

# Future Dreams, Better Realities

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## Dreams of the Future

As a university student studying for a teacher's license, I would occasionally try to imagine myself in the future. I envisioned having a classroom filled with wide-eyed, enthusiastic students listening to my every word. Never in my wildest dreams did I consider that I would instead be standing on a mountainside, singing in a foreign language as I watched the sunset. Yet, three years after I graduated from university, that's exactly where I was.

The setting was the famous Hakodateyama. I was there on a school trip with a class of junior high school students. Prior to our trip, we had been practicing the same song for weeks in our classroom during lunch breaks, after homeroom, and whenever we had a spare moment. One of the students was our director and made us practice over and over again. It seemed we were never good enough and had to keep trying harder. I was simply amazed at everyone's dedication and could not recall ever having the same type of experience in my junior high school days in the United States.

In the US, if you want to sing, you join the choir. The idea of a homeroom class all singing together is simply not a part of the curriculum. Neither are school trips. Although we occasionally go to an art museum or participate in a volunteer activity, these are usually short excursions and students who don't receive permission from their parents to attend have to stay behind in the school library for the afternoon.

I was therefore ill prepared for the amount of outside classroom activities there would be in Japan. As a junior high school English teacher, I have cooked curry rice in beautiful outdoor settings, spent the day in the park drawing a picture, listened to a tour guide on a bus travelling way beyond the prefecture in which my students live, and played card games while travelling on the Shinkansen

towards yet another new destination. Now that I have lived in Japan for many years, I can see how these early childhood activities lay a strong foundation for developing effective communication among future co-workers and colleagues.

## Formal and Informal

In the US, we tend to separate activities into categories such as "school" and "home" or "work" and "pleasure". Usually the people with whom we do these activities are completely different. It is like having your life in different compartments. A friend at school or work might not be someone you choose to spend your free time with once you are no longer in that setting.

In Japan, however, the people with whom you do activities remains the same and instead the setting in which you do the activities changes. Usually there is a "formal" setting such as a classroom and an "informal" setting such as a campground or mountaintop. The way you relate to each other also adapts to this change in setting. Due to the time spent with students in informal settings, I really got to know them at a completely different level. I could laugh and joke with them in a way I never could in the classroom. But more importantly, I learned that a student who might not be wide-eyed in English class could be the fastest at getting a campfire started or the best choir director.

Ironically when I think back to my best memories of the schools in which I taught, I do not see the classrooms or chalkboards I envisioned in my university days. Rather I remember activities like gazing at the most beautiful night view of Hakodate while singing in chorus with my 40 wonderful students. Formally I must call them my students but informally, in my heart, I call them my very special friends.