

## **Tips from a Belgian school: how to create a more multicultural education system**

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Hello, everyone. Today, I'd like to talk about what our education system in a multicultural society should be like. It's based on my one-year study in Flanders, a Dutch-speaking part of Belgium.

While studying at a Flemish public high school, I found that many students were not from Belgium. They were from Romania, Morocco, Italy, and so on.

A group of students in my high school conducted a survey at school to investigate cultural differences among the different ethnicities. They got 68 answers and more than 40 percent of them were from students who had an intercultural background. This shows how rich my high school was in ethnic diversity. In the survey, they arrived at the conclusion that most people tend to keep their own cultural customs and values even if they moved to another country. Therefore, I think students can build cultural understanding at a school with ethnic inclusiveness like my high school because there will be more chances to observe customs from different cultures. In fact, I had quite a few opportunities to learn how cultures other than Japanese or Belgian are like in my everyday school life. For example, I learned how the Romanian language sounds when my Romanian friend was talking on the phone, and my Tunisian friend told me about her vacation back home in Tunisia. In such an environment, both Belgian and non-Belgian students can improve their awareness of ethnic and cultural diversity.

Students can learn about a variety of cultures also in school programs. For example, at my high school, we had an event called Project Day and we explored Chinatown, Turkish streets, and mosques in Antwerp. I saw some Muslim students wearing hijabs in the mosque on that day. Accepting multiethnic students at local schools helps all children to understand how precious every culture is.

But how do Flemish schools provide such rich multiculturalism?

The biggest factor is the large number of immigrants in Belgium. However, I believe this is not the only factor. Plenty of support from the Flemish government for foreign children who have just immigrated to Belgium encourages them to study at local public schools. For instance, an organization called OKAN provides them with language courses at a special school for up to a year before being registered in regular schools. Therefore, those children can have enough time to get used to a new lifestyle in Belgium, learning the language, and making friends there. As a result, spending a certain amount of time at OKAN allows child immigrants to adjust to regular schools more smoothly.

I believe this support is necessary also in terms of the equality of education. In Japan, there is no program like OKAN so students have to adjust to schools by themselves. Consequently, many child immigrants are dropping out of regular schools. While the high school enrollment rate for young people in Japan is 99% as a whole, the rate for child immigrants is only 64%. In contrast, compulsory education in Flanders is

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mandatory till 18 years of age also for children from other countries while the compulsory education for foreign children in Japan is not required.

The number of people with foreign nationality in Japan is 1.6 times more than 20 years ago. As more immigrants come to Japan, the more our society gets diverse in culture. Of course, it is not easy for everyone to live in harmony with multiple cultures in one system. However, the Flemish schools shows us the positive effects of cultural diversity at school and the way to encourage the schooling for child immigrants like founding preschools for them. Take this opportunity, not to suffer in a dilemma, but to enrich our lives. Thank you for listening.