

Education for Tomorrow

Ms. Junka BEKKERS (the Netherlands)

“In the Netherlands, a school can go bankrupt, even though it is a public organization.” Although this possibility is totally unimaginable from the perspective of most Japanese people, Lita, the female principal of the elementary school that my son attends, affirms that this is the case. She began her career as an elementary school teacher. While working as a teacher, she acquired an interest in school management, leading her to take a course provided by the Schoolleider Primair Onderwijs (SPO), an organization to train elementary school principals. Subsequently, she became the principal of the elementary school where she works today. In those days, at most schools, men served as principals. In the Netherlands, a country where almost no gender barriers exist today, there was a time when people believed that men should work outside the home while women should devote themselves to household chores at home. Today, many more women have become school principals—a managerial position—often with a stronger motivation than their male counterparts. They are more serious about considering what should be done to make their schools even better.

One of the largest differences between schools in Japan and the Netherlands is that in the Netherlands, full authority is given to each school in terms of its actual management policy and budget, even though the school receives an official subsidy from the government. Educational institutions below college level are operated with financial support from the government, supplemented by



Ms. Lita, the female principal of the elementary school
(Basisschool De Regenboog)

donations from guardians (48 euro from each student’s household per year). All responsibilities for financial management lie with the school principal. In other words, each school exists as if it were an individual company. This means that a school can even go bankrupt, if it is run inappropriately. Lita says that this perhaps leads to a difference in a management style between female and male school principals: while men tend to operate their schools in a more businesslike way, women tend to try a wider variety of

more original management methods.

Now, let's look at some points that Lita focuses on from the viewpoint of a school principal as the leader of a school.

Helping Teachers Strike a Balance between Work and Private Lives

At elementary schools in the Netherlands, the number of female teachers is much larger than that of male teachers. This is said to be because many men tend to choose to work for private companies, which are more attractive in terms of income than educational institutions. Since there are many female teachers, it is, of course, necessary to establish an environment where they can receive support for childbearing and child raising. The first thing that Lita does to create such an environment is to compile a list of temporary teachers. This list is shared among the principals of local elementary schools, who also introduce appropriate teachers to each other. Needless to say, all the temporary teachers provided in the list have teaching certificates. For example, if a regular teacher applies for one-day leave to take care of her/his sick child, the school principal selects an appropriate substitute from the list promptly for the day. However, since temporary teachers are sometimes unavailable for personal reasons, it is necessary to secure many temporary teachers on the list. If the school principal cannot find a temporary teacher as a substitute, she/he contacts the faculty of education at a university and secures an appropriate individual (such as a student who is due to graduate from the faculty very shortly). In addition, if a teacher wishes to take parenting leave after the birth of her/his baby, the school principal must accept the application, whether the teacher is a woman or a man. There are cases where a male teacher who usually works five days a week begins to work four days a week for one year after his wife has a baby.

Relationship with Each Teacher and Teamwork

It seems that school principals try to establish an environment in which they can easily communicate with teachers. For example, they secure opportunities on a regular basis to share experiences and opinions with teachers. In addition, they sometimes visit each classroom to see the lesson being held there, evaluate the teacher on how she/he gave the lesson, and make a performance record for each teacher. Unlike schools in Japan, at Lita's school, there is no teachers' room, which is often a place with a stiff and formal atmosphere. Instead, at a large table set in a lounge, teachers interact with each other openly, regardless of the grades of the students they teach. All the teachers emphasize instructing students based on shared educational targets. They cooperate with each

other in organizing classes to encourage students to experience and consider things on their own, rather than forcing them simply to memorize what they have studied.

Relationships with Guardians

As I mentioned earlier, donations from guardians are an essential financial resource for school operation. In this regard, school principals emphasize relationships with guardians. To maintain good relationships with them, for example, school principals hold regular meetings with them, and try to communicate with them when they come to pick up their children. Actually, I often talk to Lita in the school hallway, and I sometimes receive e-mails sent to all guardians regarding practical issues, such as school events and school improvements, in addition to notices from my child's homeroom teacher. Moreover, in the Netherlands, not only skipping a grade but also repeating the same grade is quite common, even at elementary school. Unlike in Japan, people do not have a negative image of this practice, and it is used as a means to help students study effectively at their own speed according to their capacity for learning. This is why it is said that education in the Netherlands has a customized style. Since each child is naturally different, I personally feel that this is a very attractive system. While gaining understanding from guardians, school principals carefully check how students do at school and how they are able to study. They emphasize helping students experience the joy of learning, as well as motivating them.

Thus, Lita is proud to demonstrate leadership at school, and is pleased and honored in her engagement in educating children, who will go on to play important roles in the next generation.