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The magic of bedtime stories

Project that broadcasts tales and poetry to left-behind children in China's school dorms yields positive results

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Do you believe in the magic of stories? Du Shuang, chairwoman of the charity Growing Home, draws on her five years of experience to answer this question with a forceful "yes".

Founded in 2008, Growing Home was initially established to help the children of rural migrant farmers who move to big cities to integrate into urban life.

But in the winter of 2012, while investigating remote areas of Northwest China's Gansu province, Du encountered the despair faced by the left-behind children of migrant workers living in boarding school dormitories. She noticed that they were in dire need of love.

"I found it wasn't easy for these boarders to get to sleep quickly on cold nights. Noise and the sound of crying continued in the dormitory building long after the lights were turned off. People are often haunted by emotional fragility when the day darkens," said Du, a former journalist who is also a psychotherapist.

She recalled a case she read about in *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, a best-selling novel by US educator Jim Trelease.

"It's about a volunteer who insisted on reading healing bedtime stories aloud to young offenders in the rural United States, which helped rein in their aggression and prevented them from inflicting harm on themselves," Du said. "That inspired me to think of the feasibility of using stories to soothe these fragile children through long winter nights."

To put the idea into practice, the Growing Home foundation developed its New Tales from a Thousand and One Nights project the following year, sending a series of 15-minute stories to the bedsides of left-behind children in 30 primary schools via a system of loudspeakers in every dorm.

"Generally, parents keep their children company after school. But for those young boarders who weren't able to stay with their families most of the time, we had to offer some hope," Du said. "The stories, told in a soft, soothing voice, turned into their daily companion."

Editors and teachers were invited to hunt for stories conducive to children's healthy psychological development in the hope of helping them get along better with classmates, form



A primary school student in Chuxiong, Southwest China's Yunnan province, listens to a bedtime story.

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better habits, overcome difficulties, adjust to a new environment and deal with other problems.

Li Chunyan, who studied Chinese and folklore in college, became a "story hunter" after she joined the organization in 2016.

As a former left-behind child, the 33-year-old immediately understood the loneliness of the boarders and their inner thoughts, and was in her element when it came to selecting suitable stories from literary works.

"I prefer stories that bring the children a sense of familiarity or identity," said Li. "For instance, in some less-developed places, children don't even have an idea of what a toilet bowl is, so we try to choose stories that present familiar scenes."

The project collected 1,001 stories for primary school students and 300 for middle school students. The subject matter varies from one grade to another, which means a first-grade boarder would be able to hear a different story every night over the course of several school terms.

It only costs Growing Home 5,000 yuan (\$720) on average to install an audio system in a school, which allows the project to cover more schools and students and provide a positive influence on children's growth and development.

"We've built an online platform where participating schools can download new stories. After setting



A board shows the title of a story.

up the system, the stories can be broadcast across the campus dorms automatically every day," said Du. "It's quite labor-saving, just like a school bell."

The benefits quickly become apparent. As US educator Trelease described in his book: "Every time we read to a child, we're sending a pleasure message to the child's brain. You could even call it a commercial, conditioning the child to associate books and print with pleasure."

The bedtime stories quickly won popularity among young boarders and have reached nearly 1.7 million students in almost 6,000 schools across rural China.

Ma Hainan, a fourth-grade student in Lijiao town's primary school in Southwest China's Yunnan province, found that some stories supple-

ment what she has learned in class.

"I love listening to stories related to my textbooks, such as the story about People's Liberation Army soldier Qiu Shaoyun, and that of Aladdin and his magic lamp," the 11-year-old said.

Yin Nianhong, a teacher from a primary school in Weifen town in North China's Shanxi province, said that about 90 percent of students in his primary school are left-behind children, and most of them had seldom heard a bedtime story.

"When the tales ring out at night, students become more settled and enjoy a more peaceful night's sleep," he said.

Yin said he also found that students tended to discuss the plots of the stories with their peers during the daytime and mentioned the stories in their diaries and compositions.

"The project exerts a formative influence on the children's ability to learn, to read and to write," said Yin. "The stories are recited and recorded by professional broadcasters, and they help them become fluent in Mandarin."

Song Yingquan, a researcher at the China Institute for Educational Finance Research, was invited by Growing Home to assess the effects of the project by conducting a two-year scientific randomized-control trial in 132 schools across five coun-

ties in two provinces.

The results showed that the bedtime stories improved students' sleep quality, reduced bullying, eliminated depression and fostered enthusiasm for books and reading.

The process of urbanization has transplanted numerous migrant workers and their families from rural areas to cities, greatly reducing the number of students in the countryside. So, it has become a growing trend to see several neighborhood schools amalgamated into a single boarding school, turning left-behind students into boarders.

According to the Ministry of Education, there were over 10.6 million left-behind primary school students and nearly 4.9 million left-behind middle school students across the country last year, and the general upward trend of these numbers appears likely to continue.

The situation is so severe that it has prompted Growing Home to develop programs that go beyond reading simple bedtime stories.

After noticing the role the project played in enhancing students' literacy, Zhang Liubo, principal of Lijiao town's primary school, asked Du if they could add ancient poems.

"The organization agreed without hesitation. This year, my students claimed first place in a poetry reading contest," Zhang said proudly.

Members of Du's team often travel to the boarding schools to get feedback about the project's effectiveness and assess requests to adapt the program to better serve the children.

Cooperating with universities and NGOs, Growing Home has designed video lectures and tutorials to supplement school curriculums that are provided to principals and teachers with professional training and educational information. It has even helped to decorate dormitory buildings.

"More problems are exposed to us when we have a deeper conversation with local educational officials and teachers," said Du, who aims to benefit 7,500 schools by the end of the year. "To solve these problems, we need to first spread the bedtime stories to more schools and amass the strength of individuals and social programs."

The New Tales from a Thousand and One Nights project is just a prelude to what Du and her teammates plan to do for left-behind children. As the slogan on their website suggests, their aim is to "ensure the healthy growth of every left-behind child".