

Three hundred and forty-six thousand.

Can you guess what this number is? It is Japan's highest number ever. This is the number of students unable to attend school last year. It is a huge problem, and a major cause of suicide among young people. This is what it is to be *futōkō*.

I was one of those students. I couldn't go to school for almost all of 7th Grade. But now I can – sometimes – thanks to the great help and kindness of my teachers. I am very grateful to them. But why am I, a former *futōkō* girl, standing here? Because I believe that passing on my experience, of not attending school, may help others in difficulty – and guide us all to creating a more friendly society.

Since I was small, I've loved singing and dancing. I also enjoy thinking deeply, creatively, and sharing my ideas with others. These things are very important to me. But – then as now – they also make me stand out. And when I started Junior High School, many other students teased me, said I should be more 'normal', badmouthed me in our class LINE group. It broke my heart, feeling my individuality being taken away. To be in a place that didn't recognize me for who I was, who I am, brought me to tears. I lost my will to keep living.

What saved me was my time at Heart Global. It's a workshop where participants create a show in three days, using English. When I first attended it, it was like being struck by lightning. If I sang, people would say, "You have a beautiful voice," and if I danced, they'd say, "Your dancing is great!". If I expressed an opinion, people complimented me: "You have wonderful ideas". It was a great place to be: we all recognized and respected each other for who we were.

I also got involved with a local Kids' City. This is an event where, after months of preparation, children create and run their own ideal town. I became the leader. The others relied on me, were reassured by my presence. It was such a breath of fresh air: at school, whenever I gave my opinion, people thought me a nuisance. But here, I went from being a nuisance to being a respected person. Realizing that was the moment when my complex turned into confidence.

Our weaknesses and strengths change with our place. For me, my personality, which had been a disadvantage, became an advantage, became my weapon. And so, to people who think their present weakness means they're not worthy of living, I say to you: please know that the place you are now is not all there is to life. My mother told me this repeatedly, until I had calluses on my ears – which is why I'm here now. Please believe in your own potential. Go out and meet lots of different people. You will find a place, where you will be happy. Because your place – our world – is just waiting for you.

You are not alone.

You are needed.

And so, please, never give up – on searching for your light.

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Searching for Light