijo who can't pick up on subtle cultural cues are shunned and called "kuki yomenai" — kids who "can't read the atmosphere."

Kumiko Manabe's son quickly learned quickly the value of "kuki yomeru." When he was being bullied and beaten up in public school, his mother asked him why he didn't fight back, and he answered, "kuki yomenakucha," ("It's not done," or literally, "You have to read the atmosphere.") Her son's teacher said "he would just have to learn the hard way, and that he would eventually become what the system wants," she says. Manabe transferred her son to a private school with more kikokushijo students.

But whether in public or private school, Manabe says she has noticed a lack of tolerance here toward cultural differences among kikokushijo: Where a foreigner's social faux pas may be seen as cute, "for someone who has the same face it's simply not acceptable." She wishes there were more programs out there for these kids, but is afraid that for Japan to accept them, society would have to change.

Kikokushijo Academy aims to help students aged between 5 and 18 years old bridge the gap between their Western experiences and their new life here. The school creates a space where kids can keep up a bicultural fluency and express parts of themselves that sometimes feel suppressed in Japan. What they get from the after-school and Saturday programs is more than what's on offer at a traditional cram school. While there are rigorous exam-prep classes — and high acceptance rates into high schools among its 270 students — the schools' two branches, both in Tokyo, have an intentionally community-center feel.

According to co-founder Joshua Barry, K.A. is the only returnee cram school that is foreign-run. Other schools, like Enna, are Japanese-run with Japanese teachers. Barry says that these other schools teach English through Japanese, which K.A. is firmly against.

"We believe in an English-only policy, and parents and students have been very positive about this," he says.

The colorful lounges at K.A. are crammed full of English books. On a recent visit, children were draped over sofas, playing energetic games or holding onto teachers' legs. Older kids were reading books or finishing homework, asking teachers on break for extra help. When asked for her opinion on K.A., one 11-year-old said she likes it because "everyone's friendly." Her friend, also 11, said that she loves her English classes at K.A. because they are challenging. She said that her English class at her Japanese school "is so easy, for a baby."

"Yeah, yeah!" her friend concurred. "Like a baby in England could do it!"

One junior high school student said, "It's easier to express myself at K.A.," and the rest of the class seemed to agree, with students adding that here they feel like they are friends with their teachers and can relate to them. Most students don't speak to their parents in English, and having English-speaking and culturally global role models opens up a greater range of possibilities.

Knudsen, who has as much energy as his students, speaks animatedly about the conflict between the two different styles of education.

"Their teachers at (their regular) school get mad at them for things that we praise them for — speaking up, asking questions, making jokes."

Knudsen says that he has seen students become more reluctant to speak up and less willing to share their opinions the longer they are in Japanese schools.

"I think they need to stay in contact with their previous culture," he says. "I think they need to be able to express that side of themselves, and that's why we have this school. It's a safe haven for a lot of these kids."

Dwayne Dixon, a Ph.D. student in cultural anthropology at Duke University, N.C., has been studying kikokushijo for two years, focusing on how their identities have been formed or transformed by their experiences in Tokyo and other major world cities. What he says surprised him most was the returnees' incredible resilience. He says that because of their ability to assimilate into both cultures they often act as go-betweens, or ambassadors, but that without support the opposite can happen: Returnees have the potential to be "the biggest deviants — or the heir apparents — of Japan, and it's all based on their ability to assimilate back into Japan," he says.

A teenager at K.A. recounted his experience of speaking English on the subway with friends and being yelled at by an old Japanese man who called them a disgrace and told them they should switch to Japanese immediately. Dixon puts these kind of negative reactions down to the fact that kikokushijo represent a changing of the guard for Japan. He believes it's important to realize that these kids "represent a very necessary (new) Japanese way of being. These kids represent an international view that is unpalatable to those trying to preserve a monolithic identity."

When asked where they are from, almost every student hesitates and says, "I'm Japanese, but I lived in . . ." What this suggests is that kikokushijo see themselves as Japanese but are also changing the view of what it is to be Japanese. What they've seen and experienced in other places gives them a wider view of the world: They talk about being more comfortable with different races and cultures and about how different that makes them from other Japanese of a similar age. They even describe a cognitive openness, talking about how their thinking has changed.

"When I was in Japan I only had the thoughts of Japanese people, like: 'This is bad, this is good, and you shouldn't express your true feelings,'" said one 15-year-old student. "But going to the States really changed how I feel about things and how I think about things."

Maintaining that new perspective — that blended identity — and fostering a bicultural education through places like Kikokushijo Academy is what Dixon says will keep this "other" side alive in harmony with the Japanese side. He calls this "keeping the other lines of flight possible." Living in both cultures, he says, is "all about retaining and cultivating possibility."

For more on Kikokushijo Academy, visit www.kikokushijoacademy.com, mail english@kikokushijoacademy.com or call (03) 3324-9903. Send comments on this issue and story ideas to community@japantimes.co.jp

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Second home: Principal Charles Knudsen teaches returnee students at Kikokushijo Academy. COURTESY OF KIKOKUSHIJO ACADEMY