

# “Peace and Human Rights Committee” in the Special Religious Activities

HIROYUKI OKAMOTO

The Assumption Junior and Senior High School in Minoo city in Osaka is a Catholic missionary school for girls founded in Japan by the Religious of the Assumption, which has the Mother House in Paris, France. The Assumption Junior and Senior High School is small, compared with the other private schools in Japan, with just two classes in each grade. Yet we engage in our daily education in a family-like atmosphere, under the motto, “joy, sincerity and neighborly love.”

## Special Religious Activities

Our school has Special Religious Activities every Friday after class, apart from other extra-curricular activities. These include volunteer activities, hand bell club, and the choir. Students from first grade in the junior secondary level to the third grade in senior secondary level, wishing to join any of the activities, can register and participate.

The “Peace and Human Rights Committee” is one of those activities. There, the students take the lead in studying a wide range of issues involving peace and human rights.

As an advisor to this activity, I introduce to you what we do.

## The Peace and Human Rights Committee

At the beginning of each academic year, the students and I as the advisor discuss what topics we want to study on, and what sort of activities we will engage in. Sometimes we work on a single topic throughout the year, and there are times when we decide on no particular topic. The only requirement is that it has to be

related to peace and human rights in a broad sense, which allows for a wide variety of topics to be chosen.

What is important is the wish “to know,” to study the topic by one’s self, and to have one’s own knowledge and views about it. After “knowing,” the students exchange and share their views. By doing so, they are able to reflect deeper into the issues, and form well thought out opinions on them.

## Students activities

Taking the example of the students who joined in 2002, I explain the actual activities undertaken. In the 2002 academic year, about ten third grade junior secondary students joined the activities, until their graduation four years later from the senior secondary level.

### [1] *We want to know more!*

It seems that the students at first joined out of intellectual curiosity, wanting to “know” more about what is happening in the society.

When I asked them, “What do you want

to know about?" their answers were, "nuclear weapons" that they learned of in the social studies subjects, and "North Korea" that they saw on the news. My role as advisor was to give suggestions, such as "Why don't you look into .... under that topic?" or "What is happening to ...?"

Acting on the advice, the students decided on the topics they wanted to know about, and studied about them.

I am a social studies teacher myself, but in the formal class, teaching tends to be a one-sided transmission of knowledge, and I feel I have not been responding sufficiently to the students' demands, "I want to know more about what I learned in the class," or "I want to say something on this issue."

In the Peace and Human Rights Committee, the students can act on their own curiosity, present their views based on what they studied, and receive questions and comments from their peers. The emphasis is on the process, in which they are able to reflect deeper on the issues.

***[2] What is happening in the world now is material for learning too!***

By the time each student had made her presentation at least once, the United States was about to start the Iraq War.

Using the daily news from television and newspapers, we shared the experience of watching the "moment the war began." We stated our opinions for and against the war, based on information from the internet and the newspapers, and formed our own opinions.

When the initial attack was considered completed, we found out that there were many facts that had not been reported during the war, and realized that the news on the television and the newspapers did not cover everything.

The students seemed extremely interested on this topic, and some continued to study later on such topics as "the United States' history of war," and "victims of conflict after the Iraq War."

They were able to realize that war was not something in the distant past, but was happening in this world today, and that it was important to have the imagination to be able to "see the human beings" on the other end of the missile and other attacks.

***[3] Seeing with your own eyes, hearing with your own ears***

Videos on "north-south" issues were shown during these activities. This led to one of the students wanting to "see for herself," and participating in a short-term study tour to visit our sister-school in the Philippines.

The student who went there did a presentation on "what I saw and heard in the Philippines," about the reality of the gap between the wealthy and the poor that she saw, the traces of colonialism, the high awareness of the students at the local school, etc.

She followed up on her interest after her presentation, to examine "what can I do about it?" and chose the activities of UNICEF as her next topic. She started to consider the global subject of the "north-south" issue from the perspective of what she could do, about the situation of children around the world and how the donations were being used.

***[4] Students can learn from making and listening to presentations***

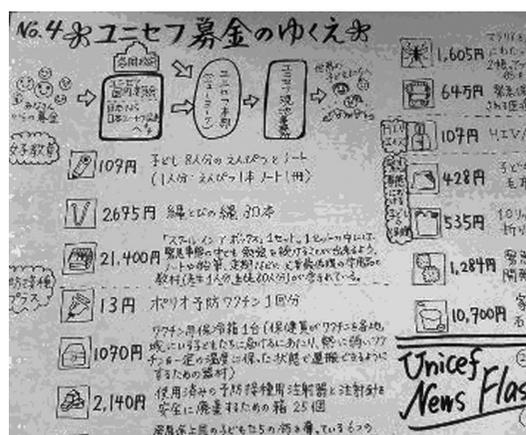
In the four years that these students took part in our activities, they continued to decide on the topics by themselves; they studied, prepared and made presentations about them on their own.

I believe that by the presentations, the other members who were listening were also able to gain broad knowledge. The student doing the presentation would, of course, have been able to develop her thoughts further, hearing other students' views, and seeing the issue from perspectives she had not thought of.

## Students presentations

The following is the list of topics that the students selected, studied and presented by themselves during the four years of the activities.

3rd grade Junior High School 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• animals for experiments</li> <li>• UN World Summit for Children</li> <li>• global nuclear arms</li> <li>• use of the school infirmary as place of refuge</li> <li>• situation in North Korea</li> </ul>
1st grade Senior High School 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• history of Korean peninsula</li> <li>• Diary of Anne Frank and the Holocaust</li> <li>• Berlin Wall</li> <li>• World War II</li> <li>• situation in Afghanistan</li> <li>• war in Okinawa</li> </ul>
2nd grade Senior High School 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Philippine report</li> <li>• American modern history</li> <li>• Peace Village International in Germany</li> <li>• Chechen issue</li> <li>• global warming</li> <li>• Korean war</li> </ul>
3rd grade Senior High School 2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• situation of children in the world and UNICEF</li> <li>• Palestine issue</li> <li>• history textbook issue</li> <li>• history of Buraku issue</li> <li>• juvenile law</li> </ul>



Presentation paper:

What happens to UNICEF donations?

The topics included many current issues, which were making the headlines in the news (North Korean and Chechen issues) as well as issues that the students had always wanted to know more in detail (nuclear arms in the world, World War II).

But some students took up less obvious issues to study, such as the current situation in Afghanistan, which had been rarely reported in the news since the war following the 9/11 attack, and the Peace Village International in Germany, that even the teachers did not know much about.

## Reports of the past four years

In writing this article, I reread all the presentation reports written by the students.

At the beginning, many of the reports and presentations focused mostly on explaining the terms and words, as if they had consulted only dictionaries. Gradually, their studies gained broader scope as they looked into the historical backgrounds and current situations. By the time they were in the 4th year, their reports were usually four to five pages long.

We had a rule that at the end of the presentation report, they had to write their own views. Some of the students were writing page-long views, and their ability to gain knowledge, to find out about issues, and to formulate opinions based on the knowledge gained, had grown steadily.

Above all, I think they have developed a broader sense of vision, taking in the history and culture in the background, when looking at an incident.

## Thoughts from the advisor

From my experience as advisor for the Committee, I have come to hold the following four views.

***[1] Is it true that “students today are less interested in what is happening in the society?”***

I would answer yes to this question at the time when I was only teaching in the classrooms. After seeing the topics and how the students studied about them, however, and watching their concern and the sharing of views during the activities, I began to think that it was not the case, and to wonder that, “perhaps I have been teaching in a way that did not allow them to think.”

***[2] The need for media literacy***

Television, newspapers, internet and other media are indispensable in the world today, in order to find out about issues. I have taken care to have the students develop the ability to see whether what is reported by the mass media is all correct, or if there are anything that is important, but is not reported. I think that having such an ability is desirable for students growing up in the contemporary world.

***[3] The importance of having your own opinion based on knowledge***

I am sure that the objective of these activities is for these children to grow up into adults with solid opinion of their own. For that purpose, the process, in which they gain sound knowledge, the ability to find out on their own, listen to other people’s views and form their own opinions, is important.

Through the work of the Peace and Human Rights Committee, I hope I can send as many “thinking adults” as possible into the society.

***[4] It is the heart that is important***

What is important is the purpose for which the knowledge and the views are used. I expect the students will grow into people who do not think just about themselves, but can see the things around them, the state of other countries, and the society as a whole. If they can do that, it is possible to create the peace and human rights.

These are my thoughts based on my experience.

These are small activities by a small school. But our vision is wide, gazing at the world. “Think Globally Act Locally.” We will continue our activities emphasizing this spirit.