

# PUT THE HAMMER DOWN

**Sandra Kimball** consults with Yoneyama Shoko about changing the education system

**Y**ONEYAMA SHOKO IS SENIOR Lecturer in Asian Studies at the University of Adelaide. Her 1999 book *The Japanese High School: Silence and Resistance* is a critical and comparative assessment of Japanese education from the perspective of students.

## Has the form of aggression called bullying always been with us?

I suspect that bullying has always been part of human history and it will be very difficult to get rid of it completely. Having said that, I also think that we are at an interesting point in history in relation to bullying in two ways.

One is that bullying has been established as an important topic of research since the mid-1980s in many parts of the world. It has helped to raise general awareness of the issue and to provide tools to better understand it, often leading to the introduction of policies to reduce bullying at school (and the work place).

The other is an increasing interest in and recognition of "holistic education." The United Nations has designated 2001 to 2010 as the "International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World" and UNESCO has decided on holistic education as the key. This is an important development in that it seeks to promote peace, of which bullying prevention is part, in the new and broader framework of holistic education, which is quite different culturally from the kind of education we are familiar with. Its adoption will involve reconsideration of long accepted practices, such as teacher-centered modes of learning and teaching, exam-based assessment, hierarchical human relationships, ineffective disciplinary practices, and non-inclusion of students and parents in decision-making. I am particularly interested in this proposed change because existing bullying-intervention programs have produced very limited results.

## Some studies say Japanese students with emotional sensitivities that cause them problems in school become better adjusted when they study abroad. What do you make of this?

First, I am not sure whether it is the emotional sensitivities of students that cause them problems in school. An international study called PISA is widely referred to in order to compare the educational conditions of 15-year olds around the world. What is less known, however, is the fact that the study also investigates students' perceptions of school.

It has been found that student alienation is especially high in Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong, despite high attendance rates. This suggests that students in these countries may be putting up with a lot in school. Whether it surfaces as a problem or not may depend upon the sense of relative gain of each individual student; i.e., to what extent one can find meaning in going to school.

Our study of Japanese international students in Australian schools found no statistically significant differences between two groups of students in their perceptions of schools and sense of well-being as learners – either in Japan or Australia. One group of students had left Japanese school to complete secondary education in Australia. They were in the "graduate program." The other group was from Japanese schools and visiting Australia for a limited term, up to one year. They were in the "study-abroad program." For both groups, student perceptions of school and the sense of wellbeing were more positive in the Australian context than in the Japanese context. This was the case despite the fact that some students in the first group had gone through a period of nonattendance in Japan.

The result came as a surprise because I had assumed that only students who had irreconcilable problems with the Japanese schools would decide to study overseas. On the contrary, this showed that the difference between students who permanently leave Japanese schools and those who remain in the system is very minimal in terms of how they perceive school learning environments and their sense of wellbeing as learners.

Regardless of their status as international students, Japanese students in Australian schools seemed better adjusted and even empowered by the mode of learning they experienced as international students in Australia. To what extent their experiences differ from that of the local students is unclear. It is also possible that students who have chosen to study abroad see overseas schools in a more positive light. We were interested in decoding the ingredients of the students' sense of empowerment. What seemed to be important was the sense of being cared for by teachers, feeling at ease with classmates through open communication, interactive and autonomous modes of learning, and, most of all, being part of a positive and friendly school and classroom climate.

## There is a saying in Japan, "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down," and in Australia

there is a similar one, "The tall poppy gets cut down." Can you describe the difference between the two cultures and the influence they might have on social conformity?

The Japanese version clearly cautions people against non-conformity, against being different. It tells people to follow the norm, to fulfill the social expectation, and to be "normal." The nail that sticks out is apparently a nuisance and can cause damage or harm. The implication that such a nail needs to be fixed is a powerful one.

The Australian "poppy," on the other hand, leaves some room for argument. Unlike the nasty nail sticking out, the tall poppy represents good qualities such as talent, wealth, status, and competence. The issue seems rooted in the way it stands. If it is perceived to be standing too arrogantly or too proudly, it may be culled. The issue seems not just non-conformity but elitism, which leaves room to question the attitude of the masses. The power dynamic is not as fixed as in the case of the Japanese proverb.

Also, in relation to bullying, the image of the tall poppy being the target of victimisation can be a bit misleading. Non-conformity can be used as the reason for bullying, but only when the difference puts the person in a socially weak position. The image of a short poppy may be appropriate in explaining bullying.

## Finally, any thoughts on where we can go from here, especially for parents and educators in Japan who don't want to be a nail that needs fixing or a tall poppy, but want to affect change in the present educational system?

I'm not sure if I can say anything useful here, but one strategy might be to increase the number of tall (or short) poppies and nails sticking out, by increasing diversity in school on the principle of social inclusion. The presence of people of different abilities, shapes, sizes, ages, colours, and cultures makes it hard to find nails or poppies sticking out. Even in a small social setting, a deliberate effort to include people who are different would automatically challenge the culture of conformity. I am sure that the readers of *Kansai Time Out* have contributed enormously to bringing greater diversity to Japanese society, and similar media outlets also provide invaluable communication to create a better future. **KTO**

*Dr. Yoneyama will be in Kansai in October and November this year to work on a project on holistic education. She can be contacted by email: shoko.yoneyama@adelaide.edu.au. 1.*