

Report on JETAA USA funding to Kodomo no Empowerment Iwate (EPaCH)

Rikuzentakata Tutoring Project

With seed funding from JETAA USA as well as from a number of other sources, a new nonprofit organization, Kodomo no Empowerment (EPaCh), was able to launch a tutoring program in Rikuzentakata City, one of the hardest hit places in Iwate Prefecture. One role of this sophisticated program is to help schoolchildren who have fallen behind in their coursework after the disaster. At the same time, it is designed to allow these children to interact with university students, who are serving as volunteers, in order to encourage the schoolchildren to confide in them about their concerns and hopes. In addition to offering encouragement and one-on-one instruction, the university students provide a sympathetic ear to the schoolchildren who are often not willing to confide in older adults about their problems and hopes.

To do this, Kodomo no Empowerment has established after-school “*Manabi no heya*” sessions (literally “learning rooms”). The aim is to provide greater educational opportunities for participating students and, while doing this, to create a safe space for them where they can get away from their cramped temporary housing and start to open up to the volunteers about the issues they are facing while their families are coping with unemployment, health problems, grief, psychological issues, and other challenges in the aftermath of the disaster.



Tutoring program at Rikuzentakata



Junior high school girls studying at the “Learning Room” at Rikuzentakata Daiichi Middle School

Kodomo no Empowerment has been holding its program on two weekdays and Sundays for junior high and elementary students at three schools in Rikuzentakata. This utilizes university students from the region as volunteers as well as 6 local tutors, several of whom have been unemployed. As of August 2012, it had more than 100 students enrolled, and generally 40 attend on a given day. It gives students the choice of three classrooms. The students in one classroom are tutored as a group on one particular subject, students in a second classroom can quietly study on their own or receive individual tutoring, and those in a third classroom can freely take part in whatever activity they wish, such as reading books for pleasure.

The Rikuzentakata program has been covered extensively in the national media, and the following are some of the reactions that it has elicited from participating students:

■ A senior female student from Takata Daiichi Junior High School comes to Manabi no Heya almost everyday, rain or shine or storm. She studies for an English proficiency test with help of a volunteer. “At the temporary housing, I don’t have my own desk, and it is so hard to focus with all the noises. But cram school costs money. I want to go to high school, then move on to college to become a nurse.” (*Asahi Shimbun* May 8, 2012)

■ A freshman from Takata Daiichi Junior High School says, smiling: “At the temporary housing, we can hear the neighbors like they are in our room. That makes me want to join their conversation, and makes it hard for me focus on study at home.” (*Yomiuri Shimbun* December 13, 2011)

■ A sophomore who also studies at Manabi no heyas says “We are family of five, but the temporary housing only has three rooms, and I don’t have a place to study at home. I can concentrate much better here.” (*Yomiuri Shimbun* December 13, 2011)



■ It is important to provide a space where students can feel safe and comfortable, bringing consistency into their lives while there are many uncertainties in the life after the disaster. One student in his senior year of junior high school was very restless, constantly asking for attention of volunteers when he began coming to Manabi no heyas. It was very difficult for him to sit quietly and focus on study. However, spending a few months at Manabi no heyas, he became more settled and able to focus on study and prepare for his entrance exam. (http://www.ninal.net/support/cat_02/20120627140146.html)

The initiative has turned out to be highly popular and successful so far, and the participating children have shown progress in a number of areas. All of the third-year middle school students in the program passed their entrance exams for high school despite having their schooling disrupted by the disaster and, in many cases having their schools damaged or destroyed. Also, the university student volunteers are reporting that the children participating in the program are starting to confide in them a great deal. (When a student confides in them with a problem, they let the student talk things through. When appropriate, they inform the student’s homeroom teacher or Board of Education that the student is having trouble with a particular issue, and the Board of Education has responsibility for communicating this to parents.) One thing that the volunteers have discovered is that more students than expected are still grappling with deep set grief, and the opportunity to speak with volunteers who are not so old as to be seen as unapproachable adults or authority figures gives them a rare outlet to talk through their feelings.

In addition to its program in 3 Rikuzentakata schools, Kodomo no Empowerment has recently begun a project at one site in Ofunato, another hard hit town 10 miles to the north. The Ofunato Board of Education is supportive of the program (and the former principal of the town's high school is even one of the main tutors), but it has recommended that the group conduct the tutoring sessions in communal space in the temporary housing settlements because it is leery of setting the precedent of offering space in a school building to just one of many groups. Currently, they have been given exclusive use of one empty apartment in a temporary housing settlement, and the board of education is encouraging them to expand to 2 other sites in town.

There are a number of students who wish to take part in the Ofunato tutoring sessions, but they have decided to limit it only to four third-year high school students, who need space to study for the all-important university entrance exams. Each participant has a small room with their own desk in a tiny two-bedroom apartment in the temporary housing. They are assisted by two tutors—the former principal of Ofunato High School and a young woman from Nagoya—who teach the students on a one-on-one basis from roughly 7 pm until 9:00 or 9:30 pm. Then, the students typically stay later on their own, studying quietly until 10:00 pm or even up to midnight. The students each have a key so that they can let themselves in and lock up when they leave.

One participant is an 18-year-old girl named Masako who is studying to go to Kansai School of Foreign Languages. When asked why she doesn't want to study at home in the temporary housing assigned to her family, and she looked shocked, saying "There is no way for me to study at home. My house is too small, and we only have two rooms. It is very noisy, and I cannot turn on the light to study when my parents get tired and go to sleep."



Masako, a participant in the Ofunato tutoring initiative, shows the desk where she studies for her university entrance exams.

Recognizing the success of the Kodomo no Empowerment activities, Japan's Ministry of Education has offered to provide support for their core activities in Rikuzentakata. This is a major step forward for the program, and the affiliation of the central government also lends considerable prestige and credibility to the group in its dealings with local officials and parents. Meanwhile, seeing the accomplishments of the program, United Way Worldwide, through the Central Community Chest of Japan, also made a \$220,000 grant to Kodomo no Empowerment in Spring 2012 to help it expand to additional cities.

Much of this was made possible because the prospect of JETAA USA funds provided some initial financial stability for the program. In the end, because the Ministry of Education had offered to pick up most of the direct costs of the program and Japanese government funding is highly inflexible, much of the JETAA USA funds have been used

to enable students to take the English Language Proficiency Exam (Eiken), which charge a fee that students from families devastated by the tsunami could otherwise not afford. Roughly 80% of all middle school students in Rikuzentakata, about 500 altogether, took the eiken exams in 2012, a record number that is more than three times higher than normal. The Board of Education has cited this as a great impetus for students to commit themselves to learning English which gives them a dream to work towards in their future, even while their families continue to face a depressing situation.



Appendix: Press Coverage of JETAA USA Donation to Kodomo no Empowerment

- 1) “Study Halls Opened in Honor of ‘Monty-sensei’,” Yomiuri Shimbun, November 5, 2011
- 2) Students in Rikuzentakata Take the Eiken in Memory of Monty, Kahoku Shimpō, January 19, 2012.

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During sessions at the halls, which are open three times a week in the evening and on weekends, students study on their own and can ask questions to former teachers and cram school instructors. The operators intend to run the sessions for two years.

At the city-run Daiichi Middle School, the first Manabi no Heya study session was held Tuesday. A total of 45 students studied for two hours from 7 p.m. in three classrooms.

Mai Sato, 13, a second-grade student at the school who lives in a temporary housing unit, expressed her appreciation. “I was so depressed by the death of Monty-sensei. But [thanks to him] this study hall was opened. I’m happy,” she said.

Naoko Watanabe, 36, an office worker in Tendo, Yamagata Prefecture, who was engaged to Dickson, expressed her hopes for his legacy.

“I think Monty is happy [to know about the study halls]. I hope Monty lingers in the memory of children in Rikuzen-Takata for a long time,” Watanabe, who once studied in the United States, said.

On the morning of March 11, Dickson was asked by his friend to translate a phrase from the essay “Koan no Taimatsu” (Ogata Koan’s torch), written by historical novelist Ryotaro Shiba (1923-1996) from Japanese into English.

The English translation was left on a piece of paper: “There is nothing as beautiful as dedicating oneself for a cause.”

The translation was given to Shelley Fredrickson, Dickson’s elder sister, who lives in Anchorage, Alaska.

Referring to the phrase, Fredrickson, 45, said, “Monty always made himself available to anyone who needed him.

“I’m so proud of him and all he had accomplished. I’m finding his inspiration is still flowing and continuing to make an impact on people who knew him as well as those that did not.” (Nov. 5, 2011)

Students in Rikuzentakata Take the Eiken in Memory of Monty

Kahoku Shimpō (Tohoku News)

January 19, 2012.

UNOFFICIAL TRANSLATION—Roughly 80% of all middle school students, about 500 altogether, in Rikuzentakata City, Iwate Prefecture, will take the English Language Proficiency Exam (Eiken), in part thanks to support from JETAA USA, whose donation will help to cover the cost of the test. This is one way to bring to life the wish of Montgomery Dickson, who taught English here as an ALT, and who told his students, “I want you to love English.”

Monty worked for the Rikuzentakata Board of Education since 2009 and was an assistant English language teacher at the city’s elementary and middle schools. Immediately after the earthquake on March 11 last year, he evacuated to a park near the board of education offices, but was lost to the tsunami shortly after.

Everyone knew him as “Monty-sensei”, and admired the way he diligently studied Chinese characters (kanji) and performed Japanese folk songs (enka) and comedy skits (manzai) at the board’s social functions. He dedicated himself to improving his students’ English ability, even holding classes for free over the winter break. He was very popular with his colleagues and students.

Despite the fact that the learning environment is still in disarray for middle school students in the city, the number of students registered for the exam on the 20th is about three times higher than this time last year. There have been three prep sessions this month, with many students working through problems from past tests and studying to get ready.

Dickson came to Japan on the JET Program, and after the disaster JET alumni from across the US collected money and created a fund to support recovery efforts in Tohoku, focusing their attention on Rikuzentakata and on Ishinomaki, in Miyagi, where the other American victim, Taylor Anderson, worked. This aid to the students is one expression of their warm wishes.

Rikuzentakata would also like to establish an exchange with Dickson’s home state of Alaska. Their hope is that in return for receiving so much support from around the world, they will become more outward looking themselves, and that their children become able to go to Alaska and speak in English about their memories of Monty and their own experiences in the disaster.

津波犠牲ALTの思い忘れず 陸前高田の中学生、英検挑戦へ

東日本大震災で甚大な被害を受けた岩手県陸前高田市で20日、市内全中学生の8割に当たる約500人が英語検定（英検）を受験する。市教委が支援団体の協力を得、受験料を全額補助することにした。異国の日本を愛し、日本語教師を夢見ながら、津波で犠牲になった同市の米国人男性英語指導助手（ALT）の「英語を好きになってほしい」との願いが生かされた。

ALTはモントゴメリー・ディクソンさん＝当時（26）＝。2009年から陸前高田市教委に勤務し、小中学校で英語の授業を補助していた。昨年3月11日の地震発生直後、市民会館内にある市教委からいったん近くの公園に避難したが、その後津波に襲われた。

「モンティ先生」の愛称で親しまれた。漢字の勉強にも人一倍努力し、職場の宴会で演歌や漫才を披露するなど周囲に溶け込んでいた。日本人の婚約者もいたという。

堪能な日本語で児童生徒や教員らとも積極的に交流、冬休み中には無償で子ども向けの英語教室を開催、英語力向上に尽力した。

同僚の熊谷卓さん（25）は「校外で芸術鑑賞中、こっそり入ってきたモンティさんに気付いた子どもたちが大騒ぎし、鑑賞どころでなくなった」とその人気ぶりを振り返る。

同市では被災で中学生たちの学習環境が整わないにもかかわらず、20日の英検申込者数が昨年同時期と比べ、約3倍に増えた。今月、受験対策講座が計3回開かれ、多くの生徒が過去の問題などに取り組んだ。広田中2年の臼井春香さん（13）は「もっと英語を好きになり、理解できるようになりたい」と話す。

ディクソンさんは、国のJETプログラム（外国青年招致事業）で来日した。震災後、事業に参加した米国人OBたちが全米で募金活動などを行い、復興支援基金を設立。現役ALTが犠牲になった陸前高田市と石巻市で重点的に教育支援しようと、支援団体などに寄付した。今回の補助にはこの善意が充てられる。

市教委は、ディクソンさんの出身地アラスカ州との交流も視野に入れる。学校教育課は「世界から支援を受ける今だからこそ、世界に目を向けてほしい。教え子たちがアラスカ州で、彼との思い出や震災の経験を英語で話せたらいい」と期待している。

2012年01月19日木曜日