

## Prime Minister's Award

### To Study Is to Live

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Close your eyes and let's suppose you are a Japanese adult. Once you leave your house, you feel nervous, uneasy, and unconfident. When you walk around town, you cannot understand what is written on signs or information boards. You think, "What does it mean?" Then, you think you are such a rubbish person because you do not understand something so simple. You are afraid of getting on a bus because you cannot read the signs written in Chinese characters that tell the fares and destinations. You feel that you are always surrounded by things uncertain and unknown. Why are you having so much trouble?

This summer holiday I worked at the Okayama Voluntary Night Junior High School as a volunteer. What I have just described is the story of Mr. A, who has been studying at this school. Mr. A suffered an acute illness when he was small, and stopped going to school when he was in grade three of primary school. He is a "proforma graduate" of a junior high school, having received a graduation certificate, albeit after barely attending the school. Mr. A got a job with heavy labor but quit the job because of his illness, and then moved from one job to another. Not being able to read, write or calculate, he could not choose his work and had to suffer many embarrassing experiences.

Night School was established to guarantee the opportunities of people from various backgrounds to receive compulsory education. Students include those who finished junior high school without sufficient education for various reasons, such as nonattendance like in the case of Mr. A. There are also current junior-high school students who are not attending any classes, people who missed the opportunity to learn amid the post-WWII chaos, or people with foreign nationalities. At present, there are 31 publicly-run night junior high schools in eight prefectures, and 37 schools run by volunteers in 16 prefectures. At the night school where I worked, around 40 students with five different nationalities and with ages ranging from 10s to 80s are studying. Looking around the classroom at the different types of students, I was genuinely surprised how varied junior high school students can be in our society.

One day I helped Ms. B to study fractional numbers. Ms. B is older than my grandmother. At the school, students and teachers basically study one-to-one. Ms. B was surprised that a current junior high student like me was working there as a volunteer. She then told me her story, explaining why she is studying at night school and how many difficulties she went through because of her lack of compulsory education. "If I could have studied like this when I was as young as you, Tamaki, would I be much happier now?" she murmured and then she said something rather surprising, "Please give me some homework because I don't want to forget what I have studied today."

I could not believe what I had just heard, homework is my enemy! At my junior high school, regardless of students' wishes, teachers give us plenty of homework. Being not so academically bright, I have been rejecting studying, thinking, "Why do we need to study? What for?"

I always did my homework quite reluctantly. Therefore, when Ms. B asked me for homework, I felt embarrassed with myself. Ms. B and other students' earnest passion for studying was almost dazzling for me. Many of them are barely surviving their everyday lives, and, until they found the

opportunity for studying at the night school, they never had time to wonder, “For what do we study?” I had an acute realization of how privileged and spoiled I have been.

Based on statistics, the enrollment rate for Japan’s compulsory education is about 99%. However, based on estimates by the Japan Night School Research Group, there are more than a million people who have not completed compulsory education because they never attended school, or stopped attending school in the middle of the academic year. In the backdrop of complicated family relationships, some of them are not recorded on a family register, have suffered abuse from their parents, have withdrawn from the outside world, or have been absent from school. And others have not completed compulsory education due to other social issues. Our right to education is supposed to be guaranteed by the Constitution of Japan and the Basic Act on Education, etc. However, there are people who were not able to receive sufficient education and pushed to live in the worst conditions – just like the students I have met at Night School, and we should not forget that. I would like to provide more “opportunities for education” to people who want to study.

The speech by Malala Yousafzai, the person whom I respect, at the United Nations always gives me support, “One child, one teacher, one pen and one book can change the world. Education is the only solution. Education first.”

My contribution is very small, but I will protect opportunities for studying, and, as a volunteer, study together at Night School. To study is to live. This summer, people at the Okayama Voluntary Night School taught me the meaning of studying.