

Why reading should be a compulsory subject in school

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***The Straits Times*, 25 May 2016**

READING not only improves grades but also nurtures better citizens

Let's make reading a compulsory subject in our primary and secondary schools. In fact, let's make it examinable too.

This idea might seem hare-brained at first glance. But I believe that it will transform us not only as individuals but also as a nation.

The benefits of reading are widely established. As I argued last year in a commentary titled "Out with tuition, in with reading" co-written with Assistant Professor Loh Chin Ee, an expert in reading and libraries from the National Institute of Education, research has shown how reading not only improves school grades, but also enables a flourishing life as adults and nurtures better citizens.

I see readers as lucky beings with a light, one that illuminates a little of the mystery of life and pierces the darkness of ignorance for themselves and for others.

How will reading as a subject work?

Research shows that young children need help to read independently and with pleasure, so that can be the role of lower primary teachers.

Later on, up to secondary school, teachers can go on to talk about how to get more out of reading fiction, how to read non-fiction more efficiently, how to read critically, and how to choose books. Better still, rather than tell, teachers can show and share the sheer fun of reading.

However, the key is that most lessons will simply be class time set aside solely for reading, half an hour to an hour a day. The teacher will go round to help struggling kids, or just to chat with them about what they are reading or wish to read.

Each level will have a recommended list of both easy and difficult books, which students can borrow from the school library. Students need read only some of the books on the list, and can also choose to read books beyond the list.

The list should have a very wide range of titles: fiction, non-fiction, novels, poetry, science, biographies, history, philosophy, gastronomy, sports; and Singaporean, regional and international works. It will include books related to other classroom subjects. For instance, biographies of scientists, mathematicians and artists, travelogues, popular science or history books, or books on language. Students must also read some books in their mother tongue.

Why make reading compulsory?

First, we are not a nation of readers. The 2015 National Literary Reading & Writing Survey by the National Arts Council showed that only 44 per cent of Singaporeans read one or more literary books in the past year, with "literary" defined quite generously.

The Government was concerned enough to announce last month in Parliament the launch of a National Reading Movement. Among the mooted initiatives is having the National Library Board take books to working adults in the office. Some parents, if only a minority, and teachers had also expressed their concern about the dearth of reading, to Dr Loh and me, when we gave talks following our commentary last year.

Second, research shows that it is important to start at a young age - those encouraged by parents to read, or are read to by them, grow up to be adult readers. Researcher Deborah Hicks said in her 2002 book *Reading Lives: Working-class Children And Literacy Learning*: "One is not born a reader. Rather, one is socialised into reading and reading practices that become part of our identities as individuals and reading persons."

How many Singaporean parents read to their children or urge them to read? I have heard anecdotes of parents telling their children not to "waste" time reading for fun and to study instead.

There are already programmes to encourage reading. One is Stellar (Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading) in primary schools, but it stresses instruction rather than lots of class reading time. Some secondary schools also set aside class time for reading. The National Library runs kidsREAD, a reading initiative for underprivileged children.

The third reason to make reading compulsory is that these initiatives do not really address two core problems. One is that reading is not truly valued, unlike, say, science or maths. The other is that the long school day, including homework, leaves many with not enough time to sleep and rest, much less read. I can empathise that when our children have free time at all, they prefer television or computer games, as shown in a 2009 study by academic Abdus Sattar Chaudhry and librarian Gladys Low.

Besides being compulsory (all kids have to take it), reading should also be made examinable (it counts towards PSLE and O levels). Otherwise, teachers, parents and children will neglect it like many do with art, music and sports.

One possible objection to making reading compulsory and examinable is that it might turn students off reading. The answer is that few students are keen on reading anyway so it could not turn off any more of them. It is up to our teachers, properly trained, of course, to make reading a joy.

The second possible difficulty is in how to test students in reading. This is a valid objection but only as much as for, say, project work, which is also an examinable subject. If a subject is important, testing, no matter how challenging, should not be an obstacle. In any case, testing of reading should not be fixated on exact marks but merely reveal if the child has been reading widely and at a high-enough level for her year. Hence a pass-or-fail system might suffice.

I admit that my proposal is rather radical. But with the existing conditions in society, I see no better way.

So let us imagine a day when each one of us has been gifted that special light called reading. Only then will there be no need for this scheme.

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