

Prime Minister's Award

Japan's Anti-Bullying Measures Are Mistaken

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Today, bullying is a serious problem in schools and many other places across Japan. The Japanese government and schools have taken various measures to prevent bullying. Here are examples of actions schools have taken: receiving help from counselors to provide continuous support for students who have been bullied; having students who bullied others take classes in a separate classroom; and providing good ethical education. But I wonder if any of these measures have led to a fundamental solution for prevention of bullying.

In my opinion, the most problematic part of bullying in Japan is that the behavior is sneaky and cruel, and tends to continue for a long time. I lived in Germany until I was a fifth grader, and witnessed bullying there. Unlike Japanese students, bullies in German schools, though they were violent, did not last long—it was always a one-day outburst.

Why is bullying in Japan likely to continue over a long time? I believe there are two causes. One is the typical way of bullying. For example, bullying in German schools refers to using force on someone weaker than you or that you don't like, and it is done mostly in an open space like the schoolyard. This kind of violent behavior tends to attract attention, and so teachers immediately step in and it hardly lasts long. Bullying in Japan, on the other hand, refers to behavior intended to hurt someone emotionally by covertly harassing him or her and giving the victim the cold shoulder as a group, rather than using violence. With such ways of bullying, apparently it looks like nothing happens and is hard to notice from people outside the group of bullies. As a result, the bullying can go unnoticed for a long time by the teachers and school administrators responsible for doing something to stop it.

The other cause is bystanders' typical reactions. In Germany, I was also picked on once or twice by older students, and my classmates or other students who knew me and happened to be there took sides with me to together chase the bullies away. This was not anything unusual. Whenever students witnessed bullying, they intervened or went to get a teacher. However, when bullying happened in front of many students at my school in Japan, none of them tried to stop it. They felt sorry for the student who was bullied, but there was a mood or atmosphere that kept them from stepping in.

My point is that there is no "stopper" that discourages bullies in Japanese schools, and this allows them to escalate their cruel behavior and continue it for a long time.

What can be a “stopper” for them? In my personal opinion, you need to be capable of doing the following three to act as a “stopper” for bullying: (1) Understanding right from wrong (2) Having your own opinions (3) Respecting other people’s opinions. I think that Japanese people are very good at (1) and (3), yet, when it comes to (2), many do not seem to make a conscious choice of forming their own opinions.

Japanese people live in a culture of conformity, and so they have a great capacity for cooperation. But this characteristic can work negatively in the face of bullying. In most cases, bullies in a large group pick on one student, and bystanders feel compelled to go along with the bullies, who are in the majority. To stop bullying in a situation like this, it is important that you stand up for and say your opinion regardless of what others say or do. I believe this is what Japanese students today most need to do to act as “stoppers” for bullying.

The German school I was in had a notebook in each homeroom for students to post recent problems and trouble that happened in the class. It was opened every Friday at the homeroom meeting held as the last class for the week so that the whole class discussed each of the items to find solutions.

I suggest Japanese schools should also adopt this type of homeroom discussion in which students seriously exchange their opinions to solve one problem so that the whole class will move in the right direction. I believe that providing opportunities for regular discussion will help students develop their conscience, their ability to form their opinions, and their respect for others’ opinions.

Japan’s anti-bullying measures today focus on saving students who are bullied, and they do not seem to pay much attention to bystanders. Such measures cannot root out bullying. The government and schools should provide more opportunities for students to form and express their opinions as a way to help them have their own views on basic human rights. I believe that the attitudes developed through these efforts will eventually provide the strength needed to protect our basic human rights.