

Beyond the “Right” Answer

近江兄弟社高等学校 3年 林 和 樹

Jō Neesima broke the law to reach America. For one reason: in Japan, asking “Why” was forbidden.

Even today, more than a century later, we still hesitate to ask a question. According to the OECD, Japanese students excel academically. Yet, in self-expression, we fall behind the world average.

Here’s the paradox: We can solve complex equations, memorize historical dates, and write perfect essays—but we struggle to say, “I disagree,” or even, “I have a question.” So I asked myself: If the younger generation stops asking questions, what happens to our future?

The answer is clear. We lose progress. We lose creativity. And most of all — we lose the power to move forward. So I wondered: “Is this really what education should be?” This question pushed me out of my comfort zone.

I was selected for Tobitate! Study Abroad Program, supported by the Ministry of Education. And I went to Thailand. What I saw there literally shocked me. The teacher asked a question — and instantly, hands shot up. More hands. And more. Voices filled the room, climbing, crashing, soaring. It was alive. Learning there wasn’t a lecture. It was dialogue. Teachers and students weren’t on opposite sides — they were one team — exploring together. One teacher told me a line that I will never forget: “Mistakes are our greatest teachers.”

Think about that for a moment. In Japan, when you make a mistake, you apologize. In Thailand, when you make a mistake, they smile and say, “Good job. You’re learning!” That moment flipped a switch inside me. I realized: learning isn’t about perfection—it’s about participation.

I even experienced it myself. I taught a judo class in Thailand. It wasn’t perfect — I stumbled. But the students didn’t reject me. They welcomed me as a fellow learner. And then — they did something incredible. They offered me suggestions: “Here’s how you could improve.” Can you imagine that in a

Japanese classroom? A student giving feedback to the teacher? Hard to picture, right?

Back in Japan, I decided to try. In one class, instead of giving answers, I asked one simple question: “What do you think?” At first—silence. But then—one hand. Then another. And in that moment, I realized—Change is possible.

So here’s my idea, and it’s clear. If we want education to prepare us for the future, we need to bring back the power of inquiry. Not just answers. Questions. Because questions spark curiosity. Questions build courage. Questions open doors to creativity.

This doesn’t require a massive policy reform. It begins with us. If you’re a student—keep questioning. If you’re a teacher—, invite questioning. If you’re a parent—protect questioning—even when it feels endless. These small actions matter. Because one question sparks another. And then another. And soon, they create a movement.

Education is not about silently copying the right answer. It is about questioning, sharing, and creating — together. And maybe, one day, a child will raise their hand — not to give the “right” answer, but to ask a brave question. And that will mark the rise of a new Japan. A Japan that listens. A Japan that learns. A Japan that leads.

So I’ll leave you with this: What kind of education do we want for the next generation? I believe that Japanese education—and education everywhere—can be freer, braver, more human. Not tomorrow. Not someday. The beginning is here. The beginning is now.

No more, “I can’t do it” Because now we know—We can do it.