

## 卷 頭 言(Forewords)

### Three months in Japan

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I had the pleasure and privilege of being a CICE visiting professor during the first three months of this year. My goal was to learn as much as I could about the Japanese education system in order to see what might be usefully applied in a joint Japanese-South African project running in the South African province of Mpumalanga. I had the opportunity to see almost every part of the education system, from nursery school through to high school and university, meeting pupils, university students, teachers, teacher trainers and professors.

As a result of these rich and diverse experiences my head is full of ideas and impressions. As with any nation, I felt there were some tremendous strengths in the education system but also some weaknesses. I was very impressed with the kindergarden and primary school system. At this level, school was a place that children seemed to love. In the schools I visited children were actively engaged in wonderful hands-on learning activities, there was a great deal of interaction amongst the pupils, the relationship between pupils and teachers seemed warm and relaxed, and the level of self-assuredness and responsibility demonstrated by the pupils was impressive.

At the high school level there seemed to be two parallel educational systems, one in school and one outside the formal school setting. In the schools I still met teachers who were committed to the pupils and wanted them to learn and enjoy the process. However, at high school pupils are driven by the need to do well in examinations if they want to go further with their education and have access to good jobs later on. Thus many children spend a lot of time (and their parents spend a bit of money) at cram schools (juku). The examinations seemed to require pupils to memorise a vast body of information. Indeed, when I looked at the national university entrance exam in physics (with translation provided by a physics teacher) I realised that the amount of content was so large that grade 12 children had no option but to cram for such an examination.

Japan is blessed with a cadre of very committed, hard-working and highly professional

teachers. Yet many of the teachers I spoke to felt that their expertise and experience were not being recognised when it comes to giving input into curriculum reform. I got the impression that much of the educational policy is formulated by academics who have not had classroom experience. Close collaboration between academics and practitioners (classroom teachers) can benefit the education system enormously.

Japan is naturally proud of its rich and ancient culture and history. Yet in these days of globalization, we are being thrown together with people from all over the world. As a result we are forced to confront new ideas and have our own ideas challenged. In South Africa a radically new educational philosophy and curriculum were adopted after our first democratic elections in 1994. Since then we have had a steady stream of visitors and consultants from many countries in the world who have shared their ideas and experiences with us and helped us identify weaknesses in our system. This has been a tremendously enriching experience, and our education system has benefited greatly. I would encourage Japanese educationalists to participate in this sort of process. CICE should be commended for playing a very valuable role in promoting such international exchanges.