

**Daina Plitkins-Denning
(1997~2000)**

In March 1997, just having finished an MA in TEFL/TESL and excited about teaching again, I joined the staff of LIOJ. The next three stimulating years as a member of that school gave me lots of juicy and things to sink my teeth into: intensive programs, curriculum development, teacher training. Some things I loved, others were "work," but all I grew from.

During my first year, I came to grips with having to "change hats" constantly and doing some new things like dancing with high school students and teaching kindergartners. I'll never forget the class of first & second graders who were so easily distracted that I even tried to take the tables and chairs away! The following year, I took the plunge into managing by becoming the program developer, a post which further challenged me and gave me a chance to pursue some things, such as curriculum development, more in depth than I could have as a teacher.

The aspects of work and life at LIOJ (and it was a lifestyle for us) that most impressed me had to do with my colleagues. There was team spirit because we were encouraged to work together to share ideas and solve problems, as well as to plan the numerous special programs which we shared responsibility for. Working with the enthusiastic teachers who were with me at LIOJ was a privilege and a learning experience. They were always willing to discuss and try new ideas, which led to more ideas, and so on. The school worked to foster exchange and experimentation—and helped us to constantly grow. I'll admit that as a manager in such a busy school, it wasn't always easy. During my time as PD, I found out a lot about motivation and communication.

In the two years since I left Japan, I have been volunteering as a teacher in Ethiopia with VSO (Volunteer Service Overseas), and this experience, too, has been rewarding and challenging. The skills gained while working at LIOJ have served me well.

First, things are not as organized as in Japan, so my ability to plan and use time effectively is valuable to me and as a part of the on-going "skill sharing" that's part of the VSO philosophy. Unfortunately, the skill sharing which was a characteristic of LIOJ is not promoted by the system here (where most teachers wish they were NOT teachers), so I haven't been able to exchange very much with colleagues, and I really miss that aspect of LIOJ life. The students here tell me that they learn from observing my professional attitude, so I hope I have affected at least one young person. I've definitely learned from them!

Secondly, "wearing different (and sometimes uncomfortable) hats" during my three years at LIOJ gave me confidence in myself which has been invaluable. In Ethiopia, I was thrown into a newly created teaching program with hardly any guidelines—just student expectations and a government textbook. I needed faith in my own judgment, as well as confidence to handle groups of 65 high school students single-handedly.

Lastly, the experience that I got with different teaching methods, materials, and curriculum design while at LIOJ has aided me in making decisions and contributing to the education programs I have been involved with. Resources are scarce, which means teachers need more of their own resources to draw on. The Ministry of

Education is moving towards more communicative teaching methods, and my contribution to the project—and the debate which accompanies it—has been strengthened by all of the professional development I did with the excellent teachers at LIOJ.