

Out with tuition and in with a reading nation

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The horrendous amount of money and time Singapore, as a nation, spends on tuition, as confirmed again by a recent survey, could be channelled more effectively and meaningfully to this: helping children to love reading.

Having children read early, widely and frequently - and for pleasure - will not only deliver better grades, but it will also give them a happier, richer and more flourishing childhood and, eventually, adult life.

The survey, conducted by The Straits Times and released on July 4, showed that seven in 10 parents sent their children for tuition. Depressingly, a third did so despite believing that tuition did not work. These results extend the findings in the 2012/2013 Household Expenditure Survey, that parents spent \$1.1 billion a year on tuition, up from \$820 million in 2008.

In pressure-cooker places like Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea, tuition or "shadow education", as Professor Mark Bray from the University of Hong Kong and other academics call it, casts a dark pall over the lives of parents and children - in terms of money, sleep and health, leisure time and play, childhood and family life.

But why reading - that is, reading of fiction or non-fiction in print or online by choice, and for leisure and pleasure - as an alternative to tuition?

First, reading is correlated with better grades, as found by research such as a 2000 study, *Reading For Change*, by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, or OECD.

Children who read well tend to read more; wide reading leads to the acquisition of what professors Susan Neuman and Donna Celano term "information capital", the type of knowledge that makes it easier to acquire more knowledge, such as those in academic subjects.

Conversely, non-readers lag behind academically, handicapped by poor reading comprehension in all subjects, from maths to science. Thus, reading is a foundational skill with wide ripple effects.

Second, reading is also much cheaper than the \$155 to \$260 that parents spend every month, on average, over many years, on tuition. Once children start, the only cost is buying books or the bus fare to one of our world-class public libraries.

Third, the benefits of reading extend far beyond exams and money. Reading brings the world to children. It gives the joy of fiction. It opens new vistas in science, geography, history and biography.

And it can feed into their interests. A football fan can read about its stars and teams, history, tournaments, and appreciate the beautiful game more. "No matter how busy you may think you are, you must find time for reading, or surrender yourself to self-chosen ignorance," Confucius said.

Reading also moulds better Singaporeans and global citizens. Books show children how people think, feel, make war or peace, and let them taste from afar the heights of love and joy, and the depths of tragedy and loss.

Reading thus has the power to transform by opening up minds and hearts. Also, reading children read because they have fun, as the rewards are intrinsic - unlike tuition, it is not a chore. Reading also enriches family life. Parents and siblings can discuss books they have read, visit the library or bookshop together, mix reading with other activities, like watching movies based on books, or even swop gossip about writers and actors.

All in all, reading children are flourishing children, and will probably become flourishing adults.

How to bring up reading children? It is not as simple as throwing them a book and saying, "Now, read!" One large-scale study spanning China, Europe and Africa shows that children learn reading by example - reading parents lead to reading children. They are also a crucial resource for a sometimes- difficult, starting journey ("Papa, what is ginormous?"). Unfortunately, we are not a reading nation, so few parents are role models, much less good guides.

Research shows that the reading habit is best acquired young, so we recommend that parents start reading to their children even before they turn one. Children merely nagged to read can get turned off forever, so non-reading parents, especially, need the right skills and attitudes.

The most important way to raise children who love reading, and who then read independently, is showing them how to read - by reading for and with them - and have fun doing it. Hence, we recommend that schools conduct workshops for parents in this area.

Childcare centres and kindergartens can also focus on cultivating reading habits, and less on worksheets. Schools can learn from the National Library Board's free kidsRead programme, where volunteers read to children from low-income families.

Lastly, we recommend a campaign for A Reading Nation, and a National Reading Week involving the whole family.

During that time, the Ministry of Education can chime in by changing its usual mantra, "Tuition is not necessary", to "Tuition is not necessary - reading is."

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