

北九州市立大学

外国語学部紀要

第154号

2022年3月

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北九州市立大学

BULLETIN

FACULTY OF FOREIGN STUDIES
THE UNIVERSITY OF KITAKYUSHU

No. 154

March 2022

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THE UNIVERSITY OF KITAKYUSHU

Kitakyushu, Japan

Kids2Kids Change the World: Teaching Disability Awareness to Children

Fiona Creaser

“Kids2Kids Change the World connects kids around the globe through exchange programs on social issues to help them become the open-minded, compassionate, culturally-aware and competent social leaders of tomorrow.” (Pearson, 2018)

Introduction

Kids2Kids was founded by Christine Pearson¹ in 2018 and aims to bring children together from around the globe enabling them to think critically about cultural and social issues affecting the world at large as well as giving the children space to understand their own importance on the international stage. This is achieved through video letters and or real time discussions, which the children actively participate in so that they may have a greater understanding of other cultures

¹ Christine Pearson is the founder of *Kids2Kids Change the World*. A resident of Kitakyushu for over 27 years, she has worked as an advisor for international conferences, as a coordinator for urban environmental programmes in Asia and the Pacific, and as a translator, interpreter, and editor in the environment, robotics, and international development fields. She is passionate about giving back to her community as one of Japan’s first group of trainers for the UK-based Springboard Work & Personal Development Programme for Women, the former President and current Membership Services Coordinator for the 50-year-old Association of Foreign Wives of Japanese (AFWJ), and an alumni mentor for the TOMODACHI MetLife Women’s Leadership Program, Girls’ Unlimited Program, and University of Rochester’s mentorship programme. Through *Kids2Kids* she aims to facilitate opportunities for kids in Japan and around the world to brainstorm solutions to the social issues of today and tomorrow.

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and feel comfortable exploring their own unconscious biases. *Kids2Kids* is run bilingually (Japanese and English) and the target audience are children aged from nine to fifteen. The *Kids2Kids* programme has already successfully run courses about recycling (cultural exchange with the U.S. and Indonesia), water quality (cultural exchange with the Philippines), endangered wildlife (cultural exchange with New Zealand), and disaster risk reduction (cultural exchange with Nepal), in addition to COVID-19, universal design, and the 2020 Tokyo Games.

In 2020, *Kids2Kids* was run as an extension course in The University of Kitakyushu. One aim of the *Kids2Kids* extension course was to centre the programme in the City of Kitakyushu using The University of Kitakyushu as a medium, while another aim was to bring ‘the local’ together with ‘the global.’ The idea of connecting ‘the local’ with ‘the global’ fits neatly within the framework of The University of Kitakyushu University’s SDGs aims and goals of *walking with the community* (地域と歩む), *connecting with the world* (世界(地球)とつながる), and *acknowledging diversity* (多様性を認め合う).

The first *Kids2Kids* extension course run in 2020, was three sessions long, each session being 90 minutes, and due to COVID 19 restrictions was conducted online and open to elementary school children in the 5th and 6th grade. The focus of this course was gender awareness and children were asked to think about the following questions over a three-month period; What is gender? How is gender incorporated into architectural design? How can you make a gender friendly environment? Children were digitally linked with the US through a video interview with a university student currently studying interior design, and through a live online discussion with a peer in Indonesia. After the successful

completion of the first extension programme it was decided to run the extension course again in 2021. This time we were able to run the extension course face to face and were able to open it up to children from elementary 5th grade to junior high 2nd grade students. This time the focus was disability awareness, and the children were asked to think about what it means to create a barrier-free environment which would be accessible to all.

What we did

The 2021 extension course was run in three 90-minute sessions over a three-month period at The University of Kitakyushu's business school which is in a more central location in the city and therefore more accessible to children living in and around the City of Kitakyushu. Because of COVID-19 restrictions the course was limited to 15 children from elementary 5th grade to junior high 2nd grade students and run bilingually (English and Japanese).

The highlight of each session was an interview with Paralympian Gregory Burns who graciously gave his time to the organizers of the *Kids2Kids* extension course and allowed us to interview him answering questions from children who had previously taken courses on the *Kids2Kids* programme about his life.

Session One: What does barrier-free mean? (バリアフリーとは...?)

The first session dealt with the question "What does barrier-free mean?" We decided to start off the course with this basic question because we have found that words used in Japanese to describe current trends are often written in *katakana*, and many children do not have a clear idea about what the words actually mean. In order for the children to understand the idea of disability we asked them to play a simple game called 'Stop and Go'. The children were asked to move when

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we said ‘go’ and stop moving when we said ‘stop’. We then mixed it up a little bit by asking them to move when we said ‘stop’ and stop when we said ‘go’.

We then asked the children to think about how easy the game would be if for example you had no legs, or no arms or you were unable to see or hear or speak. This exercise helped the children think about how things that come easily for some people may be difficult for other people to do or if it is all right if other people may play the game in a different way to them.

We then explained the difference between good barriers and challenging barriers using the following examples:

Good barriers: “If you are driving on a road up to the top of a mountain and the weather is very stormy the barriers at the side of the road stop you from falling off the edge. These are good barriers. But if for example a tree has fallen onto the road it will stop you from going forward so in order to reach your goal you may have to think of a different route that might be a challenge for you.”

Challenging barriers: “There are good barriers to protect us from COVID-19, such as masks, disinfecting our hands and social distancing. All of these measures keep people healthy, but masks can make it hard to understand what people are saying or see the expressions on their faces, which can sometimes make communication a challenge.”

We then asked the children to think about barriers in terms of “rules” at school and how they feel when they are faced with such barriers (rules) at school. Focusing this through the lens of a familiar environment for the students (school) helped them grasp the difference between good and challenging barriers. The children

then watched the first part of the interview with Gregory Burns to learn about his life and were given the following things to look at before the next session:

- (1) Think about everyday things in your life that are easy for you to do (automatic/natural).
- (2) Think about what you saw today in the video. Do you have any questions you want to ask Gregory?

Session 2: Let's create a multi-sensory classroom together! (「多感覚」教室を作ってみよう!)



The second session was possibly the most challenging for us as facilitators in that we wanted to create a multisensory environment that the children could work in so that they could in turn think about their own school environments and see how their own classrooms could be made into multi-sensory and more inclusive environments.

We decided to create four distinct stations (areas in the classroom), with each station dedicated to a particular sense, i.e., touching, seeing, hearing, and

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smelling. We avoided the sense of tasting due to COVID-19 restrictions. In each area we placed a number of different items and asked the students to think about how they could communicate and create learning tools through that sense alone.

Students then spent time at each station and to make the atmosphere as fun and enjoyable as we could we played music whilst the students were creating their own multisensory communication tools. When time was up and they changed stations, we stopped the music and started up again once they arrived at their next station. We borrowed and adapted this idea from the traditional childhood musical game ‘musical chairs’ and called it ‘musical stations.’ The children were then asked to give feedback about which station they found the easiest to negotiate, which station they found the most challenging, and which was the most fun.



The children then watched more of the Gregory Burns interview and listened to his answers to the following questions:

- (1) What did you do when you didn't want to practice every day?
- (2) How did you sort out your feelings or get past those feelings when you lost?
- (3) How did you overcome difficulties or barriers in your life? And what good has come from you overcoming those difficulties or barriers?

Finally, the children were given the following point to consider before the session.

- (1) Look around your classroom. In what areas or subjects do you think multi-sensory learning could be used?

Session 3: Kids Rise Up! Making the Leap to the Next Stage! (キッズRISEアップ!
~次のSTEPへ飛やくしよ~)

In this session we changed the format from watching the interview of Gregory Burns at the end of the session as a kind of self-reflecting inspirational exercise to watching a section of his interview at the beginning of the class in order to motivate the children to move forward and 'rise up' to the challenge of changing their mindsets about disabilities and taking the necessary action to do that.

After watching the final segments of the interview with Gregory Burns we then gave the children the opportunity to do a short skit based on the following scenarios we had already prepared:

Scenario 1: Your friend cannot remember kanji because of a learning difficulty.

Scenario 2: Your friend is being bullied because they talk differently.

Scenario 3: Your classmates are telling your friend they can't play volleyball with them because their legs work differently.

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In these scenarios we asked the children to move forward rather than move away if they encounter a child from a different culture to them or a child with a different gender or a child with a disability. If we actively engage in empathizing and accepting people from all walks of life, we will develop and grow as human beings and learn how to connect with each other on a local and global stage. Finally as a show of gratitude the children wrote messages to Gregory Burns and if they had any further questions they were given the opportunity to ask him any additional questions they may have had.

Gregory Burns Interview: Living a Barrier-Free Life with Gregory Burns

Gregory Burns is a Paralympian, an internationally acclaimed artist, and an author. He contracted polio at the age of one and was left virtually paralyzed from the waist down. He competed in the Paralympic games in 1992, 1996, 2000 and won two gold, two silver, and one bronze medal, and has set five world records. He agreed to be interviewed for this *Kids2Kids* course on disability awareness as a motivational speaker for the children participating in the programme by answering questions submitted by other children who had taken part in previous *Kids2Kids* programmes. He has now granted permission for us to share his interview publicly to the whole university and beyond.²

The one-hour Zoom interview with Gregory had to be edited so that it would be interesting and easy for the kids to watch, while also capturing Gregory's personality and message. Christine spent four days coming up with the format,

² Gregory Burns interview is available to view on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/fkba771dKuY>

learning how to edit the video and splice in Gregory's own videos and photos, translating his words into Japanese with the help of online translation tools, and then making sure that the subtitles were simple, understandable, and slow enough for the kids to be able to read as Gregory talked on camera.

We asked Gregory eight questions from the children and one additional question from Fiona, (See appendix for the list of questions).

Going through each question in detail would not give the interview justice or bring to life Gregory's personality and charisma, however, a few inspirational highlights of the interview cannot be overlooked in this paper.

'The worst thing that could happen is I wouldn't have finished.' Gregory Burns, 2021

The first question from children to Gregory Burns was asking him about the hardest thing he had done in his life and his answer was the Ironman in Korea where you swim 3.8 kilometres, cycle 180 kilometres, then run 42.2 kilometres, however he also mentions the Honolulu marathon which he took part in and in which he came in his own words 'dead last.' He then goes on to tell the children that the worst thing that could have happened is he might not have finished at all. To hear a world famous Paralympian say out loud that he came 'dead last' in a marathon and then to carry on and say the worst thing that could have happened really wouldn't be that bad after all, was utterly astounding for us (Christine and I) when we were conducting the interview. We were so impressed by his humble attitude towards his achievements and life in general.

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This then follows on to what he says about contracting polio as a child;

“The worst and the best things in your life are sometimes the same.” Gregory Burns, 2021

The worst thing for Gregory was contracting polio but it is also the best thing, for contracting polio made him stronger and able to appreciate and live a ‘big life.’

In his final part of the interview where Gregory talks about what barrier-free means to him he says: “Our society, our world is not built with, the engineers did not build it with people with disabilities in mind.” And he then goes on to say that barriers can be both physical and mental and that we have to try to overcome the mental barriers. Sometimes people are not ready to be friends with or love or marry a person with a disability and it is up to us to bring these barriers down and accept people for who they are and not what we think they represent. We hoped that we could break down a few barriers this year with our *Kids2Kids* extension course about disability awareness. The feedback we received from the children was very positive.

The results of the questionnaire given to the children by the University of Kitakyushu about the extension course were positive, the children wrote that the interview with Gregory Burns was the best part of the course for them. They also left comments about having the opportunity to learn about children with disabilities, the ability and opportunity to put their own thoughts into words, their own connections and interactions with people with disabilities and what they want to do going forward. They expressed gratitude for the chance to learn about barriers—the ones they already had an idea about, but also other barriers that hadn’t crossed their minds until they watched the interview and gained some

insights through the course, which they want to look in to in more depth from now. They learned that things that are easy for some people to do may not be as easy for others or that other people may have an easier time than they do. They also wrote about wanting to be able to overcome whatever barriers they might face in the future and think about their friends.

One comment in particular struck stood out from the rest, which could be read either way depending on how you translate it. 人と違って怖くない, which can either mean, “I am not afraid of being different from other people” or “I don’t have to be afraid of people who are different than me”. This is the main message that one particular student came away with from the course, writing also that they gained more confidence in themselves after seeing the interview and the different topics that came out over the three month extension course.

Conclusion

The *Kids2Kids* Change the World extension course has opened up a number of opportunities to expand the *Kids2Kids* programme not only in Kitakyushu but also in Fukuoka. Next year Christine and Fiona will be running the *Kids2Kids* extension course again with a new theme bringing together once again ‘the local’ with ‘the global’

References

- Burns, G. (2021). *Inspired Paintings, Workshops, Keynotes*. <https://www.gregoryburns.com>
- Pearson, C. (2018) *Kids2Kids: Change the World*. <https://www.kids2kidsinternational.com>

Appendix

Questions from children to Gregory Burns:

- 1) What is the hardest thing you have ever done in your life and how did you overcome it?
- 2) How did you feel when you realized you were different from other people?
- 3) What did you do when you didn't want to practice every day?
- 4) How did you sort out your feelings and get over your feelings when you lost?
- 5) How did you overcome difficulties or barriers in your life and what good has come from overcoming these difficulties or barriers?
- 6) What is the biggest difference between how you feel being an artist and being a Paralympic athlete. Is there a difference?
- 7) What made you decide to take part in the Paralympics while you continued to work as an artist?
- 8) What does it mean to you to be truly alive?

Additional question from Fiona:

Does swimming inspire your paintings?

