The first thing I noticed about 11-year-old Kasun Amarasinghe was the state of his shirt. Theoretically white, it was tinged with a bluish sheen, possibly the result of being washed together with his navy blue shorts. It was also riddled with bleach stains, like so many bullet-holes.

Kasun’s shabbiness contrasted with some of the other children at this school in Trincomalee on the east coast of Sri Lanka, who were decked out in spotlessly clean, neatly pressed uniforms. Sad-eyed and shoeless, Kasun was at first too shy to talk much about himself. But after a while it emerged that he lived in a nearby children’s home. “My father is dead and my mother brought me to the home because we didn’t have clothes to wear for school,” he explains. “She brought me to the home and left me there.”

I had been introduced to Kasun not because his story was particularly sad or his clothes particularly grubby, but because he had responded so enthusiastically to the new library. Built earlier this year by Room to Read (http://www.ft.com/indepth/seasonal-appeal), the bright and airy library has been a huge hit with the pupils. “The children love to come to the library, even after school,” says Anura Hettiarachchi, the young librarian in charge.

Before Room to Read got involved, he says, the library was housed in the headmaster’s office. Children had to ask for special permission to look at the books. “In any case, most of the books were traditional and not suitable,” he says, showing me an old picture-less volume crammed with dense text. Kasun, whose eyes light up when I broach the subject, explains the difference thus: “The old library was somewhat good. The new library is the best. This is my favourite place on earth.”

It takes Kasun, whose reading ability has come on by leaps and bounds in recent months, a matter of seconds to locate his favourite story. Each page in the large-format picture book, written in the curvaceous Sinhalese script, has a bright illustration of a happy-go-lucky fish encountering a new acquaintance in the sea. “While he is swimming he meets crabs and other animals, and then a sea snail and then he becomes friendly with a lobster and a prawn,” Kasun beams.
It was not until I visited him later at the nearby orphanage – housed in a Buddhist temple and presided over by an unsmiling, saffron-robed monk – that I fully understood why Kasun was so enthralled with the fish’s busy social life. The other children had gone to the fields to work but Kasun was left behind. Sitting on his filthy bunk bed, one of several lined up in the dank and unwelcoming dormitory, he was all alone. The flash of inspiration I had seen in the library was gone.

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