Fighting Against Racism/Bullying and Promoting Diversity in Schools and Communities in Japan

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I went to her school and talked to the principal, vice-principal and all the teachers about the importance of teaching children to respect individuality and accept others who look different as equals, but they did not take me seriously. About two weeks after school started, she came back home from school very sad, telling us that one of her classmates told her to change her natural brown skin into "normal" (hadairo—ochre) color. I called the teacher and the principal right away to urge them to deal honestly and democratically with the matter, calling us for a face-to-face meeting with the child and her parents, but the Principal refused. The parents did not take the matter seriously either; when my wife talked to the child's mother on the phone, she laughed about the matter as if it wasn't a serious problem. Finally, I went to talk to the School Board officials to ask them to do something about the problem. Again, I was disappointed. They evidently do not think racism is a serious problem in Japan and do not want to act.

My children have darker skin than the other Japanese children, and many people openly make cruel and racist comments about them: *kitanai* (dirty), *makkuro* (black and dirty), *baikin* (microbe), *unchi* (pooh), *kimochiwarui* (disgusting), *kurokoge* (blackburn), etc. When I go out with them,

many parents also point at us as *gaijin* (foreigners). Those people are wrong because my children are not foreigners in Japan; they are born here and are Japanese citizens just like the other Japanese children. And above all, they love Japan and the traditional Japanese culture.

I think racism is a very serious disease that Japan needs to cure. Racial discrimination in society, in public and private institutions, in senior and junior secondary schools, in primary schools, and even in kindergartens, is evidence that much needs to be done before Japan can experience multiethnic harmony. Education will certainly play an important role in curing the disease of racism. Racism here is based on the idea that the Japanese belong to a "unique ethnic group" that is totally different from all the other ethnic groups in the world. The education system must make a considerable effort to denounce this myth. To do this, schools must familiarize students with the reality of the "singleness of the human family," and explain that all of the people in the world belong to the same human race. Because of the importance of the problem, this view should be introduced into the curriculum from kindergarten through to the 12th grade, and reflected in every course a child takes during the twelve years of schooling. This approach would help to prevent racism. Imagine all the students in Japan learning that Africans, Europeans, Americans, Asians and Australians—all races—are all related. They would be fortified against the poison of prejudice that they are exposed to in their homes and in society.

We must teach our children that all human beings come from the same ancestral stock. Every person on our planet belongs to the same species. This unity, however, does not mean uniformity, but implies a celebration of diversity, because once the reality of unity is understood, diversity becomes an asset rather than an obstacle. Imagine what life would be like if all the people in the world looked alike, thought, spoke, and felt the same way, if all flowers were the same color, if all foods tasted alike. Life would simply be monotonous. We should all understand that "variety is the spice of life" and cherish differences because they are extremely important.

Multiculturalism and ethnic diversity have become important issues in many countries around the world in recent years, and the Japanese government too must consider them seriously and provide helpful programs for developing the skills citizens need if they are to contribute to, and survive in, an ever-changing and diverse society. Diversity will be utilized to reinforce Japan's stature among the nations of the world. It will teach the Japanese to

accept and respect diverse views, welcome debate, listen, discuss, negotiate and compromise for the common good of the world. We all know that recent advances in information technology have made international communications more important than ever. Japanese citizens who can speak many languages and understand many cultures will make it easier for Japan to participate globally in areas of education, trade and diplomacy.

Japan must make it possible for women and men of the world's many ethnic groups, religions and cultures to live together, to encourage different people to accept and respect one another, and work collaboratively to build an open, resilient, creative and thoughtful society. To set an example of honesty, I travel all over Japan to give lectures and read my self-published children's books at schools and community centers.

Objectives of the Program

I started the program in 2001. As difficult and widespread problems of bullying and racism are in Japanese schools and communities, they are also problem that can be solved. As a father of three young children and an author of children's books, I started taking actions to fight against bullying and racism, first in my neighborhood and my children's primary school, then things extended to my city, prefecture and eventually all over Japan.

In addressing the serious problems of bullying and racism, I started to promote a set of appropriate attitudes and skills under the program, namely:

- a. Promote values and attitudes for a peaceful society:
 - Self-esteem (accept the intrinsic value of oneself and love oneself)
 - 2. Respect for others
 - 3. Empathy (love others, understand others' opinion, help others when they are bullied)
 - 4. Belief that everyone can make positive change
 - 5. Commitment to social justice, equality, peace, non-violence and respect for life
 - Sharpened awareness among children and adults about the problems of bullying, racism and violence in schools, communities and society.

- b. Help participants develop the following skills:
 - 1. Capability to analyze the nature and origins of bullying, racism and violence; and their effects on both victims and perpetrators
 - Capability to create frameworks for achieving non-violent, peaceful, diverse and creative schools, communities, and society
 - 3. Capability to search for alternative non-violent skills within each person
 - 4. Peaceful personal conflict resolution skills.

Through lectures and seminars that I plan with the collaboration of Parents-Teachers Associations (PTAS) and Education Boards, I try to get both adults and children in schools and communities involved in creating a society free of bullying and racism. I encourage teachers to make antibullying and anti-racism a part of their curriculum and identify bullies and racists early on, before they become set in their ways. Finally, I help children learn that by taking care of each other, speaking out against bullies and racists, and working together, they have tremendous power to make a difference in their schools, neighborhood, town and communities.

The program targets a wide range of audience including young children (pre-school), children in school (primary, junior and senior secondary), tertiary level students (college and university), their parents and educators, concerned government officials, and the general public. The program is open to all who are interested.

I use a variety of materials for the activities under the program. I use my self-published books, posters, and newspaper articles in my activities. The following is a list of such materials:

- a. Children's books:
- 1. The Rainbow's Kids (Chikugo: Daddy Publishing, 2001)
- 2. Wind of Freedom (Chikugo: Daddy Publishing, 2002)
- 3. What Color are Burdocks? (Chikugo: Daddy Publishing, 2004)
- 4. I am not a Foreigner (Chikugo: Daddy Publishing, 2006)
- 5. Respect for Life (Chikugo: Daddy Publishing, 2008).

b. Book to promote peace among adults:

Peace (Chiba: Daddy Publishing, 2005)

- c. Posters
- 1. Multicultural Japan (Chikugo: Daddy Publishing, 2003)
- Bullying: Zero Tolerance (Chikugo: Daddy Publishing, 2007)¹.
 See Annex A for this poster.

Pedagogy/Teaching Method

I employ different pedagogies for different sets of participants. For the adult participants I use the following teaching module:

- 1. I give a thirty-minute talk on the issue of discrimination
- 2. I divide the participants into small groups, and ask them to read one of my articles on the issue of racism and answer a set of comprehension questions (see below)
- 3. I ask the participants to discuss the problem of racism in small groups, using a set of questions for discussion (see below)
- 4. I ask one participant of each small group to stand up and share with the whole group the outcome of their discussion.

One of my articles on the issue of racism in Japan² is very popular among adult participants. I ask participants to read the following article, answer the comprehension questions, and exchange ideas about the problem of racism using the questions for discussion:

Unconscious racial arrogance and disdain for ethnic minorities are pronounced throughout the world. It is more evident in countries where different races live together, but I believe racism is a worldwide attitude and is perhaps strongest in areas where, because of little contact with other races, it has neither been brought to the surface nor challenged.

In Japan, the part of the world where I have been active as a human rights activist for almost a decade now, racist attitudes run strong—in my judgment far stronger than in Western countries. Japanese children who are not ethnic Japanese experience racism from a very young age and can even be subject to cruel treatment by their peers and adults. Many of them are bullied at school.

Seven years ago, a Japanese-born daughter of a Peruvian acquaintance was bullied by her classmates soon after she began attending a public elementary school in Gunma. She had been taunted and ridiculed because of her different looks. Some senior students called her "strange foreigner" and raked their shoes against her heels in the schoolyard. The girl told her homeroom teacher, but no serious action was taken against the bullies.

A Japanese grade-school boy who had an American ancestor was abused by his teacher in Fukuoka about five years ago. The teacher pulled the pupil's nose until it bled. He also told him to jump off a high-rise condominium and die because he wasn't a pure-blooded Japanese. The confused child was quoted as asking his parents if he was "dirty" because he had foreign blood. Initially the school refused to confront the issue until the boy's parents became vocal.

The issue of racism, although serious, is not openly discussed in Japanese-language media. Worse, the media often exaggerate crimes committed by foreigners and portray them as troublemakers. Also, it is not uncommon to hear some TV personalities and politicians making racist comments in public. Once I was watching a popular talk show on television, and I was astonished to hear a Japanese celebrity saying something like, "Japan used to be a pure-blooded nation, but unfortunately foreigners of all kinds are now mixing it with dirty blood."

In Japan, there is a myth that says Japan is inhabited by a single race, the Japanese. But now this myth must be challenged, because the nation is increasingly becoming multiracial.

A nation in which people are discriminated against by ethnicity, which infringes on basic human rights, can never be considered a true member of the global community. The failure of politicians, educators and parents to solve the problem of racism is debasing human dignity. This issue casts the question of whether Japan is capable of being a society of coexistence.

The following are the comprehension questions after reading the article:

- What are pronounced throughout the world?
- What is more evident in countries where different races live together?
- Is racism a worldwide attitude?
- Why is racism perhaps strongest in areas where there is little contact with other races?
- What happens to Japanese children who are not ethnic Japanese in Japan?
- What happened to a Japanese-born daughter of a Peruvian's acquaintance in Gunma?

- What happened to a Japanese grade-school boy who had an American ancestor in Fukuoka?
- Is the issue of racism serious in Japan?
- Is the issue of racism openly discussed in Japanese-language media?
- What do the media exaggerate?
- What is not uncommon to hear on TV?
- What is the myth about race in Japan?

With a certain degree of understanding of the article's main points having been achieved, I ask the participants to discuss in their small groups questions classified into several objectives:

- To analyze the situation of racism in general and in Japan,
- To help them think of concrete steps in addressing the issues, and
- To assess the activity.

For the purpose of analyzing the situation of racism in general and in Japan, I ask them to choose questions from the following list:

- Do you think that racism is a serious problem in Japan? Why (or why not)?
- Do you think Japan is really a mono-racial nation? Why (or why not)?
- Have you ever been a victim of racism? Talk about your experience.
- Why do you think some people are racists?
- Do you think racism is a "disease"? Explain.
- Do you think racism is a crime? Why (or why not)?
- Do you think racists should be punished by the law? Why (or why not)?
- How can the problem of racism be solved?
- Have you ever witnessed racism or discrimination? Talk about it.
- What do you think of being indifferent to the problem of racism?
 Why?
- "The world is dangerous not because of those who do harm, but because of those who look at it without doing anything." (Albert Einstein) What do you think of this quote? Explain.
- "The opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference." (Mother Teresa) What do you think of this quote? Explain.
- "Life's most urgent question is: what are you doing for others?"
 (Martin Luther King, Jr.) What do you think of this quote? Explain.

- "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." (Martin Luther King, Jr.) What do you think of this quote? Explain.
- "Man's nature is not essentially evil. Brute nature has been known to yield to the influence of love. You must never despair of human nature." (Mahatma Gandhi) What do you think of this quote? Explain.
- "Human rights education is much more than a lesson in schools or a theme for a day; it is a process to equip people with the tools they need to live lives of security and dignity. On this International Human Rights Day, let us continue to work together to develop and nurture in future generations a culture of human rights, to promote freedom, security and peace in all nations." (Kofi Annan) What do you think of this quote? Explain.
- "You can imprison a man, but not an idea. You can exile a man, but not an idea. You can kill a man, but not an idea." (Benazir Bhutto) What do you think of this quote? Explain.
- "All human beings, whatever their cultural or historical background, suffer when they are intimidated, imprisoned or tortured ... We must, therefore, insist on a global consensus, not only on the need to respect human rights worldwide, but also on the definition of these rights . . . for it is the inherent nature of all human beings to yearn for freedom, equality and dignity, and they have an equal right to achieve that." (Dalai Lama) What do you think of this quote? Explain.
- "The idea of cultural relativism is nothing but an excuse to violate human rights." (Shirin Ebadi) What do you think of this quote? Explain.
- "Human Rights for everyone is the necessary foundation upon which all of us may build a world where everybody may live in peace and serenity and plenty." (Michael Douglas) What do you think of this quote? Explain.
- Talk about the following activists: Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi.
- Could you name more peace activists and talk about them?

In order not to limit the discussion to the knowledge level, I also ask them to respond to a number of questions that relate to ways of taking action on the issues:

- What would you do if you heard a friend or a family member make a racist comment? Why?
- What can you do to help solve the problem of racism?
- Do you ever discuss the problem of racism? Where? With whom?
- Do you think it is important to discuss the problem of racism? Why (or why not)?
- Why do you think the Japanese media don't tackle the problem of racism?
- Is promoting the concept of "one nation, one race" good or bad? Why?
- Is promoting multiculturalism good or bad? Why?
- Do you think the Japanese government should promote multiculturalism and diversity? Why (or why not)?
- How can the Japanese government promote multiculturalism and diversity?
- Do you think Japanese schools should promote multiculturalism and diversity? Why (or why not)?
- How can Japanese schools promote multiculturalism and diversity?
- Do you think the Japanese media should help fight against racism in the Japanese society? Why (or why not)?
- How can the media help fight against racism?
- Do you know that March 21 is the International Day to fight against racism?
- Have you ever taken part in any activities on March 21 to fight against racism?
- Have you ever taken part in any activities to promote human rights?
 Why (or why not)?
- From now on, would you like to organize any events to fight against racism, or to promote human rights? Talk about your plans.
- Do you think it is important for parents to talk about racism and human rights with their children? Why (or why not)?
- Do you think it is important for teachers to talk about racism and human rights with their students? Why (or why not)?

At the end of the activity, I ask the participants to assess the whole exercise with a general question: What do you think about today's activity? I ask them to express their responses verbally.

While participants hardly raise questions on the definition of terms that are mentioned in the questions such as multiculturalism and cultural relativism, they are free to use their own electronic dictionaries to find their meaning.

Helping Children Understand and Fight Against Racism/Bullying

Racism is certainly not a part of human nature. A new-born child does not instinctively have prejudice against others. Prejudice and racism are learned from the society that raises the child. These attitudes are derived from fear and ignorance, and it is only by combating fear and ignorance that we will ever achieve a truly multicultural society based on mutual respect.

One of the best things we, parents and educators, can do to help our children understand and fight against prejudice is to ask questions and listen to them as they talk about their bullying experiences at school, on a team, or in the community. If we, ourselves, are committed to helping end prejudice, discrimination and racism, it is also good to let our children know that. If we have taken, are taking, or want to take some actions to help eradicate these serious social problems, we must let our children know about them. It is always good to let them know that we have questions, feelings and hopes about these topics, too.

The other day, I had the opportunity to exchange ideas on bullying, discrimination and racism with a group of multicultural children and their parents. I could not hold back my tears when I heard some of them talk about their painful experiences:

When I was going to the neighborhood park with my little brother last week, a group of junior high school girls called us 'strange foreigners' and giggled," said a 10-year-old Japanese-born Brazilian girl. "I was so sad; I wish I looked like ethnic-Japanese kids to avoid rude comments."

I was playing with a friend in the schoolyard the other day, and a group of boys spat on my face," said a 13-year-old Filipino-Japanese boy. "They told me to go back to my country, or die."

My best friend invited me to his home after school. His father asked me where I was born. When I replied 'Japan,' he laughed and uttered: 'if you were born here, why are you black?'" said a 7-year-old African-Japanese boy.

How would you feel if something like this happened to you?" I asked everyone, after these kids shared their sad stories with us. The children replied:

"I would be very scared, and wouldn't go out anymore," replied a 7-year-old ethnic-Japanese boy.

"I would feel very sad, lonely and depressed," replied a 12-year-old ethnic-Japanese girl.

"I have never exchanged ideas about racism or prejudice before," replied a 14-year-old ethnic-Japanese girl. "Today, I heard painful stories from victims and I felt very sad. Now I will think about these problems a lot. It is very important to talk about bullying, discrimination and racism, instead of hiding them. We all have to stand up against these serious social problems."

Most Japanese children sympathize with victims of racism after hearing their sad stories, but the problem sometimes is with many Japanese parents and teachers who say they live in mono-cultural neighborhoods, and think talking about racism to their children is useless.

When these adults say they do not have cultural issues in their communities, they are defining "culture" in a narrow sense, thinking only of racial and language differences. Some issues are just less visible. For instance, there is discrimination against other Asian ethnic groups in Japan. One of my friends is Korean Japanese. She told her children not to tell anyone at school that they are of Korean origin because she did not want them to be teased. Most Japanese of Korean or Chinese origin having been born here and speaking no other language but Japanese; visually and often in their living habits, they cannot be distinguished from ethic-Japanese. Still the ethnic-Japanese do their best to ostracize them. To avoid discrimination, these people often use *tsumei* ("pass name": a Japanese full name instead of a Korean or Chinese one) and hide their ethnic background. These hidden diversities can be a springboard for people to think about the need for antiracism and multicultural education.

"I'm not racist. I treat all people with respect and dignity, and I expect my children to do the same. Why do I have to do more?" a Japanese mother once asked me after a workshop session on cultural awareness.

Of course, there are many Japanese people who are not actively racist. But the question is: how many Japanese parents and teachers are actively anti-racist? There's no such thing as being passively anti-racist. It is not enough to set a good example. Nor can we shield children from bigotry. A society that continues to discriminate against racial and ethnic groups nurtures prejudice in each new generation. If we avoid these subjects with our children, we actually run the risk of strengthening prejudices we want them to reject. Children are barraged by images and ideas we don't control on the playground, on television, and in school. However free from prejudice we may be, our children, even very young children, can absorb the biases they encounter outside of our homes.

We must teach our children to be critical thinkers, specifically about prejudice, bullying, discrimination and racism. Critical thinking is when we strive to understand issues through examining and questioning. Young children can begin to develop these skills, to know when a word or an image is unfair or hurtful. This is also a time when children are in the process of developing empathy.

Here are some suggestions for parents and teachers to develop critical thinking in children:

- Ask children to name words that hurt feelings. Then, talk about which words are okay to use when you are angry with someone, and which ones are not.
- Teach children to express their feelings by naming offending behaviors rather than labeling people.
- Encourage children to think and talk about images they see in books, on television, and in movies. Use age-appropriate books and stories to help children begin to understand struggles for justice and equity.
- Find moments to talk about fairness and empathy: "If that happened to me, I would feel terrible. How would you feel if that happened to you?"
- Find opportunities to talk about similarities as well as differences. If children are nonverbal, observe and respond to their curiosity. For example, if a group of children are touching the head of a child whose hair is very different from theirs, you can say, "She has curly hair and you have straight hair. But you are all beautiful kids, and you all have natural beautiful hair."
- Model the behaviors and attitudes you want children to develop.
 Pay particular attention to situations that can either promote preju-

- dice or inhibit a child's openness to diversity. Make sure your program reflects diversity in books, toys, games, puppets, music, movies, paintings, and so on.
- Create opportunities for children to interact and make friends with people who are different from them, because children learn best from concrete experiences.
- Don't let racist and prejudicial remarks go by without intervening.
 It's important to let children know from a very early age that name-calling of any kind; whether it's about someone's religion, race, ethnic background, or sexual orientation is hurtful and wrong. Each time we don't intervene, we are indirectly giving children permission to make prejudiced remarks.

"When do I start talking about prejudice with kids?" many parents and teachers ask me. "Earlier is better!" I always reply. Children ask questions as soon as they can talk. Even toddlers wonder about similarities and differences between people. "Your hands are black and dirty," a three-year-old Japanese boy said to me the other day. "Why don't you wash them in the sink over there?" Preschool children ask questions born of basic curiosity about the world. Simple answers delivered without upset, shock, or anger will provide them with the information they need. "My hands are black but not dirty, and my skin is a different color than yours," I said. "My skin color won't come off. Skin color is not dirt; it does not wash away. Skin color is like the different colors of your clothes. When your daddy or mommy puts your black shorts and your yellow shirt in the washing machine, they still come out black and yellow. The color doesn't wash away." Adults can use an explanation like this to help little children understand natural differences. Of course, the answers children require will change as they grow.

Post-activity Feedback

I ask the participants what they have learned in the activity. Based on my previous experiences the responses generally relate to the following:

- 1. Racism is a concept that will never disappear. As long as there is any way to differentiate ourselves from others there will be racism. However we must not tolerate racism in our communities. (a man in his 40s)
- 2. Racism is simply a result of ignorance being passed from one generation to another. Education is the only form of anti-racism. (a man in his 30s)

3. Being split 50/50 between two very different cultures (American and Japanese) I have experienced some very harsh racism throughout my life. But the key to progression for me is to remain in a state of understanding and not to allow myself to associate or retaliate to such ignorance. (a woman in her 50s)

Concluding Remarks

Many people look to politicians, or social activists to eliminate racism and discrimination. They certainly can make great contributions toward a just society, but we, parents and teachers, also have a vitally important contribution to make. We can talk openly with our children about race, ethnicity, religion, and bigotry. We can answer their questions about these complicated topics, and we can begin a dialogue that will continue throughout their lives. The quality of our children's future is at stake. In the 21st century, the ability to communicate and work with people from different racial and ethnic groups will be as essential as computer skills.

In the past, the average Japanese was not likely to have ever had contacts of any significance with an individual of different racial background; however, contemporary conditions are far different. Japan has become a diverse society. People of various ethnic backgrounds stream through Japan, and people of Japanese origin wander the globe. Individuals of Japanese background have fitted into other societies, and when their descendants come to Japan, speaking only "broken Japanese" or none at all, they have had to be regarded as outsiders. Some have even become politicians in the United States, Canada, Brazil and Peru. I believe the old Japanese concept of *shimaguni konjo* (insular mindset), which promoted Japan as a "mono-racial nation," has been shaken but not completely gone. Japanese children will inherit an even more diverse society from now on. We, parents and educators, need to help them learn to live and work closely with people whose race, religion, or culture may be different from their own.

Endnotes

¹This poster is available in www2.saganet.ne.jp/joel/Poster_Joel.pdf

²Joel Assogba, "Racism in Japan," *The Japan Times, Shukan ST* (22 February 2008), available in www.japantimes.co.jp/shukanst/english_news/essay/2008/ey20080222/ey20080222main.htm?print=noframe

Annex A

