

THE JOYS OF A LITERACY- ORIENTED FAMILY

Providing opportunities to read for all

By **Mari Sawa**



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*m*any families have seen information about how children who are readers attain higher levels of academic success. This awareness can lead to an unintended outcome: As families feel the pressure to raise successful children, they read to their children out of obligation, not out of joy. But isn't reading supposed to be a joyous activity?

At the bilingual early learning center in Okayama, Japan, where I work, I have developed two family book club programs to help change this mind-set. One program is to help develop a community of readers among the adults and help them become reading role models for their children. The other is for parents who want to learn English—which addresses another dilemma I've witnessed.

One of my biggest concerns when I moved to Japan was the pressure that parents place on their children to learn English and their lack of participation in instilling the skill, which seemed like a contradictory mind-set. Parents were requiring English learning for their children, yet they were not modeling the importance of learning the language.

However, I soon would learn through conversation with the parents that they *were* interested in their child's education. They simply did not know how to get involved. Again, my answer was through books.

Becoming an adult reader

Most parents had heard about the relationship between early literacy and language acquisition. They knew that early literacy was important for their children, hence they read aloud to their children, but they were not concerned about their lack of enthusiasm toward their own reading lives. "I was never a reader" or "I stopped reading when I had children. I became too busy!" were two responses often given when discussing their reading lives.

Fostering lifelong readers starts with adult models who enjoy reading. I needed family members to get on board with modeling reading at home. Most important, these adult readers could not be reading out of obligation, but out of joy.

Though book clubs have been a norm in American education and lifestyle, this was a new concept for Japanese families when I started it four years ago as a family engagement program. Critical thinking, text analyzation, and discussions are skills that Japanese education have sidelined in the curriculum. With this in mind, forming a book club where parents were discussing their opinions and perceptions had its challenges. There were not many who were ready to speak or become vulnerable; they were simply waiting for the facilitator (the teacher) to provide the "appropriate" answers.

The first two years were difficult; I felt like I was hearing from only myself. But with much practice, trial and error, and patience from the families and myself, we are going into our fifth year of book clubs hosted by the school. Some books that we have read are as follows:



Photo courtesy of Earth8ight School

- *Matilda* by Roald Dahl (Puffin Books)
- *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio (Knopf Books for Young Readers)
- *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (Balzer + Bray)
- *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (HMH Books for Young Readers)
- *Born a Crime: Stories From a South African Childhood* by Trevor Noah (One World)

We began by reading children's and young adult novels, which were shorter and easier for the parents to read. As mentioned, the parents were not readers, so we began our journey by slowly building up the habit and concentration. The point of the book club was to form a habit of reading and for the parents to enjoy reading, hence the chosen books were those that had already been translated to Japanese.

Sharing reading habits with children

As the parents began to see the fun in reading and they formed a community

of readers, they then asked for reading material in English so that they could learn the second language alongside their children.

English education in Japan has been under scrutiny as one of the least effective in the developed countries. The parents who claimed to have learned English during their time as students had very little knowledge and use of the language. Hence, we started another club in which parents learned English through picture books.

The parents and I get together every month to read and learn from a selected picture book that the children enjoy reading at school. The parents are provided with a chance to learn vocabulary, grammar, and read-aloud tips so that they can practice what they learned with their children at home. Each parent purchases the selected picture book so that the family has access to the books at home.

Family growth

These engagement programs started by listening to the needs of the families. Fostering joy and a love for reading

among the parents has affected their children as well. Children who squirmed and played with toys during read-aloud time became intent readers when their parents became readers at home. Their eyes now sparkle with joy when we read familiar and new books at school.

The love for reading has brought together our school community. Families have said that picture books have bound their family by increasing discussion and shared emotion. Parents who have "graduated" from our early learning center because their child moved on to elementary school still come back every month to the literacy community. When the COVID-19 pandemic impacted our school activities, families asked to continue the book clubs and picture book lessons via Zoom in order to maintain the relationships.

Instilling the joys of reading in previously disengaged adults has impacted the entire family's engagement in reading and has truly made a difference in developing a reading community at our school. ■