

Great books, lasting impressions

The Junior Great Books scheme improves more than just reading skills

EDUCATION

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Clare Lankford, a Primary Five teacher at The Harbour School, asks: "Do you think the goldfish wanted to get caught in the net?" Her pupils, sitting in a circle on the floor, mull their answers. Many have ideas, but each waits their turn to speak, listening politely before giving their own answer.

The Goldfish by Eleanor Farjeon is among among the works featured in Junior Great Books, a programme that seeks to introduce young children to literature while building comprehension and critical thinking skills.



The tale centres on a goldfish that is caught by Neptune, the mythical sea god, and put into a bowl, which becomes its whole world. The children have been given a key question to write an answer: "Why does King Neptune arrange for the goldfish to live in a little glass world instead of helping him to live in the vast ocean?"

The Kennedy Town international school introduced Junior Great Books to pupils last year, but the scheme began 40 years ago in the United States, an offshoot of the non-profit Great Books Foundation, which oversees its operation. While the books featured are mostly condensed versions of the originals, sometimes as short as four or five pages, children get to tackle a broad range of subject matter, from Shakespeare and other great writers to meaty topics such as internet addiction and an evil psychologist.

Ten-year-old James Chung and his classmates read one book a week. The previous one they read was a surreal Ukrainian folk tale called *Shrewd Todie and Lyzer the Miser*. "I don't want to use the word weird, but it was strange," says James. "You don't know what's going to happen next."

The exercise has improved his reading skills. "From the beginning to the end, it goes from easy to hard," he says. "At school, we just read in our heads. Our teacher reads it out loud. We have to find hard words that we can't read or understand."

Principal Dr Jadis Blurton, who introduced the scheme to The Harbour School, says although it is the only one in Hong Kong to adopt Junior Great Books, thousands of schools do it around the world. She appreciates how the scheme makes children think.

"It fits in with a lot of other things we believe at The Harbour School. It's very important for children to find their own voice and listen to the voices of others, and Junior Great Books is very much about that. Finding the deeper, more analytical, meaning is very important to us, rather than just ticking the box, getting the right answer and getting a good grade."

The teacher initially reads the book to the class, and children can also listen to the story on a CD. The youngsters are then given a written question and they write their own answers before the teacher discusses their replies with the rest of the class.

"Usually, in the first reading, I'll give them some background to the story," Lankford says. "For [*The Goldfish*], there was an introductory poem about a frog who believed he lived in the whole world, when in fact he lived down a well. The previous introductory piece was about desert, and whether there had always been other people. It led to a discussion



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Teacher-led discussions to explore different topics is an integral part of the Junior Great Books programme.

Photo: Jonathan Wong

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about deceit, and whether they had played tricks on other people. So it led to a discussion about ethics."

Junior Great Books encourages children to come up with different opinions. But there are rules.

"It's all about supportive discussion," Lankford says. "What are the rules of a good discussion? How do you participate nicely? You need to listen; you need to respect one another. Don't interrupt someone; don't make fun of someone else's comment. If you feel that you disagree, you need to say it in a polite way."

With time, some students, who were too shy to comment last year for fear they would say the wrong thing, have gained the confidence to offer their opinions.

"It's not simply about reading; that's another strength of the programme. It's building social skills; it's building confidence; it's building critical analysis. It's a programme that sets them up for life, I think," Lankford says

The Junior Great Books project can begin with children as young as four. "They're already using their imagination and expressing themselves," Blurton says. "To have a four-year-old saying 'Yes, I agree [with someone else's view in the class]' is a real milestone."

Older children, however, are encouraged to back their conclusions with solid information and sound reasoning. "It's not just willy-nilly opinions," Blurton says.

Lankford adds: "It's an excellent tool for science, finding fact-based evidence to support your argument." When they begin, the children are looking for guidance and affirmation from the teacher. "But part of the programme is that you don't say: 'Oh, yes, that's good, that's right,'" Lankford says.

Blurton says: "The challenges can be that no one speaks, or there's nothing left to explore. Kids come into the programme thinking there's only one right answer and the teacher knows it. So when they begin, they say what they think what the teacher wants to hear. Then they learn that literature can have so many different meanings."

She hopes it can also be adopted by local schools.

"It would be fabulous for the local school system, but it could be very challenging at first," she says.

Blurton recalls the experiences of a good friend who grew up in Hong Kong and went on to university in the US. During her friend's first two weeks at university, Blurton says, she saw other people asking questions and wanted to do the same, "but she was literally panicked".

"When local schoolchildren transition to an international school, there's a resounding silence a lot of the time because they don't know how to ask questions; they don't know how to venture opinions. I think it would be a wonderful thing to introduce, with the idea that there is no correct answer and that they might have to actually make inferences about the text."

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