

**An Investigation Into The Impact Of the  
International Exchange Partnership Between  
Reepham Primary School (UK) And Sakado  
Azuma Kindergarten (Japan) On Our  
Children's Global Competence.**

**A Reflection On, And Celebration Of An International  
Partnership In Its Tenth Year.**

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## **Reepham Primary School – Background and Context.**

Reepham is a small rural town in North Norfolk; with a population of just under 3000 (Office for National Statistics), within around 1200 households. We have a primary school of 210 children filled with children from the town, and a High School & College of 1000 children who come from the surrounding villages. In our primary school, children join us at the age of 4 and we have one class per year group, class sizes vary from 28 to 32.

In many ways Reepham is quite remote; our nearest city is Norwich, which is only a 30-minute drive away, but as the public transport is poor, families living in Reepham without their own cars can be isolated, and many children grow up rarely leaving the town. Reepham is an area which is picturesque and perceived as affluent. Although it does still contain pockets of deprivation, it is well below national average in all domains. The population has a higher than average number of professionals and senior managers, and is viewed as a desirable place to live.

In terms of ethnic diversity, the catchment area that serves our school is overwhelmingly white, with the population of Reepham being 99.2% white (compared to the National figure of 85.4%) (Census 2011) At present our school's ethnic breakdown is 98.1% White British – this is not unusual for our school.

## **The International Partnership with Sakado Azuma Kindergarten (Japan).**

### **In the beginning...**

Given the context of the lack of diversity in Reepham, when we were offered the opportunity to create a partnership with a Japanese school, the governors and head at that time jumped at the chance to offer our children a new insight into the world around them, to understand diversity, and to see themselves as part of the global community.

We were incredibly lucky to be partnered with the Sakado Azuma Kindergarten; the Principal and Vice Principal (Etsuko and Shizuka Suzuki's) passion for education and determination to provide the best opportunities for their students has inspired us, and driven our partnership forward in a way we could not have predicted. They have devoted their lives and their energy into creating a positive and forward thinking environment for their children to learn in; they are always striving to be the best for their children and providing an education which is second to none. We have learnt so much from these inspiring ladies, and continue to do so.

Our initial aims of being part of this partnership were very simple:

- To broaden the horizons of our children at Reepham Primary, building awareness of the lives of children who live elsewhere in the world.
- To provide our children with an opportunity to learn about another culture which contrasts to our own.
- To introduce the idea of being part of a global community, working on projects together with a school from another country and building friendships.
- To learn about the culture of education in another country, to then develop our teaching, bringing good ideas and practices back to Reepham Primary.

### **The Evolvement of the Partnership**

At first we spent time establishing the best way for the partnership to work for the benefit of our children; as a primary school we initially felt that the partnership should be focused on our EYFS and KS1 children, in order to get the most 'like for like' comparisons, given the age of the Kindergarten children at Sakado Azuma. After a few years we re-assessed and realised that our older children could also gain so much by being actively involved in this partnership. We now see the benefits of the relationship between the Japanese teachers and the older children, who are always excited by the visits.

As the partnership has evolved over the years, it has consisted of two main elements:

1. Exchange of cards and gifts at important cultural times (along with explanations about cultural significance).
2. Visits from teachers to the partner school. These visits have been to:
  - a. teach workshops about different aspects of our cultures directly to the children
  - b. increase our teachers' knowledge and understanding of the culture, to then share our experiences in the form of video diaries or direct teaching back in our home schools.

### **The Partnership Activities**

The activities Reepham children have been involved with due to this international partnership have included the following:

- Exchanges of cards and gifts of cultural significance.
  - Annually, each child at Reepham creates a card for a child at Sakado. This is usually at Christmas, but has sometimes been at Easter – both times of cultural/religious

significance. The aim of this is to ensure our children understand that they are sending something that is usual for us, but different for our Japanese partners, thus reflecting on our own culture as well as theirs. In return, each child receives a card from a child at Sakado Azuma Kindergarten, usually to celebrate New Year. We also receive roasted soy beans and Oni masks every year to celebrate the Setsubun festival.

- Workshops taught by visiting teachers, including:
  - Origami creations (often relating to a Japanese festival or tradition)
  - Traditional Japanese calligraphy
  - Creating lamps from Japanese Washi paper
  - Writing letters in Kanji for the Japanese children
  - Singing songs from Japanese pop bands
  - Learning dances and songs sung at Sakado Azuma Kindergarten
  - Cooking and sampling sushi
  - Tasting different teas
  - Performing the tea ceremony
  - Wearing and learning about the traditional clothing (Kimono)
  - Creating a story and publishing a book in Japanese and English.

Each workshop has been designed to:

1. Introduce the children to an important element of Japanese culture, thus building their knowledge of everyday life and traditions which are different to the UK.
2. Encompass a practical activity which is something that the children's Japanese counterparts would also do/ have already done within their usual school/classroom experience, thus allowing them to build up an understanding of similarity and shared experience with the Japanese children.
3. Be taught directly by Japanese teachers, (with some translation into English) with the support of the children's usual teachers, thus exposing the children to the use of another language (between the Japanese teachers), and building the skills of using non-verbal communication to overcome the language barrier.

## **The OECD & PISA's Global Competence Framework**

Over the course of the 10 years of our partnership, the level of importance placed on creating curriculums that foster the concept of a global community has continued to grow worldwide. The introduction of the measurement for Global Competence by PISA, introduced this year, has given us an opportunity for reflection on our partnership activities, and the impetus to analyse the impact that these activities have had on our children at an early age, in line with the concept of the global competence. Our aim now is to understand how effective these activities have been in building elements of Global Competence from the Early Years, in order to maximise the learning from our partnership activities with our children.

PISA's definition of Global Competence (2018) encompasses four key dimensions:

1. The capacity to examine issues and situations of local, global and cultural significance (e.g. poverty, economic interdependence, migration, inequality, environmental risks, conflicts, cultural differences and stereotypes);
2. The capacity to understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views;
3. The ability to establish positive interactions with people of different national, ethnic, religious, social or cultural backgrounds or gender;
4. The capacity and disposition to take constructive action toward sustainable development and collective well-being.

Taking a reflective approach to our international partnership activities against these assessment criteria, I can see that some of the criteria very simply have not been met at all through this programme (although may have been met through other, complimentary aspects of our curriculum). As such I chose to focus my research on the key dimensions 2 & 3: "The capacity to understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views" and "The ability to establish positive interactions with people of different national, ethnic, religious, social or cultural backgrounds."

The building blocks of global competence, identified in 'Preparing Our Youth for an Inclusive and Sustainable World – The OECD and PISA global competence framework' 2018, are broken down into Knowledge, Values, Attitudes and Skills. As such, I looked at how effective our school partnership activities have been in providing opportunities to promote the knowledge, values, attitudes and skills outlined in this document, to promote global competence.

## **The Sample**

In order to gain a balanced view of the impact of our activities, I used a sample of children, parents and teachers to give qualitative views for analysis.

The children - the sample of children involved in the research included children from every year group in school at present. Some classes held a whole class discussion, others discussed their opinions in small groups. In total, 140 children aged between 4 and 11 were included in our group discussions. The discussions were led by a teacher or teaching assistant, with specific questions about their experiences, their understanding and their opinions.

The teachers - the teachers and teaching assistants questioned have been working with the school for between 1 and 15 years, and therefore have different levels of experience of children's involvement in Japanese activities. 10 teachers and TAs gave opinions.

The parents - a selection of 25 parents were canvassed for opinions; 14 responded. They were given the 4 dimensions of the PISA definition of Global Competence, and asked to comment on whether they felt our international link activities had had any impact on dimensions 2 and 3 of this competence, and in what way.

## **The Findings**

### **How have the activities undertaken in our partnership with Sakado Azuma Kindergarten impacted on our children's knowledge about Japan and Japanese culture?**

The OECD and PISA identify that knowledge about the world and other cultures includes "the manifold expressions of culture and intercultural relations, such as languages, arts, knowledge traditions and norms" as well as "knowledge about the similarities, differences and relations between cultures" (The OECD PISA global competence framework 2018).

In their discussions, the children demonstrated that they have gained some knowledge about different aspects of the Japanese culture:

- "They have really big sleeves" (Reception class child, referring to the traditional kimono worn by an unmarried woman)
- "They don't have sofas or chairs" (Reception class child talking about the traditional Japanese houses and homes)
- "In their houses and at school they always take their shoes off inside" (Yr1 child)
- "The children and the grown-ups are really good at origami and they taught us too" (Yr1 child)
- "Japanese food is likely to have seafood and rice in it" (Yr3 child)

- “They usually drink tea, but not English tea, and they sometimes do a special tea ceremony” (Yr4 child)
- “We know about their food – noodles, sushi, and they eat with chopsticks” (Yr2 child)
- “There are shrines with a special orange gate at the front” (Yr5 child)
- “They have lots of different festivals and in some festivals they dress up to be different gods” (Yr6 child)
- “There are colourful festivals with dancing and special Japanese music” (Yr2 child)
- “Japanese writing is completely different, there are different kinds of letters and words called Kanji” (Yr6 child)
- “They prepare things differently and make everything very intricate” (Yr5 child)
- “They are an island nation like us” (Yr6 child)

Comments from parents also reflect that the children have a knowledge of Japanese culture gained from the partnership activities:

- “My girls have really enjoyed the interaction with the Japanese school and recall drinking Japanese tea whilst understanding what is in their tea bags, making and eating sushi, learning how the Japanese write and doing origami. This has certainly given them an understanding of Japanese culture and a different way of life” (Parent of children in Yr3 & Yr4)
- “Rosanna and Joseph often talk about what they know about Japan at home. Even yesterday Rosanna was talking about the sushi making she’d done and the green tea ceremony. Joseph could also relate his experience of Japanese food tasting. Rosanna has copied her name in Japanese and has it on her door.” (Parent of children in Yr1 and Yr3)
- “She has learnt a great deal from each visit from the Kindergarten. She gets inspired about Japan every time they visit and has learnt a great deal about their culture and way of life. She has learnt some of the language, made sushi and miso soup, as well as becoming quite advanced in origami.” (Parent of Yr5 child).

Teachers commented on how they felt that building this knowledge had helped our children to understand their own culture and identity more thoroughly, by making them question how these different aspects of Japanese culture were similar and different to our own.

- “I think it affects the children’s understanding of our culture and values, because they have to think what their own identity is in order to identify what is different – for example in the tea ceremony ‘that’s like how we drink tea but we add milk and dunk a biscuit in’”. (Yr6 teacher).

**How have our partnership activities impacted on our children’s attitudes of openness and respect for people from diverse cultures and backgrounds?**

Children were able to comment on the need for tolerance and respect for other cultures, and recognise that by working with our Japanese partners they were learning important cultural information to help them understand the world better. For example, when asked why they thought we worked with Sakado Azuma Kindergarten and learnt about another culture, our Yr3 class’s responses included:

- “If you don’t know about other cultures you might offend them”
- “If you don’t know about other countries, you might have a war because you can’t understand.”
- “It’s important to know about other countries”
- “It will make someone sad if you meet them and you haven’t heard of their country.”

One Yr 6 child demonstrated an attitude of respect in saying:

- “Japan is an extremely sophisticated country”.

Parents also were able to see how their children’s attitudes embrace the openness, tolerance and respect for different people. For example:

- “I overheard Emily and her cousin talking on the way home from a trip in the car only last week. Of all things, they were discussing Donald Trump and Boris Johnson! It was such an insight to hear Emily talking so sensitively about a different religion/current news/stereotypes and give her own opinions as to how other people’s views and beliefs from different cultures should be respected. Really blew me away. She was able to put herself into someone else’s shoes and speak about what she thought was important. I really think that the topic based learning that children have been taking part in over the last few years, and particularly the links with the school in Japan, have enabled children like Emily to really gain a better world view and insight in to how others live.” (Yr4 parent)
- “The link with the Japanese school certainly encourages acceptance of cultural differences”. (Yr3 parent)

### **Do our partnership activities equip our children with the skills to understand the world and take action?**

None of the comments received from children or parents demonstrated any impact of the partnership on these specific skills. Teachers, however, were able to comment on our wider curriculum, and where the skills of reasoning, communicating, perspective taking and conflict resolution may link in to the partnership activities.

- “Although these skills aren’t explicitly taught in the context of our Japanese activities, the fact is they are taught in ‘Let’s Think in English’ and children are encouraged to think deeply and listen to all perspectives, then adapt their opinions if they see another argument presents a more worthwhile perspective – changing minds in the light of new ideas is encouraged! We use these skills in all our lessons, so even though the Japanese activities don’t include debates or problem solving, I’m sure the kids would use these skills in this context if the activity allowed.” (Yr3 teacher)
- “My class took action to raise money for Water Aid after we studied Africa – I know that’s not directly related to the Japanese activities, but I really think that they feel that sense of being part of a global community who can impact the world and that’s largely because of the Japanese link. (Yr5 teacher).

### **How have the activities undertaken in our partnership with Sakado Azuma Kindergarten impacted on our children’s capacity to establish positive interactions with people of different national, ethnic, religious, social or cultural background?**

The children’s discussions revealed that this builds from their first year at school, starting with simple positive experiences with teachers who the children recognise as speaking in a different language, and having have a different ethnicity to them.

- “They helped us make the origami Christmas trees – they were fun” (Reception class child)  
“We learnt to write our names in Japanese!” (Yr2 child)
- “The dances we did for ‘Hello’ and ‘Goodbye’ were really fun! I liked it when the piano kept stopping and we wiggled” (Yr1 child).
- “I liked watching the video of them (the Japanese children) dancing and singing, then we did it too” (Yr2 child).

- “I like learning other people’s languages, and I want to hear other people’s languages” (Yr1 child)
- “My class discussion showed that my children like the idea of being able to say hello to everyone, whoever they are around the world, so just being able to communicate was both important and exciting for them”. (Yr2 teacher).

Our children’s capacity to establish these positive interactions was also recognised by teachers and parents, as developing and building while the children grow through the school. This is due to the fact that they have worked with Shizuka, Etsuko and their teachers for several years, and have built a good relationship with them personally.

- “The kids have a laugh with them (the Japanese Teachers) as well – it’s not just working out what’s expected of them, it’s having a giggle while they do it too, especially with Etsuko as she’s so expressive and funny without speaking and the kids respond well to that.” (Yr5 teacher)
- “For her to experience meeting people face to face and enjoying their company and way of life is uplifting”. (Yr4 parent)
- The building of positive relationships is not restricted to the Japanese teachers who visit; many children feel a bond with the children at the Kindergarten too, having seen them on videos and received cards/letters from them.
- “We got letters from them (the Japanese children) in English and wrote letters back inside a heart – we got to make the heart in origami and write in Japanese too – it was a bit tricky but we all did it!” (Yr4 child)
- “One of the activities my daughter particularly enjoyed was writing to a specific pupil and receiving a postcard in return written in Japanese with a photograph. She considers this child ‘her friend in Japan’”. (Yr3 parent)

The relationship that has built between the English and Japanese teachers has also provided the children with a model of how friendships can transcend the barriers of language, ethnicity, religion and culture. This relationship has developed over the 10 years, and we now consider Etsuko and Shizuka personal friends. The teachers felt that in the classroom and around school, this friendship is clear for the children to see and feel, and that this (as with every behaviour that children see from adults in school) provides the children with a model they can copy and accept as normal and right.

- “Our children can easily see the friendships between us are genuine and not just ‘for the classroom’ – this adds to their experience and understanding that we can all have friends from around the world.” (Yr2 teacher).

**How does our partnership with Sakado Azuma Kindergarten impact on our children’s capacity to understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views?**

Our children’s knowledge and understanding of the Japanese culture have provided the foundations for building their capacity to understand different perspectives and appreciate world views. Their experiences of such a different culture are positive; they ask questions about differences, as they are curious and keen to understand.

Our parents have noticed the impact on this dimension of global competence:

- “My daughter accepts that all countries have different perspectives on life through food, drink, weather, language, religion and social background.” (Yr3 parent)
- “Living in Norfolk, and particularly Reepham, we are to some extent removed from a diverse ethnic and social mix. Having links with another culture in another part of the world has only helped to broaden the children’s understanding of the global world that they will be growing up and entering the workforce in.” (Yr1 parent)
- “I feel that the link with Japan has given him a very positive and first-hand experience of another culture and country, for which I’m very grateful. This is something that can be particularly difficult to experience in our part of the world. It has definitely made him more appreciative of the world around him.” (Yr6 parent)
- “The link with the Japanese school certainly instils the view that we are all part of the same world, and although we may have different experiences in different parts of the world, we also have many similarities and this encourages a view of us together as one global community. It also promotes respect for cultural differences.” (Yr5 parent).

## **Evaluation**

We can see from the comments that offering a range of different learning activities over a sustained period of time has introduced and developed the key 'Global Competence building blocks' of knowledge, attitudes of openness, friendship and respect, and understanding the importance of valuing cultural differences and diversity. Our children leave Reepham Primary with the foundations for building a higher level of Global Competence in secondary education.

They are well on their way to fulfilling the PISA Global Competence domains of:

1. The capacity to understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views;
2. The ability to establish positive interactions with people of different national, ethnic, religious, social or cultural backgrounds or gender;

and many have had the opportunity elsewhere in our curriculum to begin to have:

1. The capacity to examine issues and situations of local, global and cultural significance (e.g. poverty, economic interdependence, migration, inequality, environmental risks, conflicts, cultural differences and stereotypes);
2. The capacity and disposition to take constructive action toward sustainable development and collective well-being.

The evidence in the comments from the children, the parents and the teachers certainly shows that the children's awareness and knowledge of the Japanese culture has been developed through the exchange activities. The whole school community have an understanding of life in Japan, and a positive attitude to learning more about it.

The positive nature of this relationship cannot be underestimated – as one parent says about her children: "they display their Japanese name badges with pride in our kitchen". One child who recently left to attend another school reported to his mother that he was 'enormously proud' as he was the only child in the new group who could count to 10 in Japanese.

From the children's perspective, they have friends who live on the other side of the world, and who teach them things that are new, different and exciting. From the parents' perspective, their children have been given the opportunity to learn about the diversity of the world around them by engaging directly with an unknown culture in a positive and respectful way – meeting real people. Several parents mentioned how important this is for our children who live in a community that lacks diversity. From the teachers' perspective, our own understanding of Japanese life has grown year on year, meaning that we can continue to build on the children's understanding on a continuous basis. We are

able to 'open up the world a little bit more' for our children, by showing them a non-European, non-western culture that is very different from their own.

The most effective elements of this exchange seem to be that:

- The children's understanding builds from ongoing experiences and annual visits, starting in Early Years but continuing with consistency until the children leave for High School. This means that the learning is not simply a one off tokenistic experience, but the development of deeper knowledge and understanding over the course of their seven years with us.
- The relationship of positivity and friendship which grows year on year for every child and every teacher. This means that the children's experience of learning about the differences across the world goes hand in hand with them experiencing positive, fun, helpful relationships with people who of different ethnicity and who speak a different language.

Fundamentally, in the context of Early Childhood, we have found that our children build a positive awareness of a different culture, learning directly from teachers who are of a different ethnicity and speak a different language. This is the foundation for their 'Global Competence'.

We are excited about continuing to develop our partnership into the future.