

Classrooms as Gateways to Peace

The boy's pencil trembled above the Kumon worksheet, its tip hovering like a raindrop on the verge of falling. The room echoed with the soft scratching of graphite and the occasional giggles, but he sat stiffly.

The boy had only recently moved from China. During each lesson, he nodded along dutifully; yet, his eyes remained clouded by the fear that his peers would notice he was behind. I waited until the others were busy, then crouched beside him. "Would it help if I repeated that part?" I asked.

His eyes flickered towards me, and he gave me a slight nod - almost shy. His fingers, clenched white around the pencil, seemed to relax. I could see he let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

I knew that breath, too.

When I first moved from Japan to the United States, I had almost no knowledge of English. Although I was excited for the opportunities that lay ahead, I was quickly silenced by the language gap. In class, I copied what I didn't understand, laughed when others laughed. During discussions, my eyes took the heavy role of avoiding eye contact with my teachers and peers. In my mind, I was adamant not to look lost.

Then, I was placed in ESL. There, words came much more slowly: not just from me, but from the teachers as well. They utilized gestures, drawings, and even pauses to help me think on my own. In that room, I began to breathe.

Because of that experience, I began to notice the quiet things at Kumon: the girl who blinked too long at simple questions, the boy who kept on erasing the same line over and over. These are not academic issues but rather signals of help.

In Japanese society today, more and more children are entering classrooms from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As communities respond, systems of support are beginning to form. Yet, there are still regional gaps in accessibility as well as quality; Japan is not yet used to fostering foreign adults such as technical trainees, much less

immigrant children. It is an indicator that our nation is in its phase of growth concerning international understanding and peace.

My vision of a peaceful world is not grand. It is a classroom where a child can say “I don’t understand” and feel no shame. A learning space where silence is met not with impatience, but with curiosity. If we foster an environment where children can interact with multiple cultures from a young age, we invite a new generation of future leaders that can respect other cultures.

In the future, I would like to utilize my experience of living in two different cultures, and work as a consultant to realize this ideal. Through learning international relations in college, I hope to create a language support system that honors cultural identity while easing the transition into Japanese society.

After all, peace often begins with something as small as a breath—finally let go.