

Inculcating the Reading Habit Through the Nilam Programme in Schools

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes the Mentor Mentee System as the mechanism in the Nilam Programme to inculcate the reading habit among students in schools. The programme needs to incorporate adaptations to enable the fledging programme to get a real start. The implementation is a concerted effort of the whole school where the responsibility rests on the shoulders of all and not just the language teachers. A list of findings has shown how the teachers in their role as mentors have to combine the power of their rapport and commitment to get students to pick up the reading culture. Besides that, the total involvement of the Principal as the Head of the Programme is vital for the birth and survival of this cultured habit among students.

INTRODUCTION

Programmes have been embarked to get children to read. The main aim of a reading programme is to help children who know how to read, do read. Students are encouraged to read outside the classroom to practice their reading skills and to read for general knowledge, enjoyment or leisure. Reading for fun is to prepare students for life long reading and reading for information is to prepare students for lifelong learning in an information age. The challenges of globalisation and the K-economy have renewed the urgent need for Malaysians to read to enhance knowledge.

INCULCATING A READING CULTURE

Helping students to read extensively encourages them to enjoy reading books and to develop their reading habit. One of the ways of helping students to read extensively is to give them a simplified but interesting storybook. Interestingly, Wallace (1986) in her studies on reading behaviour noted that children will likely want to read if reading is part of the behaviour of other people in their environment. Children are socialized into reading. They are motivated to learn to read not only for personal reasons, such as private enjoyment of stories, but also for social reasons. They aspire to be members of the society of readers they see around them.

It cannot be denied that the suitability and availability of reading materials has always been the bone of contention in a reading programme. Wise (1971:26) argued that “all reading contributes to the individual’s learning...”. His dictum provided a more enlightened perspective for viewing the issue. He cautioned that we tend to be guided by unnecessary theoretical rigidity. In other

words, to encourage reading we should steer away from any purported suitability or superiority of any one type of reading material over another. Thus, any tendencies among students to read any type of reading matter should be encouraged rather than stifled.

To inculcate reading in schools, we can attack reading in a two prong process, that is reading as a supplementary activity and to continue doing so when the students leave school and plunge into society as reading is so much a part of adult life in literate societies.

PROBLEM IN ESTABLISHING A READING CULTURE AMONG STUDENTS

One of the main concerns of the KBSM and Revised Curriculums is to ensure that students are able to read factual prose and fiction for information and enjoyment at the end of the secondary school. Poor reading is a universal problem. It cannot be denied that our students are reading a lot less than other children of their age group. Surveys carried out have found dismally that Malaysians on the whole seldom read. Reading has been relegated to a language skill in the curriculum for a long time and it got lost in the cognitive process of learning a language. This has an undesirable effect on the overall performance of the children. Thus, the infusion of the literary elements in the curriculum was done to encourage students to read (HSP: 7).

The onslaught of ICT era has influenced the prevailing cultures of the young and the population at large. To rectify the worrying trend, the Nilam Reading Programme was drawn up as the national agenda in 1998. The latest concern came from our Prime Minister himself when he personally called on parents to encourage their children to 'fall in love with books and share the fascinating tales together during their free time instead of watching television all the time' (2005). Malaysians must inculcate the reading habit to face the challenges of globalization and learning is a lifelong campaign.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NILAM PROGRAMME IN TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Background

The Nilam programme which was officially launched on 22 September 1999 in Tunku Abdul Rahman Secondary School has incorporated adaptations of the original working procedure by the Principal, Rakayah Hj Madon. The principal has the conviction that for the national agenda to be implemented successfully, the responsibility should not rest on the shoulders of the language teachers only but the whole staff must be involved including the principal and the senior assistants. The inculcation of the reading culture should be one concerted effort to set the trend in the school. A working committee was set up with the Principal at the helm assisted by the Senior Assistant in charge of academic affairs. The head of the English Panel was appointed the secretary and the committee members comprised the teacher in-charge of the library and three language teachers including the head of the Bahasa Melayu panel.

The adaptation of the programme uses the mentor-mentee system where each teacher was given three to five mentees in the first year beginning September 1999 with form one. This works on an accumulative ratio whereby every mentor will have a maximum of twenty five mentees in five years' time in 2003. The mentors are under the supervision of three supervisors comprising the principal, the senior assistant in-charge of academic affairs and one specially appointed teacher. The three supervisors will monitor the implementation by the mentors under their charge. Mentors have to hand in the students' Nilam record books before the end of each term. The school adapted and designed its own Nilam Record Book for the students.

The mentors will meet their mentees in their own time and the mentees have to pass up their Nilam Record Book twice per term for mentors to check and record their reading. Mentees from the weaker classes are allowed to present pictorial summaries of the books read and mentors do not mark book reports for mistakes unnecessarily. Mentors are encouraged to write constructive comments on their mentees' reading. Mentees who do not read are brought to the library and given books to read. The element of force is deemed necessary to inculcate the habit slowly whereby students will see reading as a pleasure. Mentees are only allowed to read books in Bahasa Melayu and English.

The system of awards recommended in the original nilam programme was deemed too steep and that it would stifle the fledging programme at its birth. The adaptation of the award system rests on the nomination of the top readers from every mentor whereby the final list will use a cut-off point to align the number of winners with the annual budget for book prizes for the two categories, that is Bahasa Melayu and English. Winners will receive cash vouchers which they use to redeem for books at a designated book store.

In the first year, there were administrative glitches pertaining to identity and communication problems where the form one students did not know who their mentor was and some shied away from the senior teachers in the morning session. The following year, photographs of the mentors and names of their mentees were put up on the notice board. The move was found to be unfavourable as some students defaced the photos of the teachers they did not like.

In the third year the distribution of students used the system where mentors were given the students they taught as far as possible to overcome the problem of coordination and rapport in the first two years. The list of names was documented into a book and a copy put in the staffroom. Mentors were given their own list of mentees.

In 2003 the nilam programme encompassed forms one to five. A working procedure manual was drawn up for the benefit of the mentors. Documented into a book, it also included two record sheets for entries of the number of books read by each mentee for each term together with the list of supervisors and the mentors under their wing, as well as the organization chart and history of the nilam programme.

In 2004, the procedure manual incorporated a working calendar to enhance operative administration for both mentors and their supervisors. A Nilam 50-minute silent reading for the whole school was implemented for every Thursday morning. The time for assembly on rainy Monday mornings will automatically become Nilam reading time. Everybody, teachers and

students alike must come with a book to read and mentees will be picked at random by the principal to give a brief book report of the book they have read on the stage. The annual reward also included a special book prize for mentors of winners of both categories.

Problems encountered

In the initial stages, teething problems were mainly administrative on the part of the mentors and the reluctance of mentees to pick up a book and read. Monitoring was crucial and mentees who had zero reading were brought to the library and forced to read and write a book report after that. There were students who merely copied the synopsis from books as their reports or recycled their book reports in a new Nilam Record Book. Complaints were normal as part of change but issues were ironed out and loopholes plugged along the way with constant review and upgrading the implementation process which culminated in a manual and record book for the mentors to enable the supervisors to monitor the overall implementation and to provide concrete feedback on the progress of the programme.

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE NILAM PROGRAMME

Since the fledging Nilam programme is central to inculcating the reading habit among the students, an analysis was done on the records of all the mentors in 2003 and 2004 by the secretary of the programme to gauge the reading habits of the students and to provide more insight on how useful the mentor-mentee system is. The main concern was looking at the number of books read by each mentee and the percentage of zero reading. It was thought pertinent to pilot a questionnaire in 2004 to get students' feedback regarding the effectiveness of the programme on the students' reading habit, and how useful the programme is to them.

Procedures for data collection and analysis

The data consists of records from both the mentors and mentees' record books and feedback from the respondents of the questionnaire .

I) Analysis of reading records

An analysis is done on the mentors' record of students' reading for 2003 and 2004 and a comparison is made pertaining to the number of zero reading and the number of books read by the mentees for the two years.

Table 1a : Comparison of reading in percentage of the number of books read by the students in 2003 and 2004

Year	No. of students	No. of books read in percentage									
		0	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-80	81-100	100 above
2003	835	28.6	38.2	20	5.4	3.1	2	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.5
2004	945	15.2	40.8	24.0	9.7	5.1	2.2	0.9	0.5	0.5	0.6

The analysis shows a positive increase in reading among students for each form between 2003 and 2004. It can be concluded that reading by the majority of students fall into the one to thirty bracket and the percentage for the higher bracket groups does not show any significant change.

Table 1 b : Comparison of percentage of Zero Reading among the students in 2003 and 2004

Year	Form 1	Form 2	Form 3	Form 4	Form 5
2003	22.3	23.3	45.3	20.7	37.7
2004	8.9	15.6	15.8	18.0	21.1

The analysis shows a drastic drop in the number of zero reading for all the forms with the exception of form four in 2004 from 2003.

Findings of analysis

The analysis shows a positive increase in reading for each form between 2003 and 2004 where the overall number of zero reading dropped significantly especially for forms one, two, three and five. Feedback from the lending of library books has shown a great surge in the number of readers particularly among the junior students every day.

The analyses done on the mentors' record for the mentees have consistently highlighted an interesting and important finding for the two years. The analyses show that it is the mentor who plays a vital role in effecting reading to take place among the mentees and that the academic ranking of the students do not have any significant impact on the inculcation of the reading habit to a certain extent. The best class may have zero reading for some of the mentees and the percentage of books read are disappointingly low whereas the last class may show that everybody is reading at least ten books per year. In fact, more than one third of the winners came from the below average classes.

Therefore, it is pertinent to say that to inculcate the reading habit among the young and for the fledging programme to take effect, the role of the mentor is crucial and the element of force has to be substantial and present for the reading culture to take birth and grow.

Analysis of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire is piloted to answer the following questions.

- a. What do students read and how frequent do they read?
- b. Are the library books sufficient and appropriate for the students ?
- c. What is students' attitude towards reading and writing book reports?
- d. How useful and effective is the nilam programme in effecting change in attitude and behaviour towards reading?
- e. Is there any co-relation between reading and academic performance?
- f. What could be done to improve the nilam programme ?

METHOD OF STUDY

Description of Participants

A total of 440 students comprising 212 males and 228 females were picked at random from all form one to form five classes to answer the questionnaire which was piloted in late October 2004 .

Students' Feedback

The feedback from the questionnaire reveals that approximately fifty percent of the respondents read only one book per week and eighty percent read only during their leisure. The results also show one interesting finding among the male respondents. Thirty percent of the boys said that they like to read comics as opposed to eight percent for girls. Among the suggestions forwarded, comics is suggested to be allowed and included as reading material. Fifty two percent of all the respondents said that they read all kinds of materials which include magazines and newspapers in both languages.

The respondents also disclose that they get their books from friends besides borrowing from the school library and to a lesser extent the public libraries. Seventy-eight percent is of the opinion that the books in the library are suitable and interesting for them and suggested that the number of new books be increased to attract more readers.

Pertaining to writing book reports, ninety percent of the respondents feel that it is beneficial and it helps to improve their command of the language. Eighty six percent is of the opinion that the nilam programme has helped to instill the love for reading in them and ninety five percent says that reading has helped to improve their language proficiency. Eighty nine percent has given a resounding nod that the nilam programme has sown the seeds of the reading habit among the students.

Among the lists of suggestions presented to improve the nilam programme, is the request for the silent reading time on every Thursday morning to be increased to twice a week. The number of books to be read for both languages per month is to be fixed and students who deviate should be punished are strongly proposed by the respondents across the forms. Another request is the permission for students to read comics too. Activities related to reading like book fair, reading camp and talks are also suggested. All the suggestions forwarded consistently include a request for better book prizes in the annual awards.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings from the mentors' records and students' questionnaire reflected several issues pertaining to instilling a reading culture among students.

Firstly, the success of the programme is a concerted effort of the whole school. The analysis of the mentors' records has consistently shown that the role of the mentor as the impetus to effect change in reading behaviour is crucial and that in the beginning the element of force and punitive

measures cannot be compromised at all. Even the students themselves recommended that the number of books to be read be enforced and students who fail to comply be punished. Therefore, the role of the Principal in implementation and decision making is vital. The Principal's total involvement and commitment provides the crutch for the programme to succeed.

Secondly, a flexible system of rewards is necessary to build up the culture and the base of support for the programme at the initial stage. Recognition of the effort of both the mentees and the mentors provides an extra mile to get people to strive for the awards and in so doing, it is hoped that the culture will spread to instill a love for reading among the students. This encouraging trend is reflected in the number of students who flock to the school library after school and the long queue waiting at the lending counter every afternoon.

Thirdly, the sensitivity of the school administration to stock up the library with new and interesting titles every year is a great boost to get students to read. Perhaps one issue which deserves attention is whether we should disregard students' request for reading to include comics. As Wise (1976) has argued, theoretical rigidity should not be the yardstick of measuring the suitability of reading material as all reading contributes to learning. A common tendency is treat comics with disdain.

In conclusion, reading is a cultured habit and it takes time to sow the seeds. Change is always painful at the beginning and resistance is normal. Therefore, the principal at the helm plays a crucial role. It takes the principal's total involvement and commitment to provide the crutch for the programme to grow. Once the seeds have been sown and the culture grown, new students would want to be 'members of the society of readers they see around them' (Wallace 1986:2) and to join the club'. We want our students to become people for whom reading is taken for granted as an everyday activity.

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