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After spending three weeks with Japanese high school students, I was impressed by how they strengthened the quality of their relationships. I was granted the opportunity to visit multiple high schools in Osaka, Japan, where I met almost 50 students whom I became close friends with. During this trip, I was able to observe how Japanese students interact with each other as well as make friends with them. It was impressive to see how Japanese high school students focus on connecting with others through teamwork, taking initiative, and spending time with each other outside of school, which is how I was able to make so many friends while in Japan!

The first thing I noticed was that the Japanese students didn't hesitate to begin a connection between us. Everyone we met was welcoming and eager to get to know us. The schools we visited had kindly put together welcome committees, and we had student guides who were happy to show us around. Even despite the language barrier. For example, during our first week in Japan, we met Kurumi and Yuma, who had visited San Francisco as part of the same program. They took the initiative to invite us to go shopping, where we were able to get to know each other more and, by the end of the trip, became close friends. Many adults had noted that the students were going to be a bit shy, but I was surprised that wasn't the case at all! Right off the bat, they had lists of fun activities for us to do together and were excited to share aspects of their culture with us. As we spent more time together, I also became more excited to share my background. This curiosity about each other made me realize how much they value friendship. This was also evident by how after school, groups of students would meet up and go to local

parks, malls, and restaurants, which we were able to do as well. Japanese students sustain their friendships by hanging out with large groups of friends, whereas American students mainly use social media to communicate with each other and hang out with one or two close friends. Japanese students' eagerness to meet new people and the prioritization of their in-person relationships are what make their connections so strong.

Another major factor in student relationships in Japan is how their school system is set up. While in the U.S. we change classrooms and have classes with different students and teachers, in Japan the students stay in their homeroom class and different teachers come in to teach. This means they're with the same students for much longer and can form stronger bonds with their classmates. Our student guide, Kurumi, for example, was friends with her entire class! They'd work together during the school day, and then after school, they'd hang out and get snacks as a reward. This was pretty common in most classes we visited. The teamwork in class translated to stronger connections outside of class. School-structured activities and clubs are another way students connect. While in America we also have school clubs, Japanese students have the opportunity to participate in cultural clubs as well. While visiting Abeno High School, the welcoming committee/School Hospitality Club gave us a tour of all the different clubs going on after school. The Tea Club hosted us for a traditional tea ceremony. It was impressive how it was entirely student-run, and the members all seemed very friendly and familiar with each other. They demonstrated how school clubs are an important part of sharing Japanese culture as well as having fun with friends after school. The structure of the Japanese school system allows students to form closer connections while educating, which results in stronger teamwork as well as friendships that hold up outside of the classroom.

Surprisingly, social media plays a less significant role in the lives of Japanese students than it does in America. In the U.S., most students have at least two messaging platforms, mainly text and Snapchat, as well as two “posting” apps, i.e., Instagram and TikTok. Whereas most Japanese students use Line to message and Instagram to post. Upon meeting students in Japan, we exchanged Line contacts and Instagram @s; however, I noticed that they use these platforms very differently than the way American students do. Most of my friends from Japan post their stories and pictures of them hanging out with friends or what they’re doing at that moment. My friends from the U.S. rarely post their stories and mainly do monthly “photo dumps” (a post of a collection of pictures from that month). Japanese students also text a lot less. While I had some short conversations with my friends about plans for the following day, the really meaningful conversations were over bowls of katsudon in the cafeteria or walking to the next tourist destination. This is another example of how Japanese students form deeper bonds by spending time with each other in person and, by doing so, create more memories that then get posted to Instagram. Japanese youth’s lack of usage of social media is admirable, and I’m glad I was able to connect with them “IRL” instead of through a screen.

Even though I only spent three weeks with them, I feel like I made some true friends through all the activities and time we spent together. The Higashi and Abeno High School students not only became close friends but also taught me to take initiative and seek out the people I want to befriend. Their welcoming spirit and eagerness to spend time with friends both in and outside of school are what makes their relationships so strong. From this experience, I feel that both the Osaka and SF students formed a connection that strengthened the bond between our two cities.