

Chikyu no Gakko: The mobile library project



As the bright yellow school bus pulled into the driveway of the kindergarten in Kamimachi, Japan, the children crowded against the window, pressing their faces against the pane in excitement. Pulling their boots on and zipping their jackets up, the children filed out of the building as the bus doors opened, revealing row upon row of picture books.

Helped by their teachers and Save the Children staff, the children poured over the books displayed in rows inside the bus and along the shelves set up in the windows, taking their time before making their selection.

Koichi Asano, 6, chose a book called “A door is open”, saying he chose it “because it looks scary” and plans to read it at home. Koichi likes books and says the mobile library – picture books on a bus – “is cool”.

Kyoka Oota chose a book called “A rabbit and a snowman”, because “I borrowed it before and read it, and it was interesting.” She likes the book because a rabbit is in the story. On the bus that came to visit their kindergarten, she says “it’s very nice, with lots of books!”

Haruhi Zanma says he chose a book called “Two bear cubs” because he likes animals, saying, “I thought that horses were in this book.” Haruhi is excited to read the book on his own, and says “I will read this book all by myself!” He likes the mobile library, and says about the bus “it’s cool, with lots of books!”



Kosei Ogawa chose a book about a child’s family moving to a new home, called “Bokunchi Hikkoshi” or “My family moves to a new house”. The cover on the book is of a family moving all their things on a big yellow bus, just like the mobile library bus – which Kosei says “looks interesting, with a lot of books” to choose from. “I feel happy,” he says, to be able to get new books to read.

Nanaka Imaizumi chose “Peter Pan” from the bus, “because it’s cool”, saying she knows Peter Pan already, and knows she likes it. She was surprised to see the bus pull up with so many books – “I was surprised to see it, because there are a lot books!” Nanaka likes reading because she says “it’s just fun!”

Save the Children provides ongoing technical and financial support to local non-profit organisation “Chikyu no Gakko”, who runs the Mobile Library project for kindergarten children across the affected areas of Japan. The bus travels around the areas hit by the earthquake and tsunami, visiting kindergartens, community centres and temporary houses, reaching at least 2,000 people per month.

Fukuko Shibuya is a teacher at one of the kindergarten visited by the mobile library. “The children were really looking forward to the bus coming, they didn’t expect so many books! It was hard for them to choose a favourite one among them. We’ve had a really great time – thank you so much.”

Although Kamimachi was not one of the heaviest hit areas, Fukuko explains that the children still felt the earthquake and were scared. “Even though we only had a little bit of damage here from the disaster, the children were frightened by the aftershocks.” She explains that the books can help children fight their fears and have a chance to lose themselves in the books, and use their imagination. “I think that the children can have a good time if they have even very small things that they can play with” she explains.



Reiko Aoto, another teacher at the kindergarten, agrees. “The children seemed to be afraid whenever the aftershocks hit. We tried to alleviate their fear as much as we could.” Although one year has passed since the disaster, Reiko still feels that children need places to play and let go of some of the stress they’ve felt over the past year. “We want the children to have an environment where they can play, carefree and happy.” She describes how happy the children were to see the bus pull up at their kindergarten. “The children looked so cheerful and their eyes were shining eyes as soon as they saw the bus. When they actually got inside the bus, they chose their books with a great joy. We appreciate it a lot and hope to have similar opportunities in the future.”

Interview with Mr. Chiba, head of local NGO “Chikyu no Gakko”



“Our headquarters were washed away by Tsunami, and most of our staff also lost their homes. Some of them evacuated to the rooftop and stayed there for the whole night. Ms. Koyanaghi, the deputy president of our organization and a central player in our “picture book project”, thought that we had to care for the children at evacuation centres as quickly as possible. So we called people from of all parts of Japan to gather picture books and send them to the disaster-hit areas. This is how our picture book project started.”

“We thought we should take care of children first. At evacuation centres and in other places, only the images of the Tsunami were aired on TV, repeatedly everyday, with nothing else. We thought that children needed to have time to feel relieved – not to escape reality, but [to avoid having] the children suffer from a feeling of fear. It would be like a second disaster. We thought of sending picture books to children so that they could relax a bit.”

“Fortunately many people supported us – they sent around 75000 picture books to our former headquarters which was damaged by the disaster. Our staffs and some volunteers sorted them and handed them out in our staff’s own cars directly at first. Since then we have been given different kinds of support, including a bus to send lots of books to disaster-hit areas in an effective way.

At the beginning, “when we brought picture books by our own cars to kindergartens, we couldn’t send so many books, only 2 or 3 boxes. We wanted to have a bus to bring books to much more children. We had the opportunity to talk to Save the Children and tell them about our idea. They liked it, and so we decided to do it together. Since then we often talk each other to make a strategy to make it happen, bringing us where we are today.”

“[Save the Children] gives us advice on organising activities, and also gives us financial support,” Mr Chiba explains. At the beginning, “we worked with no financial help and couldn’t pay for petrol for our volunteers. But Save the Children pays the cost of running our activities and pays for maintenance of a bus, and you have also given us the funds to purchase a small car.”

Mr. Chiba reflects on the changes since starting to work with Save the Children. “Before, we were accepted because we worked in the name of “Chikyu no Gakko”, but now we are perceived as a much more reliable group working in cooperation with Save the Children, which is well recognised as a leading organisation for children. When we visited Ishinomaki in a car with the “Save the Children” sticker, people there noticed it and welcomed us, saying, “You come back again!”

“Financial and material support is still very important even it becomes easier to get stuff we want, however, we the people in disaster-hit areas including us fear to feel to be lonely or isolated the most, like feeling we’ve already been forgot. So they are relieved to know that they are not forgotten, and that people around the world continue to help them. They are not as reassured when we visit them because we belong to them; we are members of their community. They think people from the same neighbourhood come again and are not as impressed with it. When they see volunteers coming from distant places to work with us, they are relieved to feel that they are not forgotten. We want you to tell them that you and the world don’t forget them. We think it the best support.”

In the future, Mr Chiba would like to continue receiving support for his organisation and thinks international NGOs like Save the Children should provide specific support to smaller, local organisations to help build up their capacity to respond on a larger scale and improve their skills to increase their scope of work for children. “Small groups like us have just started to build relationships with each other and act together locally. Please help us with your big power and love. We don’t still have an ability to do publicity work. Despite we can do on-the ground activities, we don’t know how to do other aspects well. So it will be very helpful for us if you support us by playing a part of coordination, training or giving seminars to us.”

Photos: Annie Bodmer-Roy / Save the Children