

## **Supporting Post-Disaster Community Resettlement: Some perceived short-term and long-term effects of the “Nashi No Hana Volunteer Project” (2012-2016)**

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**Abstract :** From September 2012, just 18 months after the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake, to February 2016, a total of 135 students enrolled at Miyagi University of Education (M.U.E.) have travelled as volunteers to Aizu Wakamatsu City in Fukushima Prefecture, staying for 5 days to assist teachers in the nursery, primary and junior high schools specifically set up to cater for children aged 3 to 15 who were forced to evacuate from Okuma Town, which is situated on the eastern coast of Fukushima and more importantly is one of the two municipalities which hosts the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant.

On 12 March 2011, these children along with all adult residents of Okuma were forced to leave their hometown due to high levels of nuclear fallout, released as an emergency measure after a tsunami hit the plant, knocked out the electrical power supply and left it out of control.

This paper examines data in the form of both written feedback and interviews with students who took part in volunteer activities in schools, as well as the staff at the Okuma schools in Aizu Wakamatsu City and the author's own observations as leader on all seven visits. From these, several short and long term effects to the students and the schools have been identified.

Short term effects, such as the M.U.E. students being able to increase their first-hand experience of various educational contexts were identified as a positive outcome of the programme. Subsequently, one of the long term effects for the M.U.E. students who took part in the programme several times, was the opportunity for much stronger individual ties to be built up and a much more detailed extended observation of children's development over a longer time span.

Effects for the children and staff in the schools have also been identified through feedback and interviews as very positive and actually more acute as time went on. This has been shown to be because of the severe depletion of the numbers of the Okuma children, causing the children and staff to have increased feelings of isolation, so that anticipation before each visit, and appreciation towards the M.U.E. students for coming increased in later visits.

**Key words :** Various Educational Contexts (様々な教育現場), Repeated Visits (継続的支援)

### **1. Background to the establishment of the programme.**

The author was employed by Okuma Town, Fukushima, one of the two municipalities which hosts the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, as a Native English Teacher (N.E.T.) from May 1998, for a total of thirteen years, up to the day of the earthquake on 11 March 2011. This involved her teaching English at the Junior High School for four years

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and then working as the sole N.E.T. in the two primary schools (P.S.), Ono P.S. and Kumamachi P.S. for nine years. In addition the author taught regular adult evening English classes in the local community and worked on the International Association committee which organized sister-city exchange visits with Bathurst, N.S.W. Australia.

As can be expected, during this time deep connections between the author and the Okuma community were established and she got to know numerous individuals as well as whole families. Also through continuous employment at the same Board of Education, deep ties were also built up with the administration staff and in particular the Head of the Board of Education, Mr Toshihide Takeuchi.

After the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster the townspeople of Okuma were evacuated to Tamura City and later Aizu Wakamatsu City and the author was also forced to evacuate her home due to the same high nuclear fallout levels, so was left unemployed. However, from July 2011 she was first employed as the sole Assistant Language Teacher (A.L.T.) in Minamisoma City and then from April 2012 as a Specially Appointed Associate Professor at M.U.E. It was then that the idea of trying to arrange a visit with M.U.E. students to assist the staff in the evacuated Okuma schools in Aizu Wakamatsu, and in some way re-pay the kindness of the Okuma people, was conceived.

The name chosen for the programme, “Nashi no Hana,” refers to the town flower for Okuma, which was a major producer of Japanese nashi pears and these flowers created a beautiful fragrant white blanket over almost the whole town in May every year.

The first successful visit with seventeen students was carried out in September 2012. Details of this visit and student feedback in Japanese can be read in a previous paper, “The Okuma and M.U.E. Friendship Programme,” (Nemoto, 2012).

## 2. Further development of the programme.

This first visit in September 2012 was expected by the author and the organizers to be a onetime event, but on the final day the Okuma staff mentioned how deep the snow in winter is and joked that they would appreciate the volunteers help shovel snow in the winter. This led to the second “Nashi no Hana Project” visit in February 2013, with 23 M.U.E. students which lasted again for five days and then five further visits in both summer and winter were made also possible over the four year period. See Table 1 below.

To explain the programme in more detail, the “Nashi no Hana Project” is supported by the Educational Redevelopment and Support (E.R.S.) Department of M.U.E. both in organizational and financial matters. Any student at the university can take part and sends an application to the department by e-mail. At pre-departure orientation M.U.E. students hear about the background to the Okuma children’s situation, what they need to take on the visit and then choose which educational establishment they will visit, either the nursery school (3-5 year olds) one of the two primary schools (6 -12 year olds)

Number	Date	Students
1	September 2012 (4 nights/ 5 days)	17
2	February 2013 (4 nights/ 5 days)	23
3	September 2013 (4 nights/ 5 days) Sports Day	23
4	February 2014 (4 nights/ 5 days)	25
5	September 2014 (4 nights/ 5 days) Sports Day	10
6	September 2015 (4 nights/ 5 days) Sports Day	13
7	February 2016 (4 nights/ 5 days)	24
Total		135 volunteers

Table 1. Record of the frequency, dates and numbers of students on the programme.

or Okuma Junior High School (13-15 year olds). This choice is basically up to each individual student, but the organizers make sure a general balance of numbers between the three options is achieved.

Students depart on a specially chartered coach supplied by funds from the E.R.S. Department from the M.U.E. Aobayama Campus or another location in downtown Sendai and travel to Aizu Wakamatsu City where they stay in accommodation also paid for by the E.R.S. Department. Breakfast and dinner each day is provided by the university in the same way and students only have to pay for school lunch (approximately ¥250 per day) out of their own pocket.

Accommodation has been at business hotel type facilities with each student in a single room, but also at national youth hostels, where up to 8 students of the same sex share one room. After activities at the three facilities on the last day, students again return to Sendai by specially chartered coach paid for by the E.R.S.D.

### 3. Changing needs and decrease in numbers of children at the Okuma Schools.

The aforementioned Head of the Okuma Board of Education, Mr Toshihide Takeuchi, describes setting up the Okuma schools after the disaster in Aizu Wakamatsu in his book; “Okuma Town’s challenge in restarting schools” (2012), and points out that approximately half the children from the town evacuated there in April 2011. An expected 1,485 children were to start the school year after the spring break, in April 2011, but only 708 moved with their families to Aizu Wakamatsu where schools were set up for them. The others chose to evacuate to Tokyo or other large and small cities and prefectures all over Japan to live with relatives or family members and start school there.

Despite this drop in numbers, beginning to prepare adequate facilities, resources and equipment to school 700 children aged 3-15 years old was an enormous task for the administrators and staff at the two nursery schools, two primary schools and the junior high school when only unused or semi-derelict school buildings were available for use in Aizu Wakamatsu.

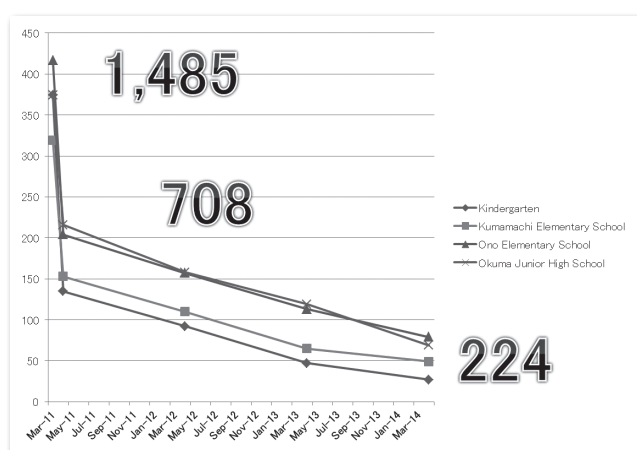


Table 2. This shows the decrease in the numbers of children aged 3-15 years old, enrolled in the Okuma schools in the period from March 2011 to March 2014.

Due to the hard work of the staff and students too, schools started again successfully, but the children attending have decreased gradually each year. The numbers are now down to just 122 children from nursery to junior high school, which is only 8.2% of the school population at the time of the disaster.

Reasons for families moving away from the official evacuation site with such services provided by Okuma Town are varied, but from staff interviews, it has been learnt that now there is a large group of residents living in the southern mild coastal area of Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture.

A major reason cited, by staff at the Okuma schools, for further resettlement after first moving to Aizu Wakamatsu is the harsh weather conditions there in the winter, which the residents from the much milder coastal area of Okuma Town found difficult to get used to, especially the heavy winter snow meaning clearing pathways and cars before going to work

every morning.

Another reason cited for families moving away from this area has been work related issues. As mentioned above, Okuma Town hosts the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant and a large percentage of the working adults in the community were employed either there or at the second, Fukushima Daini Nuclear Power Plant further down the coast, at the time of the disaster. As these adults are still employed by Tokyo Electric Power Company and still go to work there to deal with the clearing up process and now dismantling of the plant, the drive is 116.6 kms taking approximately 2 hours from Aizu Wakamatsu City. Moving to Iwaki makes the commute to work easier, just 57.6 kms, or an hour by car to Okuma Town from Iwaki, for those still working at the power plants on the coast.

Looking into other reasons and actual numbers would be the basis of another paper, but as the “Nashi No Hana Project” has been visiting the Okuma schools in the period September 2012 to February 2016 the depleting numbers of children have been very obvious and startling to the M.U.E. students, especially those which have made more than one visit.

The students have often said that the children seem more lonely and say that they miss their friends who have moved away to live elsewhere. In this way, by continuing the programme for 4 years, we have been able to see further problems arising from community resettlement first-hand and the needs of the Okuma children changing as time goes on.

The Okuma staff have said in interviews that they and the children look forward to the M.U.E. students coming more, now there are fewer children in each class, as the children feel more lonely and somewhat left-behind now, than when the volunteer programme first started and there were many children all studying and starting a new life together in each class. By looking at the two photos of Sports Day, below the decrease of 60% in numbers over 2 years is quite obvious.



Photo 1. September 2013, 300 children.



Photo 2. September 2015, 122 children.

When looking at the changes over time that have naturally come about, another is the change in the activities the M.U.E. students undertake. After the successful first and second visits in September 2012 and February 2013, when support in studying and exchange with the children were the main activities, Okuma Town asked if M.U.E. students could come in September 2013 on the days which coincided with the Sports Day held for all 300 children at the nursery schools, primary and junior high schools, see photos above. In this way, the Okuma staff were assessing their own needs and asking for support from our programme and this was an important shift in the relationship between those receiving and giving support.

It was much easier for us to go with a clear purpose of helping out at the very large and important event of Sports Day and the days running up to Sports Day when practice is held and extra hands are always needed. The M.U.E. students have now helped at 3 consecutive Sports Days from 2013-2015.

However, when we look back at problems faced over the four years of operation, the programme has had to be

promoted regularly and effectively to attract sufficient participants each time and although it was possible to take up to 25 students each time and this maximum number was achieved just once, in February 2014, the least was just 10 students in September 2014 and the unfortunately the programme wasn't able to be held in February 2015 due to lack of participants available.

#### 4. Collection of data for this study.

This paper examines data in the form of informal interviews and written feedback from students who took part in volunteer activities in schools, informal interviews and written feedback from staff at the Okuma schools in Aizu Wakamatsu City and the author's own observations as leader on all seven visits.

Written feedback has been collected from all participating students soon after each visit, but to focus on the most relevant data, showing the present situation in the Okuma schools, only the most recent comments written in September 2015 are actually quoted in this paper. Student interviews were of an informal nature and are not included.

In September 2015, both written feedback in the form of questionnaires and interviews with staff in the Okuma schools were conducted as part of data collection to supplement written feedback from students in preparation for a presentation on supporting community resettlement and educational issues at an international conference in Shizuoka, Japan, in November 2015 and formed the basis for this paper.

#### 5. Some perceived short and long term effects of the programme for M.U.E. students.

##### 5.1 Short-term effects

Almost all of the M.U.E. undergraduates are on courses leading to them becoming certificated teachers in primary or junior and senior high schools and they have teaching practice in years three (two weeks) and four (three weeks) to gain practical experience in schools, develop classroom teaching skills and awareness, and allow observation of practicing teachers.

When promoting the programme to potential volunteers as mentioned above, emphasis on the value of visiting various schools to get further experience and facilitate wide observation of children and teachers was emphasized as an advantage to students who aim to become teachers in the future.

Certainly one of the short-term effects of the "Nashi No Hana Volunteer Project," that is mentioned frequently in the students' feedback, is that students can visit any school of their choice and observe children from a wide age group (3-15 years), this may be different from the age group, for example, that they focus on in their classes and teaching practice at university and adds another, deeper perspective on child development.

As for the students studying to be primary school teachers, on this programme, they can focus on the subtle differences between lower (first and second years), middle (third and fourth years) and upper (fifth and sixth years) age ranges and compare this to their experience in teaching practice where in year three and four of their studies they will be assigned to just one class in a single year group each time.

Providing opportunities to assist children in the Special Needs Education classes at primary and junior high school is another aspect of the programme that has allowed undergraduates to have valuable experiences they normally wouldn't be able to receive. One male student helped out in such a class for two visits running and after the second visit even received letters of thanks from the children's parents, praising his efforts and saying how much their child had enjoyed studying with him.

Even though students are on courses leading to certification as teachers, some choose other career paths in private



companies, work as civil servants and join private cram schools, essentially each student thinks a lot about what they want to do in the future as they take classes on education, their specialized subject and go on teaching practice. Sometimes students are not sure if they are cut out to be teachers and in this respect the programme has seen to have some positive effects;

“There were some reasons that I had decided to join Nashi No Hana project this time. At that time, I just finished teaching practice at a junior high school and thought I have to know more about children. So I wanted to go to not only junior high schools, but also elementary schools as a volunteer worker to get more chances with children... Through this time, I recognized I really wanted to be a teacher in the future. To achieve this dream, I’ll study hard and learn more and more in my university,” student Y, (2015).

One of the most clear short-term effects was students being impressed and inspired by the strength of the Okuma children living in the state of evacuation away from their home-town, for what will be five years this April. In student reports this is mentioned frequently and one student sums up his feelings and writes; “I felt that the Okuma children have painful memories, but they enjoy living now. They gave me the power to challenge everything,” student M., (2015). It could be said that volunteer activities such as this, have a deep effect on the motivation of M.U.E. students, but whether that is a short or long term effect is very hard to define.

Another short-term effect is for M.U.E. students to have the opportunity to interact with each other and talk about their future careers and other things;

“In this project, there were various students. There were seniors, juniors and sophomores. And also there were students in other courses, not just English majors. We talked about examinations to become a teacher, hobbies, studies and volunteers. Each of them was precious experience for me. We could get a lot of points of view from other students and have a really good time in Fukushima,” student Y., (2015).

Indeed, various students from very different backgrounds and focus areas have taken part in the programme including, a student who was a resident of Aizu Wakamatsu City and wanted to help the Okuma community in some way, but didn’t have the opportunity before, four students with hearing impairment studying to be junior high school English teachers, one student who was taking a year off studies due to emotional exhaustion and joined as a step to get back into school life and an exchange student from Hawaii University. In this way, it can be said that the students on the programme and the Okuma children too have been able to meet and interact with a wide variety of people through the programme.

## 5.2 Long-term effects for M.U.E. students

By continuing this programme and allowing students to join again, causes a long-term effect of greatly increasing the first-hand experience of students various educational contexts, allowing close observation of children’s development and teachers actions or teaching in numerous formal and non-formal contexts.

One student who went on all seven visits, was able to develop strong personal ties with the Okuma children and effectively follow the same children’s development over four years. It can be said that experiences such as these which are vital for teachers in training, cannot be taught in a university classroom or through a textbook, but only by going out into schools and interacting with children first hand and each time he has been able to observe different situations in the schools and seen how teachers deal with them. For example, he talks about how he learnt that scolding bad behavior takes courage, but it is necessary;

“We can study how to be a teacher by everything we experience on the volunteer programme. What I studied the

best was scolding. Scolding needs a brave heart. When I joined this project for the first time, I happened to see a student harassed other student. I thought I must have scolded the student, but I couldn't do it because I am afraid of being disliked at that time. After that by seeing a class teacher scold her, I thought I must scold students to be a good teacher when they hurt other's feelings. In the first project, I studied that scolding is important to be a teacher," M.U.E. student S., (2015).

It can be said that long-term effects are impossible to effectively assess because of their nature, of a delayed effect, for example a student who took part in the programme in her first year and was at the time studying to be a primary school teacher, joined the nursery school children, but she liked that age group so much she decided to also take courses in nursery education, gained certification and this April will become a nursery school teacher in Sendai. Her experience on the programme helped her find which aspect of education really appealed to her and provided the motivation to work towards achieving her goal of becoming a professional in that area.

One volunteer student was by chance from Okuma and an evacuee herself, so by joining the programme was able to meet up with and support members of her own community and assist them in resettlement. She was a junior high school student who had her graduation ceremony on 3.11 itself and was evacuated suddenly the next day, just like the children presently at the Okuma schools. In a letter to the sixth grade students after the visit in September 2016, she writes;

"By participating on the volunteer programme, I was so happy to see that you all were happy and smiling each day although you experienced the dreadful disaster. For me too it was very tough when my friends moved away from Fukushima and I felt sad and lonely. I think you are sad that your friends moved away too. Those friends are also sad moving away, and frustrated that they won't be able to graduate with you all together, but this is a very hard truth we have to live with.

Do you remember Okuma before the disaster? From now on there will be children who don't know or remember their real hometown, Okuma, so it's important for you to keep those memories. The memories of your time here in Aizu Wakamatsu are important too and will also become cherished and valuable to you. This actually will become a great treasure of yours in the future.

Because you overcame such a disaster, you don't know it, but there are many things great things that you can do in the future. I hope you all find something you want to do or want to be in the future and all have happy lives. I'm cheering you on. I hope and wish with all my heart for the day we can all return to the real Okuma and see everyone together in our community again."

The M.U.E. students always write letters of thanks to the staff and letters of encouragement to the class they visited, but a message such as this, from someone who really knows how the children feel, but is now studying psychology to become a school counselor, must surely serve as encouragement to the evacuated children.

Another unexpected result of the programme was the actions of a student who after participating several times, then went to study in Sweden as an exchange student for a year. She wrote about how she could create a very worthwhile experience for children in Sweden and help the Okuma children, back in Fukushima;

"I am in Sweden now, so I could not take part in Nashi no Hana this summer, but I tried to keep in touch with Okuma children in a different way. I had an opportunity to make a presentation about Japan to six graders in Montessorriskolan for two days. On my first day, I asked the students what the word "Japan" reminds them of. One of the students answered "FUKUSHIMA" . So, I decided the second day to tell them about Okuma and how the children had to evacuate from their hometown.

After that, they decided to write letters to encourage the pupils in the town. Pupils in Sweden and Okuma have not

met each other, but I found that the Swedish pupils, who listened to my presentation, thought about the Okuma children’s situation and feelings very much. I felt that even if people are living far from Fukushima, they can have affection for the people who suffered this kind of disaster,” student O., (2015).

## 6. Effects on the Okuma children and staff

From staff interviews and written feedback, several effects of the programme can be identified. The main one is that because Okuma values any support of education including visits from all sorts of people in Japan and elsewhere, for example their sister-city in Australia, from the very first visit, they welcomed the M.U.E. students and viewed the interaction of children with university students as a valuable experience. They see such interaction with various people an advantage for the evacuated children and it as a way of enriching the education they provide. In this way, the M.U.E. students visiting and communicating with the children can be said to be a positive effect of the programme. One member of staff writes; “We’re simply glad that the students come to the Okuma schools, because meeting others creates a good chance for our students to communicate with all sorts of people.”

Regarding the university students’ visits as having a positive on children’s perceptions of future career and educational routes, the feedback is also very positive. One teacher writes; “Through talking with the university students, children became more motivated and interested in studying for their future.”

The staff were very appreciative of the assistance they received during the visits and spoke highly of the M.U.E. students’ attitude overall; “We felt the energy and dedication of the young people towards our children and education in general.”

It was pointed out that by being on the receiving end of volunteer activities shows the evacuated children how humans can help each other; “The children can learn about how we feel grateful after help from others, through this project,” and “We can learn about “consideration for others” and “living together in harmony” from watching the university students’ volunteer activities.”

As the programme has progressed, one thing that has come out from feedback from both sides is the importance of the continuity of such a programme. One visit didn’t really do that much to benefit the Okuma children, but continuing the visits has been the strength and now the staff and children look forward to these visits, especially now numbers of children have dropped so severely, to just 8% of the school population (3-15 years) before the disaster.

One of the head teachers sums it up by saying; “The teachers could observe the importance and effect of continuity, through the repeated visits by the students,” and “We really appreciate your continued support, even though it’s four years since the earthquake. Please come again.”

## 7. Conclusion

From examining data in the form of both written feedback from and interviews with students who took part in volunteer activities in schools, as well as the staff at the Okuma schools in Aizu Wakamatsu City and the author’s own observations as leader on all seven visits several short and long term effects to the students and the schools have been identified. Positive feedback has been very encouraging to the organizers, leader/author and participating students in the programme over the last four years and every effort will be made to continue this support in the future, even though severe budget cuts are predicted in the fiscal year for 2016. It is hoped to continue this programme as long as there are evacuated children at the schools set up for them.



## 8. Acknowledgments

The author wishes first of all, to thank the hardworking and very supportive staff in the E.R.S. Department of M.U.E. Without their continued assistance and financial support, seven visits over four years would not have been possible.

More importantly however, thanks is due to the staff at the Okuma Board of Education who accepted the offer in 2012 for the first visit and has worked with the author and the E.R.S. Department to coordinate the visits smoothly each time. For them to fully cooperate and allow 135 undergraduate students to visit their schools, meet and mix with children and staff, starting just 18 months after the disaster and their traumatic evacuation to Aizu Wakamatsu, has meant that those students could gain the valuable experiences mentioned above, some which could even be classed as life changing.

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