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Early in the morning this Monday, I was sitting under the cherry blossoms in Fukuoka and thinking about how fortunate I was to be here in this incredible country. My thoughts took me back to the first time that I concretely remember hearing about Japan. I still recall it quite vividly. I was in an early grade at school and our English teacher – Ms. Myra Fernandes - started story time with a story about a little girl called Totto – Chan.

I assume that quite a few of the people in this room are familiar with her story but for those who aren't – in the early 1940s, Totto Chan was a little girl who was thrown out of public school for having attention deficit disorder. However, her mother found a new school for her run by an inspirational headmaster called Mr. Kobayashi. His school had students from all backgrounds – including children who suffered from polio or couldn't speak Japanese. The book had a profound effect on me and continues to impact children all around India and the world.

Twenty odd years later, I work in education for the World Bank – supporting the provision of education in places that are currently at war or are recovering from active conflict. Thanks to my own education – which was supported by the Sasakawa Foundation – I have had the opportunity to travel to more than sixty different countries on six different continents.

Today, I would like to reflect on three principles that I learnt from Totto Chan and I continue to use in my daily life -

1. Education doesn't mean school buildings. Tutto Chan studied in an old railway compartment. Formal structures are not important – what matters is that we keep learning and keep growing.

2. Inclusive education is vital. Only when people from different backgrounds – different countries, different cultures, different religions get together do we get out of our echo chambers and truly begin to learn.

3. Inspirational leaders make or break projects. We need ethical and motivational people like Mr. Kobayashi from our story to constantly challenge us and help us discover our unique sets of talents and abilities.

I aspire to be like him and I am honored to be here and among such inspirational leaders all around me. I'm deeply grateful to be in this wonderful country to which I owe so much. Arigato.