

## **Extending the NILAM Programme with the Home Connection**

by

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Research has shown that reading enjoyment is more important for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status (OECD, 2002). The Nadi Ilmu Amalan Membaca (NILAM) programme which was launched in September 1999 in Tunku Abdul Rahman Secondary School, Kuching (STAR) has made inroads remarkably where 'zero reading' among students has dropped significantly. However, the inculcation of the reading habit should not be confined to school hours and be the sole responsibility of the teachers alone as the reading habit is best nurtured at home and should be made a natural part of family life (Hamilton, 2005). The best time to hone this habit would be during the school holidays when students are free at home and parents can be involved. This paper will report on several issues and implications pertaining to inculcating a reading culture among students from a survey involving students and parents who participated in STAR's "NILAM during the Holidays" programme.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Most developed countries take great pains to promote literacy and a love for reading among their youth. Purely cognitive accounts of reading are incomplete as being able to read does not mean that the person will choose to do so. Research has shown that reading enjoyment is more important for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status (OECD, 2002). Reading for pleasure could therefore be one important way to help combat social exclusion and raise educational standards.

#### **The Importance of Reading**

Reading for children is the key to success. It has been found that when teens read more than just their classroom assignments, they generally do well in school. The extra reading expands their vocabularies apart from showing them how different writers put down their thoughts leading to better writing skills. The information picked up through reading builds up the vital solid core of knowledge that they need. Reading also provides the window to the world, a kaleidoscope for them to learn about people and the world. Books are a road to places, times, people and events they would never be able to visit in person. Reading also provides the teens with the venue to share experiences and seek solutions. Besides reading is enjoyable and can bring a great deal of pleasure to teens. Most important of all, the more they read, the better they read.

It is imperative that books should spark the readers' interest and imagination, challenge them to greater reading proficiency and inspire them to read more. But most of all they should enjoy reading what they are reading. Reading should not be a task, but a pleasurable and enthralling

experience (Hamilton, 2006). According to Hamilton, reading should be made a natural part of family life where time for reading together is set aside to establish the reading habit at home. Research has proven that reading at home greatly accelerates the acquisition of reading skills, and shows a strong connection between independent reading and developing reading skills that lead to fluency (National Literacy Trust, 2006).

Research has also shown that children who read very little do not have the benefits that come with reading and studies show that when struggling readers are not motivated to read, their opportunities to learn decrease significantly (Baker, Dreher and Guthrie, 2000). This can lead to strong negative feelings about reading and create a vicious circle in which poor readers remain poor readers (Juel, 1988).

Research has repeatedly shown that motivation to read decreases with age, especially if pupils' attitudes towards reading become less positive (McKenna, Ellsworth & Kear, 1995). Thus, if children do not enjoy reading when they are young, then they are unlikely to do so when they get older. It is imperative that reading campaigns should encourage readers of all ages to discover books as Chall (1996) noted that education and reading are circular- the more a person has of one, the better the development of the other.

### **Problems in inculcating a reading culture**

Despite the years of reading campaigns launched by the government, it is rather disturbing to note that 98% of 10+ year olds read only two books a year in a survey conducted in 2005 – a number which remained unchanged since a 1996 survey. The NILAM Programme – a national agenda of the Ministry of Education Malaysia, launched in 1996 to encourage children to read has yet to reach a significant level (The Star, 2006). The onslaught of ICT seemingly has taken a heavy toll on reading. To most students, reading is boring and takes a lot of effort. A common complaint among parents today is that children prefer the idiot box or computer games to a good book. Students tend to perceive reading as a chore rather than a pleasure. Furthermore, a student's life is all tuition and homework and extra classes. They spend so much time studying that there is literally no time to read. To relax they want to do something else, something like watching television or playing football.

### **THE NILAM PROGRAMME IN TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN SECONDARY SCHOOL**

The NILAM Programme which was launched in September 1999 in Tunku Abdul Rahman Secondary School, Kuching (STAR) has graduated from its fledging status to enter its tenth year of implementation. The programme took off as an adaptation of the original blueprint on the advice of the Principal, Rakayah Hj. Madon who rationalized that for the programme to work, the task should be shouldered by the staff including the principal and the senior assistants and not the language teachers alone. The implementation experienced some operational hiccups in the initial two years but through constant review and monitoring, an ideal system is perfected along the way and documented as a working procedure manual for the mentors.

NILAM in STAR operates on the mentor-mentee system where the mentors are given students they teach. The mentors are placed under the supervision of three coordinators comprising the principal, the senior assistant in-charge of academic affairs and one special teacher. The mentors will meet their mentees in their own time and the mentees have to hand up their NILAM

record books twice per term and four times per year for the mentors to check and record their reading. The three coordinators will monitor the implementation by the mentors under their charge. The mentors have to hand in their record book as well as the students' NILAM Report Books once a term for auditing by the coordinators.

From 2004, the working procedure manual comes complete with information on operative administration, a calendar and entries of students' reading records and a 50-minute silent reading for the whole school, staff and students alike was designated on every Thursday morning from seven o'clock. The session will end with time for book reports by students who are picked at random by the principal. The annual rewards also comprise book prizes which are chosen based on the gender and age of each winner and there are special book prizes for outstanding mentors. A questionnaire on the effectiveness of the NILAM Programme was piloted at the end of October 2004. Feedback from the respondents confirmed that NILAM has effected change in reading habits and improvements in academic performance. The most important findings of the survey are that the element of force cannot be compromised in establishing the culture in the early years and the role of the Principal is the vital crutch.

SMK Tunku Abdul Rahman was chosen for the Ministry of Education's Assessment of the NILAM Programme Survey in 2004 and interestingly the Ministry's circular (2005) on the reinforcement of the reading culture among students in schools reiterated serious involvement of head masters and principals of schools with all subject teachers and students as one of the success factors in the implementation of the programme which mirrors the effort done in STAR.

### THE GROWTH OF NILAM IN STAR

Implementation becomes smooth-sailing and success viable after the first five years of breaking resistance and establishing the culture among the students. The analysis on the total number of books read by the students in the school from 2003–2006 projected a positive increase over the period and the number of 'zero reading' students showed a steady decline.

#### Analysis of Reading Records

Table 1. Comparison of reading of number of books read by the students from 2003 -2006

Year	No. of students	No of books read	Ratio of books to student	Zero reading (%)
2003	835	9459	11:1	28.6
2004	943	16621	17:1	15.3
2005	952	19904	21:1	6.1
2006	1027	23323	23:1	2.0

#### Making the Home Connection in NILAM

By 2005, the fledging programme has made inroads remarkably where 'zero reading' among students has dropped to 6.1 percent due to close monitoring and supervision. However, it was felt that the inculcation of the reading habit should not be confined to school hours and be the sole responsibility of the teachers alone. Research has shown that the reading habit is best

nurtured at home and should be made a natural part of family life (Hamilton, 2005). The best time to hone this habit would be during the school holidays when students are free at home and parents can be involved.

The Principal Rakayah Hj. Madon mooted and embarked on a trial reading programme called "NILAM for the Holidays" during the year end holidays in 2005. It was open to students who were interested. A total of 62 students signed up for the programme. There were 46 from Form 1, nine from Form 2, one from Form 3, three from Form 4 and two from Form 5.

A letter was sent to the parents via the child informing them of the objectives of the NILAM Programme and the school's activities to promote the reading culture in accordance with the national reading agenda. Parents were requested to endorse their children's participation in the programme and help to get books for their children to read or to bring them to the school or public libraries. A timetable on the opening hours of the school library was attached for the parents' reference. Each participant was given a printed card to record the date, title of the book, number of pages and signature of their parents for each book read. The card has a maximum record of 30 books for each category of Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Inggeris. The request for parents to sign for every book read was a two prong strategy of getting parents' involvement and supervision. At the beginning of 2006, 18 form 1 students and two form 4 students were given book prizes for reading more than 30 books each. The rest showed minimal reading records.

In 2006, the school made it compulsory for 67 students from the *Kelas Rancangan Khas* (Special Programme Classes) to sign up for "NILAM during the Holidays." The same procedure was used and at the end of the 4 school holidays, 22 students read between 100 – 222 books with the rest recording 50 – 99 books. Ten students from the first class of Form 1 (1 K1) and another 18 selected students from four Form 2 (2 Q1, 2 Q3, 2 Q4, 2 Q7) classes joined the fold during the May holidays. All except one from 1K1 recorded a total between 81 to 180 books read over the 3 holiday breaks. All the Form 2 students except 3 read a total between 24 to 99 books.

It was decided that the holiday programme be extended to other Forms 1, 2 and 4 classes on a voluntary basis for the long November holidays. A total of 370 record cards were issued together with a letter to their parents. The cards were returned when school reopened in 2007.

### Analysis of Card Returns

Table 2. Data on the class and the number of cards received

KRK	1 K1	1 K2	2 Q1	2 Q3	2 Q4	2 Q5	2 Q6	2 Q7	4 B1	4 B2	Total
67	29	12	29	12	11	4	6	2	21	16	209

The maximum reading recorded for the new batch of students was 60 books and the minimum of 3 books only. The reasons given for not reading by the 163 students during the holidays were mainly related to other activities taken up and loss of the cards. Some students reported that parents find it tedious to sign for every book read and just penned a bracket to summarise with a single signature.

## **Analysis of Survey**

A survey was done this year to gauge students' feedback on the following questions.

- a. The benefits of reading
- b. Students' suggestions to improve the Programme
- c. Parents' comments on the Holiday Reading Programme

Forty-seven Form Two KRK students and ten students from Form 2 Q1 took part in the survey.

## **Feedback from Students and Parents**

Fifty five of the respondents reported that they enjoy reading. The respondents also revealed that reading improves their grammar and vocabulary besides ideas for their writing.

Interestingly, eight of the respondents revealed that NILAM and reading should be confined to school days. They enjoy reading but want time for themselves for other activities during the holidays. Two students also lamented they are so bogged down by the amount of homework that reading for pleasure is greatly reduced.

The suggestions listed by the students include extending the programme to the whole school and the incentive of book prizes for readers with good records. Students also put in a request for teachers to impose a minimum reading for both Bahasa Melayu and English as well as the privilege of borrowing more than one book from the school library at one time.

Feedback from thirty parents who responded to the survey attributed the strength of the programme to meaningful holiday activities for their children besides inculcating the reading habit and improving the children's power of language. All the parents gave a resounding nod to the holiday programme and requested that it be continued during school holidays. Two parents however recommended that reading material for students should be made more selective as reading should not be about stories but reading for ideas as "most successful people are thinkers but not readers." (sic). This indicates a potential for the inclusion of more non-fiction for reading. One parent saw the request for their signature for each book read as tedious rather than helpful supervision and involvement.

## **SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS**

The feedback from the whole exercise reflected several issues pertaining to inculcating a reading culture among students.

Firstly, one element which cannot be compromised was the 'push' factor which provides the crutch for the success of NILAM in the school. It cannot be denied that if the push element is put in absentia, students are not bound by any obligation to hand up the reading records after the holidays and excuses are given as reasons for abstaining from the programme.

Secondly, it is evident that any effort to turn the school into a community of readers is to start them young. The reading and commitment of the KRK classes confirms that compulsion plays a vital role in turning them into book lovers and most of all as 'good readers are good readers only because they read all the time.' (Mary Leonhardt, 1995)

Thirdly, the role of parents in helping to get their children to read cannot be ignored. Research has shown that parents and the home environment are essential to the teaching of reading and instilling a love for reading. Parents' involvement and commitment in sharing the responsibility of moulding and educating their children into good readers must become the top agenda of the Teachers-Parents' Association Meeting.

Fourthly, in the face of the ICT onslaught, it takes a lot of commitment and dedication on the part of the school to organize, coordinate and oversee the many programmes and activities that can be planned to promote literacy and instill a love for reading among young people nowadays.

In conclusion, the success of any school programme is one concerted effort between the school and the society. In the case of the NILAM Programme, the school should capitalize on parents and the home environment to foster a love for reading among students. If reading is to become a lifelong habit students must see themselves as participants in a community that views reading as a significant and enjoyable activity (Strommen and Mates, 2004). Though, the cornerstone for lifelong reading is laid in the early years it is never too late to start reading for pleasure (Sheldrick Ross, McKechnie & Rothbauer, 2005). We should instill in our students a culture where reading is taken for granted as an everyday activity.

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