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Human Story

Grow Big, Little Doctors! Mai Sekiya, Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer

First physical measurements

In a training room at the Deep Eye Care Foundation (DECF), located in the northern part of Rangpur District of Bangladesh, about fifty children gathered around and stared intently at Ms. Mai Sekiya, Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer (JOCV).

"Which picture shows the proper way of measuring height? Select the right answer from the following 4 photos."

4 photos are projected onto the screen with music, each showing a different way of measuring heights. Children are delighted by Ms. Sekiya's rapid-fire style quiz program and they answer energetically to a barrage of questions asked by Ms. Sekiya.

Measuring height, weight, and eyesight are common body-measuring activities you often see in Japan. The body-measuring data is critical for tracking growth and detecting problems early in children, but Bangladesh has no such system for them.

To spread body measuring in Bangladesh, the government launched a campaign in elementary schools throughout the nation from August 23 through 28. As a part of this campaign, Ms. Sekiya and other JOCV members held a training session to teach the children how to measure height and weight. Still, the school lacks the necessary equipment, such as measuring bars and scales. For the eyesight test, professional guidance is fortunately available through the cooperation of DECF, who arranged the venue, but the rest of the methods were humble—the "measuring bar" was really a measuring tape placed on the wall, and the scales were common household ones. Nevertheless, it didn't seem to matter to the children, however, who were happy just to be able to clumsily measure their friends.

Undernourishment, a serious concern

This day featured two training sessions co-organized by DECF, District/Upazila Health Office and District/Upazila Education Office. Nearly ninety students from eighteen schools who were nominated as "Little Doctors" by their schools participated.

The government of Bangladesh adopted a system called "Little Doctor" to improve and spread school healthcare throughout the nation. Each school assigns 15 children to be "Little Doctors" and provide them with knowledge related to healthcare and sanitation—today the "Little Doctors" are responsible for teaching their friends at their schools the body measuring skills they learned in the session. Ms. Sekiya's mission is to spread the "Little Doctor" system, which has still not become fully popularized.

According to her, many Bangladesh schools used to rely on local healthcare workers for the children's health, before the "Little Doctor" system was introduced. Teachers had little awareness of healthcare education, and healthcare workers would merely visit schools once a year or so. One of the main goals of the "Little Doctor" system is to teach children the importance of health and how to manage their own bodies by spreading everyday knowledge among children. Since a school is the place where students come every day, it is possible to issue notices to children's families or give them new knowledge and information in a prompt manner.

A sampling survey carried out by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2011 revealed that nearly 41% of Bangladeshi children under age five were short and about 37% underweight for their age. These numbers have gradually declined over the last decade, but the results suggest that the country still suffers from a serious child malnutrition issue, since it hasn't yet achieved the target of holding underdeveloped children down to 20%. Short stature resulting from malnutrition does not only affect poorest segment of the population in Bangladesh. According to the World Bank, about 54% of the poor children in this country are short, while nearly 26% children from wealthy families also suffer from the condition. These figures are for children under 5, so it is particularly important to provide health and nutrition education at schools that everybody attends.

If even one of these children...

Ms. Sekiya, who worked as a leader of the training session, was sent to Bangladesh in September 2012 for Community Development. Before that, she worked for a Japanese TV program production company as an assistant director for three years. She enjoyed the job, but was exhausted by long and irregular hours of work. One day, a poster on the wall of a subway caught her eye. It was for recruiting Overseas Cooperation Volunteers for JICA.

"Let's change the world, and yourself!", the poster said.



Ms. Sekiya talks to children in the Little Doctor training session in Rangpur District (other pictures are from the same venue)



"Your height is..." Little Doctors try to measure the height.



Children learned how to check eyesight, thanks to support from the Deep Eye Care Foundation (DECF)



Quiz program on body measuring. Children look up eagerly at Ms. Sekiya.

Ms. Sekiya had been interested in international cooperation for a long time, but her actual job could not have been farther from her dream. She , and like a

fish in water, she was a born leader

had almost made up her mind to change jobs after working for 3 years. She saw the poster just at the right time. She joined JOCV . Her outstanding planning ability, which she had developed through creating TV programs, coupled with her enthusiasm, powered the Little Doctor training session forward.

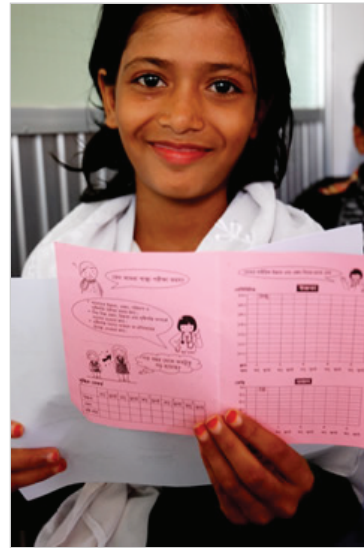
One unique feature was that other JOCVs working in Rangpur District actively helped to run the Little Doctor training session. To ensure that the body measuring went smoothly, JOCVs divided the forty children into several groups and led them to different sections for height, weight, and eyesight in different order. They then patiently helped children learning how to read the scale and read aloud the measurement. Ms. Sekiya could not have done it alone. This body-measuring session would become a new model for JOCVs' cross-sector collaboration.

Ms. Sekiya is passionate about the idea that "we must make the children feel proud of themselves to raise awareness." In this session, JOCV members tried to make children feel special—for example, by arranging buses to bring children to the venue. At the end of the session, they distributed expensive sweets and juice to reward them. Such small achievements actually raise children's awareness and foster their sense of responsibility.

"If even one of these children becomes a doctor in the future, our activities will do something better for 1,000 people", Ms. Sekiya says.

Each volunteer must face the front line of development assistance on their own. The results of their efforts cannot be quantified and are often invisible. Still, the volunteers feel strongly that their efforts are worthwhile. Today, the eyes of the children listening to Ms. Sekiya's speech were sparkling, hinting at the potential for a brighter future.

Change a person, and you change the world.



Every child is given a card to keep track of their growth. These are also handmade by JOCVs.