

2022 Kan'ichi Asakawa Award
Student Paper Contest for International Understanding and Exchange
High School / Highest Award

Importance of having perspectives:
Living in an international community

NAKAMURA Fumiaki , First Grade
Fukushima Prefectural Aizu Gakuho High School

This summer I had an opportunity to have an online session with high school students from a total of four countries and regions: Japan, China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. We shared history and culture of our respective regions and talked about our hobbies regardless of nationality. We were so into the chatting that it continued into the next day. We spent a really enjoyable and precious time together.

However, there was a tense moment during the conversation. It was when the topic about discharging treated water from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station into the ocean came up. One of the Chinese participants said, "The Japanese government should give up the idea of discharging treated water because it will have a negative impact on marine life." I was surprised that he mentioned such a thing without hesitation. The issue shouldn't be that simple. I didn't want him to express his opposition so casually. The impact of the nuclear accident which occurred when I was a child is still very vivid in the area where I live. As someone who has experienced evacuation, I didn't want others to touch on this topic so lightly. It was only after the program that I was outraged, wondering what he could understand and say about this issue with the little knowledge he had gleaned from newspapers. It was the first time for me to see an outsider talk about issues of my community. I was bewildered by the unexpected views and failed to organize my thoughts in time.

The issue of the Taiwan Strait caused the second tense moment. During the program, Nancy Pelosi, a U.S. Democrat, visited Taiwan. That incident caused a huge rift between Taiwan and Chinese participants. In fact, the mood between the two has changed since that day. The Taiwanese participants were excessively scared of the possibility of being attacked by China's armed forces, whereas, the Chinese participants argued that it was unfair of the Taiwanese to talk bad about the Chinese government unnecessarily. The confrontation escalated, and some people even spoke out offensively words against the other side. It was the hardest part of the program, unable to do anything but to watch the relationship which had been formed being broken before my eyes.

What should I have said then, as a high school student living in Fukushima? And what could

I have done with the feud between China and Taiwan as a Japanese who is an outsider? I kept thinking about this issue even after the program ended and finally reached this answer. These two seemingly unrelated issues stem from the same cause: a lack of exposure to different perspectives. The key to approaching the solution of this issue is “diversity of human relationships”. This is what the Japanese society will need most in the future.

Let me take what I experienced during an English lesson with my German tutor as an example to think about diversity in relationships. We were discussing the issue of comfort women that day. I said that while it is true Japan did bad things, I didn't think the current generation should bear responsibility or be blamed for the act one-sidedly. However, the response I got back was contrary to my expectations.

She said, “In my opinion, Japan is the perpetrator of almost forcing women overseas to become comfort women. And I think the international community has the similar notion about this issue. Perhaps you, as a Japanese, should consider why you are blamed in the first place”.

I had a hard time accepting her view at first, but after thinking about it, I thought it was a reasonable opinion. I realized that my opinion that the Japanese government deals with other countries fairly may have been biased by the fact that I had been exposed to information only available in Japan. I took her advice, and started checking on articles about Japan as a perpetrator. I found references written from different perspectives when I did so. Then, I formed my opinion: “Japan must apologize for its past mistakes rather than trivializing them. To do so, Japan should listen more to suggestions from the international community”. She was convinced this time. Naturally, everyone feels uncomfortable when their opinions are denied. As I expected positive feedbacks from her, her remarks from different perspectives tingled in my ears. Yet, I realized it is important to never stop proactively seeking opinions from others with different viewpoints because diversity brings benefits that are beyond our imagination.

Even for large organizations such as governments and companies, the values and benefits of exposure to different perspectives are the same as in human relationships. Companies should actively hire people of different origins. However, there are not so many immigrants in Japan. The percentage of immigrants in Japan was 1.7% in 2015, while in Germany it was 12.5%, France 12.3% and the U.K. 12.9%. Japan's figure is far smaller than that of those countries. It shows that Japan significantly lacks racial diversity.

An atmosphere in an organization changes dramatically just by having people with different backgrounds. In fact, there are studies that have scientifically demonstrated its benefits. A study by Prof. Chad Sparber, an economist, found that productivity increased by 25% or more when racial diversity increased just by one standard deviation in specific areas such

as law, insurance and financial services. Other researchers have reported a number of similar results. The reason, as noted above, is that others provide new perspectives.

There have been a series of international issues caused by conflicts of interest in modern society. This is partly because Japan and the world have yet to find how to cope with diversity which is increasingly becoming important due to globalization. A micro example of my experience I mentioned here and macro-international issues all boil down to the same reason: accept diversity. It's just a simple phrase, but it's difficult to put into practice. This is because people tend to focus on their own perspectives and opinions that are close to their own.

It's not too late to be conscious of this. Seeking different people and views, listening to various opinions without fear of being rejected, respecting every perspective equally, imagining what others feel and think, or in other words, putting yourself in someone's shoes: these are the personal guidelines I came up with after giving much thought to them from my experience this summer to live through the international community going forward. It is also my suggestion to the international community to eliminate conflicts on Earth.