

## Promoting Intercultural Understanding as a CIR

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### Introduction

It's been just over a year since I started work as a *Coordinator for International Relations* (CIR) at the Multicultural Affairs Division of the Mie Prefectural Government. I'm lucky to work with great Japanese co-workers and 3 other CIRs from Canada, China and Brazil. At my division, I'm involved in a wide range of work, including school visits, interpreting, translating, Prefectural Advisor (PA)-related work as well as creating content for social media. At first, it was a little intimidating to be faced with so many new tasks, but now I truly enjoy all the different aspects of my work.

### School visits

One of my main duties as a CIR is to visit elementary and junior high schools with the goal of promoting intercultural understanding. Coming from Australia, a country that places great emphasis on the benefits of multiculturalism, I consider the opportunity to raise Japanese students' cultural awareness a wonderful privilege.

In my lessons, I try to convey the message of multiculturalism, which is about embracing diversity and saying no to discrimination. However, I find that the widely accepted view of intercultural awareness in Japan is at odds with the 'real' meaning of multiculturalism, since the education system and the media tend to deal with this subject on a more superficial level.

One issue that I find from my school visits is that some teachers reinforce stereotypes by telling students that foreigners have many difficulties in Japan, and thus need the assistance of Japanese people in their daily lives. This leads them to be disappointed when I can't share with them any notable difficulties that I experience in Japan.

For me, the message that I strive to send to students is that people from different backgrounds are not just always having trouble in life, but are also people capable of making a valuable contribution to society.

In some of my more recent school visits, I've decided to share my experiences growing up in Australia, and explain what it's like to have both an Australian and a Japanese family. My aim is to encourage students to empathise with other students who may come from different cultural backgrounds, and to help them realise that there's not always a clear distinction between being a 'foreigner' or being 'Japanese'.

With some classes, I like to do a personality test with students. By doing this, students can see that everyone in their class is different and has their own strengths as well as weaknesses. The message of the activity is that diversity is positive and that it's beneficial to recognise similarities with people, especially those from different backgrounds.

Even people with different cultures can share common interests and values, which can contribute to building positive relationships.

### Interpreting and Translating

Another part of my job is interpreting and translating. Overall, this aspect of my job has been balanced and enjoyably unpredictable. However, I did encounter issues with some of the requests we received. Some divisions lacked an understanding of the time needed to prepare and the intensity of the actual work. Communicating important details to CIRs in the days leading up to official events often seemed less than a top priority. This led me to create an official letter for prefectural divisions to read before requesting our services that outlines what interpreting is, possible limitations as well as the information and time needed to prepare.

### Social Media

At my workplace, my fellow CIRs and I are in charge of creating content for our Facebook page. My predecessors originally set this up to post personal accounts or essays about their cultural discoveries. However, I wanted to make content that would challenge people's prejudices and question stereotypes. For that reason, I made a proposal to change the name of our page to 'Humans of Mie'. The idea for this is based on the popular 'Humans of New York' page that features photos and interview excerpts of people on the streets of New York. Our page posts interviews of people in the same way as 'Humans of New York'. The interviews feature people from all walks of life who live in Mie Prefecture so that readers can discover the human side of those who may be different to them. My hope is that through these posts, readers may discover what Japanese and non-Japanese people have in common, and come to recognise the value of cultural diversity in Japan.

### Final Thoughts

I consider myself lucky to be able to explore new ways to promote intercultural understanding as a CIR. My hope is that Japanese and non-Japanese people of Mie Prefecture may appreciate diversity to a greater extent and truly discover the benefits of it in their own community.

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