On Education for the New Era

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“Strategic shift required for education—from knowledge focus to development of ability to think on own”

Japan perceived as “passive” and “declining” in the World

  I participated in the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland at the end of January.  It was good for Japan to have Mr. Yorihiko Kojima, Chairman of Mitsubishi Corporation, serving as one of the co-chairs of the meeting. We had several Japanese business executives in the early 2000s who served as co-chair of the meeting, but none for a while.  The Davos meeting is known to be one of the best places for the country to make its presence felt by appealing to the world: however there were few speakers representing Japan. Many Japanese who participated in Davos meeting seem to take the “passive” approach to the meeting and act as spectators rather than participate more fully.  I am concerned that this type of behavior may enhance the “passive image” of Japan. In fact, there has been decreasing attention given to Japan over the past several years, unlike the emerging and lively economies of China and India.

If you want the world to recognize you today, you need to have distinctive competence and unique expertise in certain areas.  What is even more important at the international conference, such as the Davos meeting with a format that favors interactive discussion and debate, is the ability to think on the spot and respond.

Until a few years ago, so called “advanced countries” made decisions for the global agenda. Today, the world is becoming multi-polar and many countries are expected to express their view. Global issues are complex and are inter-related so that diverse opinions and views of multi-stakeholders need to be explored to resolve them.

 No “right” answer

  There is no “right” answer for many issues in the world today.  You cannot choose one right answer among multiple choices and mark it, as in the entrance examination of universities in Japan. You hear many diverse views of the same issue and full of disagreements and debates at Davos, for example.  As there are no clear paths to the solution today for many issues, first we need to be able to express our own view clearly while recognizing, and making space for many alternative views. It is through hearing and debating many ideas and views, we can come closer to the solution.

 In Japan, however, we have NOT been trained for constructive discussion and debate.  In addition, I have noticed that there are an increasing number of young people who cannot respond to the question, “What do YOU think?” They may be good at summarizing others’ views. But they cannot form their own view and express it. They have difficulty responding to the question, “Do you agree or disagree with this idea? Why?”  When asked for questions during the Q & A session, few students raise questions in Japan.

It is my belief that parents and educators are mainly responsible for the passive attitude of the young Japanese people today.  At school, the focus is still on knowledge transfer.  Though children are inherently full of curiosity and thus constantly ask why questions, their intellectual curiosity is killed as the education at school is one-sided and top down.  I often observe that parents respond to the questions though the questions are intended for their child.  This type of parental behavior reduces the child’s independent thinking.