

2025 Kan'ichi Asakawa Award
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Bridges Overseas Created by Picturebooks

Wakana Yokoyama, Third Grade

Fukushima University Attached Junior High School

“They scavenge for books in a pile of trash and read them.”

I could not believe my ears when I heard these shocking words. I heard them when I visited a slum in Thailand during a family trip over winter break last year. Until then, I had taken it for granted that people can read books. In Japan, most children are born into homes where books are easy to find, and many kindergartens and nurseries read picture books to help develop children's language skills. However, I learned that this is not the case in poor areas of the world.

In Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, which I visited last year, the economy is well developed, with many shopping malls and brand-name stores, and the atmosphere is not very different from Japan's. However, just a few minutes away, a slum spreads out in sharp contrast to the city.

The slum is called Khlong Toei, the largest slum in Bangkok, where about 100,000 people live in a crowded residential area. Many NGOs from around the world have offices there, and schools and libraries for children have been built. My parents and I visited the office of the Sikkha Asia Foundation, an organization that provides educational support in the slum, and we heard a story from a person who has been involved in education there for more than 40 years. The first words they spoke were the sentence at the start of this essay.

This experience made me want to study what education is like in poor areas, mainly in Southeast Asia, after returning to Japan.

I first focused on the literacy rates of adults aged 15 or older in poor areas in countries around the world. Statistics published by UNICEF, UNESCO, and Japanese NGOs such as the Shanti Volunteer Association, show adult literacy rates based on various data sources. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report 2020, literacy rates are 81% in Cambodia, 76% in Myanmar, 68% in Nepal, and 43% in Afghanistan. Compared to the others, Cambodia's 81% seems relatively high, but it still shows that roughly one in

five people cannot read. In a Japanese classroom of 35 students, this would mean that about seven students could not read, which really surprised me. Some more recent data show that adult literacy rates in Cambodia have now exceeded 90%, reflecting the results of ongoing support. Yet, about one in ten adults still cannot read.

Next, I looked into the current conditions and characteristics of these regions through videos on the internet. In Cambodia, education was disrupted by the civil war that started in 1970. Low literacy rates can even lead to accidents. For example, a man who could not read almost walked into a minefield because he did not understand the warning signs. He was saved at the last moment by a volunteer staff member who happened to be there and shouted, "That's a minefield!" When I heard this story, I understood that people learn to read in order to protect their own lives.

In Afghanistan, girls are not allowed to continue public education after elementary school under the policies of the Taliban regime. However, at libraries run by international NGOs, they can receive free lessons in subjects such as English and mathematics from volunteer staff. In one video, a girl said, "Going to the library is the only thing I enjoy." This made me understand once again how important libraries and education are.

In Myanmar, many people who have fled the country because of the junta's civil war are forced to live in refugee camps along the Thai border. In a video of a class at one of these camps, the children listened wide-eyed to the teacher's storytelling. With all his effort, a boy in the video wrote down what he had heard on a sheet of paper. His mother cannot read, so he reads to her what he has learned at school. I was deeply shocked, not only that his mother could not read, but also that, unlike in Japan, children read books for their parents.

Through learning about the current conditions in these countries, I came to understand that books and libraries, which are ordinary in Japan, are a source of emotional support and hope.

After finishing my research, I began to think about what I could do myself. Around that time, my father told me about the "Campaign to Deliver Picture Books" run by the Shanti Volunteer Association. This campaign delivers new Japanese picture books that include stickers translating the text into local languages to libraries and schools in areas upon request. So far, about 18,000 books have been sent overseas every year.

I immediately joined in as a volunteer and chose a picture book titled "Little Mouse, What Do You Want to Do When You Grow Up?" to be sent to Laos. It took about only 30 minutes to put the translated stickers on the book, although the time varied depending on the length of the book and the person doing the work.

According to the association's 2024 report, a total of 18,631 books have been delivered overseas. Knowing that the book I worked on would become one of them made me feel that I, too, was making an international contribution. I wrote my name in both Lao and Japanese on the last page. While writing in an unfamiliar language, I felt very happy as I imagined this book being sent to a library like the ones I had seen in the videos.

After seeing the slum in Thailand and watching videos about educational support in different countries, I was impressed to learn that people can still learn even in very harsh conditions. I also learned that you do not have to go abroad to help. By joining volunteer activities like this campaign, we can support education by using a little of our time. In today's world, we can become interested in many countries and regions and learn about their situations through the internet. From now on, I want to think about international support and cooperation not as issues in faraway countries, but as problems faced by people close to my own generation.