

Overcoming Differences

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I see students get on the school bus and sit away from me. I walk down the corridor and see students making slanted eyes at me. I walk into the cafeteria and hear someone say I smell like sushi.

When I was 10 years old, I lived in Italy. There were a few students who always treated me badly, and eventually I started to believe that the Italian students were better than me. But I was too young to fully understand that they were discriminating against me.

My grandfather also lived abroad but his experience was different from mine.

4 months ago, I got a letter from my grandfather. It was about his experience in Tianjin as a child. He said living there was like living in 2 worlds. One world was a world with beautiful buildings and touching scenes of grassland. The other was a world with poverty, crime and starvation. While he stayed in the foreign settlement, he had fun playing and studying. However, he held a superior attitude to the Chinese people living outside the foreign settlement.

My grandfather and I have both lived in a foreign country during childhood. But we had very different experiences. I didn't look down on Italians. So why did my grandfather look down on Chinese? Chinese and Japanese have similar appearances. Based on my experiences, I thought that discrimination would occur only between people with different appearances. But that is not true. Prejudice is caused by the fear of cultural differences. During the war, he was not taught to appreciate Chinese culture and couldn't dispel the prejudice he was raised with.

The more cultural differences we have, the more difficulties we have in understanding each other. I understood about discrimination because I was discriminated against by the Italian students. But we should not have to understand discrimination by experiencing it ourselves. Instead we should learn to understand and appreciate other cultures.

My grandfather and I were in different situations, but maybe if our situations were reversed, I would have been the one discriminating against others. In Italy, my friends were not educated about Japanese culture and in Tianjin, my grandfather was not taught to appreciate Chinese culture. So, they held prejudice unconsciously.

I am from Hamamatsu, the city with the largest population of Brazilians in Shizuoka Prefecture, and of course, I have Brazilian friends. When I was a junior high school student, I often saw a Brazilian girl sitting alone. I couldn't help but think that she was struggling to overcome the cultural differences between Japan and Brazil. Since I had nearly the same experience as her, I couldn't just leave her to suffer alone. I wanted to

talk with her, but I didn't know what to talk about. From my experiences in Italy, I knew that I might hurt her by unconsciously saying something bad because I didn't know about her culture. However, in school, there was no opportunity to learn. So, I took action and applied to an organization to take part in Brazilian events. After learning about Brazilian culture, I talked to her and we became close. Now she goes to a different school than me, but I still talk to her and we are still good friends.

Maybe we can never eliminate prejudice, but we must do our best to reduce it. I think having courage to take action and learn about other cultures is the most important thing we can do to reduce prejudice. If there is no place to be educated, have courage to take initiative.

As Mr. Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."