

Upper Secondary School is So Interesting!

– Upper Secondary School Entrance Exam and School Life for Students with
Disabilities –

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1. From the Words Expressed by a Mother

In 2001 Osaka Prefecture started the experimental “Model school system for receiving students with intellectual disabilities into upper secondary school”. At that time at a small gathering in Neyagawa City that included person with disabilities, one mother that knew the system expressed “I thought that the only option for this child was a special school, but it is not just one, is it?” A small light lit up in the heart of this mother, but it held a great hope.

Why should students with disabilities that have learned and played together with their friends without disability at elementary and lower secondary school have only the one option of a special school (currently “school for special needs education”) after graduation from lower secondary school? The other students can select various types of upper secondary school, such as the general course, industrial art course, commercial course, art course, part-time course, or a private school, and are given the opportunity to take entrance exams several times. However students with disabilities have none of this.

One of the elements of freedom that is also an important yardstick of freedom is how much choice is available, so this situation robs persons with disabilities of freedom.

By reference to the “UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”, the “Basic Law for Persons with Disabilities”, and the “Act on the Elimination of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities”, the right to choose one’s own pathway is being robbed on the grounds of disability, and “reasonable accommodation” is not being provided to eliminate the social barrier that prevents them from learning with other students. This is clearly “discrimination”.

Prompted by the quietly expressed words of this mother, in 2002 the “Neyagawa Liaison Group for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities to go to Regular Upper Secondary Schools” was established for creating a “Social Independence Course” (described in the next section) in the upper secondary schools within the city. This group undertook exchange of information on upper secondary school entrance exams, the situation in elementary and lower secondary schools, exchange regarding the life in the community, signature campaigns, and discussion with the Osaka Prefecture Board of Education.

As the clamor to enable students with disabilities go to upper secondary school spread, participation spread to include pupils and students with disabilities and their parents and guardians, caregivers, teachers from elementary, lower and upper secondary schools, and special needs schools from all cities in the Kitakawachi area, so in 2006 the name was changed to the “Kitakawachi Liaison Group”, which is the name in use today.

2. Enabling Anyone that Wants to go to Upper Secondary School

At present within Osaka Prefecture there are 11 upper secondary schools with an “Social Independence Course” that have produced a framework of special entry for students with intellectual disability (of which 2 schools are Osaka City upper secondary schools), and there are 8 upper secondary schools with “Co-living Promotion Class” whose students with intellectual disability can go to a regular upper secondary school while being enrolled at an upper secondary department of a special needs school. The entry limit is 3 students, so at times the number of applicants for the Social Independence Course exceeds 3 times the number of places, compared with for example the average ratio of 1.15 at regular upper secondary schools.

The other upper secondary schools do not refuse to take entrance exams, but the condition is that the entrance exam must be passed. Therefore various matters must be considered in terms of the entrance exam, through discussion and consultation with the lower secondary schools, the upper secondary schools whose entrance exam is being taken, and the Board of Education. Such matters include taking exams in separate rooms, enlargement of the question sheet, providing answer columns on the question sheet, taking exams by being read to and dictation, extension of time, ... etc.

However, in the current exam system that determines pass or fail by screening based on points scored, it is judged that reasonable accommodation is not provided for persons with intellectual disabilities whose obstacle is that they cannot obtain a score. In this age the national average of entry to upper secondary school exceeds 98%. It is necessary to realize a “free admission of upper secondary school system” that enables anyone to enroll that wants to learn at upper secondary school and spend school life with their friends.

3. Upper Secondary School is So Interesting!

Speaking from experience, virtually all persons with disabilities that go to a regular upper secondary school are unanimous in this. Life at the school is interesting. Moreover they do not say this half-heartedly. Each expresses it in their own way that “upper secondary school is so interesting!”, by the shaking of their wheelchair,

shrieking almost rising out of their seats, expressing feelings that no words can convey with wriggling motion of their whole body, their wide eyes sparkling, conveying their intention with a unique large blinking motion, etc.

As a former elementary school teacher I can say that definitely it was not my intention to be sloppy in my work. On the contrary I made every effort to work with them, by having discussions how to organize classes and events with ingenuity that all the students can work on together. Therefore I think it would be nice if they also added “elementary school and lower secondary school were also good”, as I feel a little jealous about this!

4. It is Interesting with Friends

So why is upper secondary school life so interesting? Ren, who is living with cerebral palsy, is a second year student in the bloom of youth at a regular upper secondary school. In the morning Ren’s mother brings him to school by car, but on the occasion as the car approached the school he said “Please drop me off here. I do not want my friends to see you, it’s embarrassing.” Then he alighted from the car on the street before the school, and entered the school gates with his wheelchair being pushed by friends who were passing by.

Friends assist him moving within the school building, with lesson preparation and note taking, at lunch hour they assist him with lunch, so he is always with friends. Friends even assist him with early lunch.

Returning from a party after the school festival or from a live event with friends, when they noisily gathered by the river bank, patrol cars came twice, the first time they evaded, but the second time they were taken into protective custody. At this time the friends said to the police officer “Ren’s mother is coming to pick him up, so only let him go”, and so on, there is no end to the heroic sagas of upper secondary school life.

Having reached the age of 15 he is probably feeling a gradual separation from the adults that have looked after him all the time to date, including his parents, teachers, and caregivers. There are no young people to tell him “love stories”, and to talk to about the problems of life when adults are near him. He is gradually starting to feel about society, living, and independence.

I have met many parents and guardians as well as students who say “It has been really easy since entering upper secondary school”. Their expression is calm and happy as if they had put away their concerns, such as keeping up or encountering bullying, etc., and revealed their heart.

5. Special Facilities, Equipment, and Specialist Knowledge only Separate Children with Disabilities

Yutaro's mother sighed "what on earth were all those problems during lower secondary school". Wanting a parent to accompany him, not being able to suck phlegm in the classroom, wanting to go on the school trip with all the others on a bus with a lift but ultimately was not allowed... Each problem was discussed with the school, and she recalled the experience when the Board of Education became involved and harsh words were spoken. But after he entered upper secondary school that all the requests were accepted as common sense. "I feel as if I am dreaming" she expressed.

At upper secondary school there are no classrooms for special needs education. There is no support assistant, there are no special facilities or equipment, and there are no specialists. It is even being said that it is going well because there is no special equipment, but why is that?

An obligation and responsibility to look after Yutaro as an enrolled student emerged on the upper secondary school side after he enrolled. Suddenly the teachers were uneasy. They did not understand Yutaro. They did not know what to do. So what did the teachers do? They asked his mother, the parent that most understands Yutaro. They said "tell us about Yutaro". That day was the day of announcement of successful applicants, so the mother was surprised and delighted. Isn't this strange, to ask such a natural thing? "This was the first time that I was asked by the teachers", she said, which is still stranger.

At the elementary and lower secondary schools she was asked about Yutaro's disability, and it was discussed, but it did not seem that what was discussed was Yutaro, the child, the person.

The pattern adopted was the school asked doctors, university specialists, special needs school advisers about Yutaro's disability, and were taught specialist knowledge and ways of dealing with his disability, then viewing Yutaro in the light of this specialist knowledge, the school talked with his parent.

The more the school or the teacher accumulates experience of special needs education, the more they tend to view the child through the filter of specialist knowledge and methods when engaging with the parents and guardians. I believe that at present a major malady is engulfing education and schools, in that not only children with disabilities, but each child is not being seen and engaged with as a total personality, and it is not possible to only engage with them through educational specialist, knowledge, and methods.

At Yutaro's school, the teachers speak frankly with the parents and guardians,

question them, and consult them, and then undertake the teaching methods, methods of moving, how to spend the rest time, and how to be involved in the clubs. It seems that this information was shared among all the teachers.

The students who naturally saw the attitudes of the teachers spoke with Yutaro, assisted him, and naturally involved him in the classwork. Although there are no special classes or special facilities and equipment, a very inclusive school has been realized through the ordinary interaction of the teachers and the students.