

"Learning Together and Living Together" Education Creates a Cohesive Society

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Encounter with the concept of "cohesiveness"

It was nearly 40 years ago that I visited Okinawa (the southernmost and westernmost prefecture in Japan) for the first.

A person from the area guided me to a *gama* (or "natural cave") while I listened to their story about the Battle of Okinawa (the last major battle of World War II, and one of the bloodiest). At that time, there were belongings and remains of the deceased. He spoke to me with awe, saying things like, "this could be a spine," and "this could be a child's bone." I started to shiver, became speechless, and felt as if the surrounding scenery has disappeared and become blank. This was my first experience to be entrusted with something special, something I can never betray as a human being. This was my intuition. I call it a "soul baton relay."

I have frequently visited Okinawa. When talking to older people, I realized that the people in Okinawa lived together with the souls of the deceased and that the more souls they share, the kinder and stronger they become. This was how I started to think about "cohesiveness." Human beings pursue cohesiveness for survival. They live together with souls. They cannot live without cohesiveness.

At schools, children with and without disabilities, children of different races, ethnicities, and nationalities, children who are puzzled at their own gender identities, children who come from different family backgrounds, children with different personalities, and children who attain or do not attain good scores at school live together and learn from each other. Such children are the treasures of schools. Education—learning together and living together while accepting diversity—takes place at educational sites throughout the world in the form of inclusive education. The Government of Japan has ratified the United Nations Convention, modified its related laws, and advocated the "promotion" of inclusive education.

The power of learning that cannot be measured through scores only

I heard a child say, "My brother will start first grade now, and he is disabled," and I visited his house. The child Kaoru sleeps in a crib. He cannot speak, see, or hear. Liquid food mixed with medicine enters his body through a catheter, and he is unable to move by himself. While his mother explained the situation to me, his father said stridently and decisively, "I will keep Kaoru in the house. If I am found guilty because Kaoru would not go to school despite of compulsory education, I wouldn't care even if I ended up in prison."

I cannot imagine how Kaoru spends his time at school. I simply thought, "It must be impossible." Then, his mother passed Kaoru into my arms, saying, "Would you like to hold Kaoru?" I felt the warmth of Kaoru's body. At that moment, the feeling that "it's OK; I can get along with him" ran like a current throughout my entire body. After that, I wanted to see Kaoru and repeated my visit to his home. His parents started to use the words "school" and "friends." On the other hand, the school spoke of his situation negatively, saying, "his life cannot be secured," "there are no experts," "no facilities or

equipment are available," "he cannot understand classes," and "we feel sorry for him because he would be treated as a guest."

During the third semester, we asked Kaoru and his parents to attend a staff meeting. After having answered rapid-fire questions, the father firmly but quietly spoke up. "How can teachers say that Kaoru is not learning when he is being held in his mother's arms in a music classroom while children sing?" There was nobody who made a counterargument. During the new semester, a particularly unique classroom with tatami mats and a bed appeared. Children surrounded the bed while they spoke to Kaoru. They played with clay. The children taught Kaoru how to count by gently folding Kaoru's fingers, saying, "2 plus 3, this way." I was deeply impressed to see that the power of learning cannot be measured through scores.

The right to learn together and live together

I became a classroom teacher of the first grade for the first time. Imagining children with their eyes aglow, I headed towards the classroom, but my words did not reach their ears. There was only the hustle and bustle of movement. We could not even hear each other's voices. When I chased after children who jumped, fights broke out in the classroom. My voice became hoarse and my body was completely exhausted.

Moreover (what a terrible thought came up!), there was Shimpei living with cerebral palsy in the class. I was not confident and my heart was about to be broken. However, fortunately (what a sly way of saying it!), I expected Shimpei to spend his time in a resource room during all but three subjects. I might be able to overcome this difficulty. Nevertheless, unfortunately (how selfish of me!), his mother emphasized her opinion that since he lived in the school district, she wanted him to study with the other children. Discussions between the parents and the school continued, and there were many strong comments. Shimpei stayed in the class at all times from the second semester, from when he was commuting to school until he left.

Atmosphere of the class changed. children were involved with school lunch and toilet assistance all wanted to be there first to help him. After school, children got together at Shimpei's house every day and went to the park with a buggy. Discussions took place over Shimpei, Shimpei made statements so as not to be outdone by them, and the children around Shimpei listened carefully to what he was saying because they wanted to hear everything he said. He started to write on his own by moving his tightly held pencil.

Shimpei made statements by standing up and wriggling his body in an attempt to make his friends understand him. He moved his pencil because he wanted his friends to read what he wrote. "Learning together" does not happen because mouths and hand are trained. Rather, it happens when children live together with each other.

At time, his parents made assertions about "movement." Currently, now that the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been rectified, children are entitled to "such rights." Therefore, the duty and responsibility to respect and realize the wishes of children and their parents are imposed on schools.

Children with disabilities took an upper secondary school entrance exam

Yutaro lives with the help of a ventilator on a bed-like stretcher, using a 24-hour-a-day home-visit nursing care service. He can only move his pupils and eyelids. When he closes his eyes, it means "yes," and when he does not, it means "no." This is his only means of communication thus far. He came from a center of therapeutic care and education for infants and toddlers to a special-needs school, after which he entered his community's lower secondary school. However, he did not have smooth sailing at the lower secondary school. Rather, teachers, staff, and Yutaro changed considerably while they experienced problems taking place in succession.

When Yutaro entered the third grade, he clearly asserted that he wanted to go to an upper secondary school. There was no school that rejected his entrance exam—but he is simply required to obtain the passing mark. Discussion took place until the day prior to the day of examination with the Board of Education, which was quite particular about being fair to other applicants and the pursuit of reasonable consideration. As a result, the lower secondary school teacher read quizzes and then read the replies based on the number of blinks, which were recorded by an upper secondary school teacher in a separate room from other applicants. It was determined that a nurse would be on standby in the room.

Nevertheless, Yutaro could not obtain scores. This was because of the nature of his disability. What do the total scores in the Japanese language, mathematics, science, social studies, and English language represent? They have no meaning. They are as meaningless as the total of standing and sitting height, weight, chest measurements, and eyesight. This is the kind of thing that is used as justification for "exclusion."

Yutaro attempted a secondary exam at a part-time upper secondary school that did not satisfy the quota. He stood up alone and stepped forward in front of interviewers. He was asked, "Is your name ○○?" He must have slowly blinked. Moreover, he must have exaggeratedly and clearly blinked at the question "Would you like to study at an upper secondary school?"

He became a successful applicant. In Osaka, the promise that "there will be no rejections as long as there are enough spaces" is kept. Currently, there are about 3,000 students with disabilities learning at prefectural upper secondary schools. The quantity of students advancing to upper secondary schools currently exceeds 98% in Japan. Therefore, there is no reason to reject persons who desire to learn upper secondary schools.

Do students follow school standards? Or does the school change for them?

The mother of Kan, who goes to the Osaka Prefectural technical upper secondary school, asked me if I would attend a social gathering. I was rather tense because I had to sit in front of the vice principal, the special need education coordinator, the head teacher of a grade, and the classroom teacher, who lined up. While pointing out his records, the classroom teacher said, "It is difficult," and "the standard score of 40 cannot be reached for any subject—I do everything, such as after-school tutoring sessions and providing handouts." After this comment, the vice-principal gave his opinion: "I would like to hear from Kan about whether or not he was happy about having chosen this upper secondary school." They insinuated that there should be a transfer or expulsion from the school, as if to say that such measures would be for Kan's sake.

Kan adored the upper secondary school and had made friends. He was friendly and cheerful, and he was popular among teachers. However, before an exam comes up, his expression at home became angry, and he took his frustration out on his parents, throwing things at them in some cases. Kan had not been able to reach or exceeded the standard score of 40 because of intellectual disability. The school undertook the utmost endeavors to help him reach a score of 40. However, he was not able to improve his grades. "Nothing can be done," his mother was told.

His mother quietly but clearly said, "The only thing you teachers say is for Kan to conform to the school standards. However, can't the school standards be changed for Kan? Isn't it reasonable accommodation?" The school consulted with the Board of Education and created a flexible system for comprehensive evaluation of attendance, notebooks for classes, submission of Kan's own assignments, and so forth. Kan advanced to the third year and was able to graduate safely and soundly from the school.

Teachers at upper secondary schools do not have relevant experience. Rather than rejecting students because of this lack of experience, they should try to gain it. The Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities and domestic laws propose inclusive education and support teachers in such endeavors.

Change direction clearly from separation to cohesiveness

We have to clearly change the direction from separation to cohesiveness. This idea came up vividly when we had no choice but to think about life, death, and survival due to the COVID-19 pandemic on a daily basis. Human beings are the most vulnerable of all animals and cannot live alone. Therefore, human beings have survived through cohesiveness and collaboration. I thought afresh that politics, economy, culture, and education must be designed with the aim of "living together."

Japanese schools respect diversity, accept differences, and do not tolerate discrimination. On the other hand, education that separates children with disabilities is conducted without particular concern, as if it were normal. Some say that inclusive education is an ideal to be aimed at. In the hope of a utopia that is a classroom in which friends are waiting, children with disabilities are required to polish deficient social skills and communication abilities themselves in separate locations and train their physical functions. It is said that it would be acceptable to allow such children in only if they "correct" or "improve" their aforementioned matters. Why are only children with disabilities required to be changed? What should be changed is the classroom and the school side.

When children with various backgrounds are together, problems will occur. Because problems occur, learning will be generated. Children conduct trial and error for different types of problems that arise, solve them, and learn from each other. Under such circumstances, classrooms, teachers, classes, and schools will change. Inclusive education cannot commence unless children with various backgrounds are together.