

I looked at the clock. It was two-forty and I'd been waiting for half an hour already. To be completely honest I was a bit nervous, because I didn't even know what I was doing sitting outside the principal's office – I'd just been called down from my Japanese class and told to wait. A lot of people had disappeared from class that day, and I didn't know why, but I could only guess that I was about to do whatever they had done.

*"I could be working on my cultural assignment,"* I thought impatiently, remembering it was due the next day. Then the door opened and my friend walked out. She didn't have time to tell me what the principal wanted to talk to me about, but she didn't look like she had been in trouble, so I took that as a good sign.

Obedying instructions I went inside and sat down, running my fingers along the padded arms of the chair as I looked across the principal's desk to where the principal himself was sitting.

"Good afternoon," he said formally.

"Er, afternoon," I replied nervously.

"You having a good day?"

"Er, yes."

"And how's school going?"

"All right I guess." By now I was wondering what he was leading up to, and...

"And how are you going at Japanese?"

"What? Oh, sorry," I mumbled in reply, "Um, good, I suppose."

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Yes, well the reason I wanted to talk to you was because the school is thinking about forming a sister-school relationship with a school in Japan."

"What, like Adelaide's sister-city is Himeji?"

"I suppose it would be a bit like that," the principal answered. "What do you think?"

"I think it's a great idea," I said, trying to be enthusiastic. It's not that I wasn't excited, but I didn't even know what it would mean for my friends and I.

"So you do believe that we should have a sister-school relationship?"

"Yes, of course," I replied quickly, "But what would it involve?"

"That's what I want you to tell me," he instructed.

"Me?" I stammered.

"Yes." The principal paused for a moment and continued. "I would like the decision to be made by the school as a whole; not just the school board, and the students in particular. We would need to persuade the students – including your friends – to see how this sister-school relationship will benefit the school, and show them our ideas concerning the plans for the relationship. I've been talking to some of the other students, and 'we should have exchange trips and home-stays' was the best they could come up with. I was hoping you would have some more thought-given inspiration."

"So you want me to tell you what would be so good about having a sister-school in Japan, and what plans I would have for the relationship?"

"Precisely," and the principal leaned back in his chair, waiting for me to begin.

"Oh, well obviously there's the concept of having cultural exchange trips, with Japanese teachers and students coming to Australia and us likewise going to Japan." The principal was unimpressed, but then I thought of my close friend, who really wanted to go to Japan, but couldn't afford it. "Maybe both the schools can support each other

financially,” I suggested. “We could do fundraising to raise money for Japanese students who want to come to Australia but do not have the money – like a scholarship. Our sister-school could do the same for us, and maybe then we could make the scholarship available to those learning Japanese. This would benefit the school, because it would be an incentive for those thinking about beginning Japanese and an encouragement for others to continue.

“Also, we can share our cultural knowledge with the Japanese exchange students. When doing this we would have to know what we’re talking about and not just make it up, so in teaching them about Australia we would no doubt learn more ourselves.”

The principal nodded in consideration.

“When the Japanese students come to our school and homes their English skills will improve,” I continued, “but it is not just them who will benefit. During their time with us we will improve our own Japanese courtesy and speaking skills and they can give our own parents and siblings a greater appreciation of their language.”

“Their culture is so rich and diverse, and there is so much we can learn from them. Japanese exchange students and teachers can teach us more about the Japanese Arts, such as *origami* or traditional tea ceremonies. Maybe we could set up in our school a special room entirely for these purposes, including *ikebana* and our own *bonsai* plants. With enough interest for it, Japanese Arts could be introduced as an elective at school. I am sure there would be many who would greatly enjoy the experience of *parapara* dancing.”

“Well, it certainly seems like you have many ideas relating to what we can gain from the Japanese students,” the principal commented, “but we must consider that they too will want to learn about Australia. It is not really enough that we share our cultural knowledge with the exchange students.”

“I was thinking about that,” I said in reply. “We can obviously keep in contact with them via e-mail and pen-pals, but that’s not really enough either. By keeping in contact with those who have already taken part in an exchange trip we can find out what they liked about our country; Adelaide in particular. I already have a pen-pal from Tokyo, and her friend has been to Australia. She liked places such as the beach, the zoo, and the central markets. While we are fascinated by Japan’s bullet-trains they are amazed by our trams and o-bahn buses, and find things like roundabouts really special.

“My idea is that within our school we can do fun projects such as make videos for them about these things they find so special, including koalas, and send them to Japan – benefiting Japanese students who can’t come to Australia. It would also be good for us to practise communicating with people who don’t have English as their first language.

“They like our Tim-tams, wholemeal bread, mashed potatoes and chocolate or orange cake, so why not send them recipes for the foods they can make, or create videos showing them how to cook other Australian dishes. One of the things my pen-pal’s friend enjoyed most was Australian television and animation, so maybe we could tape some of our shows for the Japanese students and they could send us some samples of Japanese television.

“In return they can make video-documentaries about their city, their school, and Japanese festivals, such as *Kodomonhi* or *Hina Matsuri*. Learning about their festivals directly from Japan would be much more interesting than simply being informed about

them by our teachers. We would also see how the festivals are affected by the Japanese students' religion or family structure."

I slouched back in the chair with a relieved sigh.

"You've made many valid points there," the principal said, with a nod of approval, "and I'll be bringing those up when presenting this idea to the school." He glanced at his watch. "Is there anything else you'd like to add?"

I thought for a moment – about how much I enjoyed my friendship with my pen-pal from Tokyo. I knew she was still trying to learn more English, and my fluency was far from perfect, but that had never affected or hindered our relationship.

"I think friendship is the most important thing," I said confidently. "Memories are so special and even if we don't keep in contact with all the Japanese students that visit us, or all those we meet when visiting Japan, I know there will always be one that holds a special place in our hearts, and hopefully we will keep in close contact with them. Friends are so special and I can't think of a better way for relationships to be built and grow, even after we leave school."

As I left the principal's office I realized just how much potential there was if a sister-school relationship was formed with a school in Japan. Aside from what I really wanted, I knew that it would be so wonderful if it all developed into more than an idea – I just hoped my friends thought so too.