

Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Minister's Award

Breaking free from prejudice

A work by a second grader in Nakano Public Junior High School No. 2, Tokyo

Since I was little, I have struggled with communication and have trouble staying focused. Because of this, I was placed in a special-needs class during my early elementary years. The classmates I met there were kind, and before I knew it, I had many friends. During recess, we would fly paper airplanes, draw pictures, and enjoy a peaceful school life together. I worked hard in my studies and was often praised by my teachers.

But those happy memories only lasted for two years.

One winter day in second grade, my mother told me, "Starting in third grade, you'll be studying in a new place."

That "new place" was a regular class. Seeing how much I had grown, my parents believed I was ready to transfer. While I felt sad about leaving my friends, I was also excited about the idea of joining a regular class. What kind of kids would be there? What would we do? It sounded fun.

However, that excitement quickly faded after I entered the new class. Unlike the special-needs class, I often struggled to keep up with lessons. Homework, which hadn't been a part of my previous routine, became a burden with deadlines that overwhelmed me. The classroom rules were stricter, and I sometimes found myself unintentionally breaking them. Most of all, I found it incredibly difficult to communicate with my new classmates and participate in group activities. Being naturally shy, I couldn't make friends or even hold a proper conversation with others.

Some classmates grew frustrated with me.

"Ugh, I can't deal with this anymore," a girl sighed in annoyance.

"Hurry up already!" a boy snapped.

Some students were kind, but many were indifferent or distant to me, because I was having trouble adjusting to this new environment and was not good at participating in class activities.

One day, I overheard a conversation among a group of students preparing for class. "Weren't they in the special-needs class? Why are they in our class now? They're so

annoying.”

Hearing those words made my whole body tremble. I never imagined they would talk about me like that behind my back. Their nasty words lingered in my mind, and I started dreading school. But instead of blaming them, I convinced myself that it was my fault—that because I had been in the special-needs class, it was only natural for them to think that way.

My turning point came in fifth grade, when something changed—I made a friend.

At first, they would simply talk to me during recess. But over time, we began drawing pictures together, walking home from school together, and even hanging out on weekends.

I was happy. But at the same time, I was scared.

I didn’t want them to find out about my past. They didn’t seem to know that I had been in the special-needs class, and I was terrified of what would happen if they did. What if they start treating me differently? What if they cut ties with me? The fear never left me.

About a year later, during recess, my friend suddenly asked, “Hey, I heard you were in the special-needs class before?”

Shock ran through me. My mind raced—”How did they find out? What should I do?” I even thought that my life was over. I froze, unable to say anything.

Then, my friend said, “But that doesn’t matter to me at all.”

I was stunned. But at that moment, I realized something.

My friend didn’t see me as “the kid who was in special-needs education.” They saw me as “the friend who loves drawing.” They saw who I really was inside. The overwhelming fear I had carried for so long melted away.

Now, in the second grade of junior high school, that friend and I are still close. I’ve become more confident, I talk to my classmates more, and I am also trying my best in my own way in both my studies and club activities. Looking back, I know that some of the struggles I faced in elementary school were because of my own difficulties, but there were also times when people judged me simply because I was in the special-needs class.

I don’t know how my classmates see me now, but I no longer feel ashamed of having been in the special-needs class.

My first real friend in a regular class taught me something important—the value of looking beyond labels.

Around the world, people are judged for being “disabled,” “foreign,” or countless other reasons. But through my own experiences, I’ve learned that I don’t want to judge people based on “because they are ____.” I want to see them for who they truly are.