

For the Love of Reading! New Strategies to Engage the Next Generation of Readers

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Abstract:

The National Library Board (NLB) Singapore has long been a stalwart champion of reading. The NLB supports reading in informal and social contexts, focusing on reading for pleasure as a sustainable and enriching activity. In recent times, reading for pleasure has faced increased competition from time-starved children and young adults, and other forms of entertainment. This paper will cover NLB's new Readers for Life strategy, under the Libraries for Life framework, aimed at cultivating the love of reading in our children and young adults in a holistic and relevant manner. It includes the wide range of efforts to better equip librarians with the essential knowledge and skills to cope with the demanding roles of public librarianship.

Keywords: Public Libraries, Readers for Life, reading for pleasure, reading initiatives

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, the National Library Board's (NLB) network of Public Libraries has positioned itself as a social learning space that nurtures active readers and knowledge seekers, through the provision of relevant, timely and engaging library services and reading programmes.

Public Libraries in Singapore continuously strive to retain its relevance and role in promoting the love of reading to all and serve as a driver for social cohesion, interaction, learning and creation. Earlier library blueprints like Library 2000 and Library 2010 had their focus in building the physical and digital infrastructures to perpetuate learning and reading. NLB's Library 2020 masterplan, also known as Libraries for Life, evolves from previous plans and focuses on programmes that strengthen NLB's core business of promoting reading and ensure that the positive social capital generated by libraries is further enhanced. The vision of NLB under the Libraries for Life masterplan is Readers for Life, Learning Communities, Knowledgeable Nation. As reading provides the foundation for knowledge acquisition and learning, libraries can foster reading for life on a national level. Through interactions at

libraries, individuals can also connect with their communities and foster a sense of belonging and shared values in Singapore's multicultural society.

Using the past achievements as a backdrop, the Public Libraries, through the Readers for Life strategy, turn its attention towards the soft-skills of developing the reading habit in Singaporeans.

2 SCOPE

This paper will focus on the key initiatives of the Singapore Public Libraries to cultivate a love of reading in children and young adults (i.e. teenagers) in a holistic and relevant manner. Particular emphasis will be given to the new Readers for Life strategy, under NLB's Libraries for Life strategic plan, and the implementation of activities to engage the next generation of readers.

In addition, other significant reading programmes that have been conducted for children and young adults over the past three years will be highlighted too as these contributed towards the development of the Readers for Life strategy. Last but not least, NLB's learning framework, which is used to equip librarians with the essential knowledge and skills to cope with the demanding roles of public librarianship, will be shared.

3 READERS FOR LIFE

Research shows that reading as a lifelong learning habit is sustained by the love of reading which must be nurtured beyond the school environment and formal schooling years. Singapore's literacy level in 2011 was at 96.1%¹ but this only shows that Singaporeans are relatively well-equipped in reading skills and may not necessarily be reading for pleasure. If reading is not nurtured as a life-long habit, in the long run it will dull a person's sense of curiosity and interest, creativity and imagination that come from reading and its related skills like comprehension².

A study done by the US National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), looked at the impact of reading and reading ability of young adults from 1984 to 2004. It showed that young adults who grew up with poor reading skills and strong reading aversion had a greater likelihood of poorer academic and economic achievements later in life³. While it may be easier to appreciate the importance of reading for the young, reading is just as important an activity when it comes to older persons. In a Japanese experiment involving some 124 community dwelling seniors aged between 70 and 86 years, these older persons were asked to read on a daily basis. They were able to show that daily reading resulted in an improvement in their cognitive functions. The seniors who read were shown to be more mentally agile compared to the control group⁴. Thus, the importance of reading at any age cannot be lightly dismissed. In

¹ <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/101406.html>

² Perkinson, K. (n.a). Getting your child to love reading. Retrieved from <http://www.rif.org/us/literacy-resources/articles/getting-your-child-to-love-reading.htm>

³ EDITORIAL: OMGUG2BK: Teens' reading habits are a shocker. (1 December). McClatchy - Tribune Business News.

⁴ Uchida, S., & Kawashima, R. (2008). Reading and solving arithmetic problems improves cognitive functions of normal aged people: A randomized controlled study.

the young, a reading habit helps develop creativity and critical analysis skills essential for daily living, while in the old, reading helps them to stay mentally alert.

The Readers for Life strategy extends the Public Libraries past and existing initiatives by targeting the diverse communities, starting as young as infants, continuing with school-going children and young people, and encompassing the older persons, to foster in Singaporeans a love for reading that can serve them over their lifetime. A holistic suite of content, services and programmes has been designed to be delivered through multiple touch points as a means of entrenching reading and sustaining it as a good habit at all stages of people's lives.

The following reading strategy framework is being used to meet the objective of nurturing readers for life among all ages and helping them move up the reading pyramid.

READING STRATEGY	
Toddlers and Pre-schoolers <i>Foundation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Word recognition and introduction to concepts Active listening; arousing curiosity
Children <i>Reading is Fun</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making it fun and interesting makes for easier learning Habits are built from creating interest
Young Adults <i>Reading is Cool</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading is an activity to be enjoyed together Peer-to-peer engagement plays a part
Adults <i>Deepening Reads</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To broaden one's horizon and to enable exposure beyond one's usual reading diet
Seniors <i>Read to Engage</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As a means of intergenerational bonding; to connect with other sessions and to keep one's mental agility

Some of the key reading initiatives that have been developed by the Public Libraries to meet the diverse reading needs of children and young adults are:

TARGET AUDIENCE	READING INITIATIVES						
	New (Readers for Life)			Existing			
Toddlers and Pre-schoolers	Early Read	kidsREAD	Fun With Tots				
Children	Read@School	Young Read! Singapore	Quest	Storytelling	Junior Reading Ambassador	Molly	
Young Adults			Conquest	101 Things for Teens			Project Deliver Me

4 KEY READING INITIATIVES

The following section covers key reading initiatives under the Readers for Life strategy as well as other signature programmes, prior to the Libraries for Life strategic plan, that nurture and support reading among children and young adults in informal social and recreational contexts.

(A) Early Read agenda

For the infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers, the focus is on setting a firm foundation for functional literacy so as to inculcate a reading habit in a child's early years. The Early Read agenda aims to bring together educators, parents and librarians working collaboratively to impart beneficial pre-reading skills to children.

Learning to read starts long before a child enters school and there is a strong connection between the development a child undergoes early in life and the level of success that he will achieve later in life. For instance, infants who have the pre-reading skill to distinguish the building blocks of speech at six months are found to better at other more complex language skills at two and three years of age. They are also noted to be better at acquiring the skills for learning to read at four and five years of age.

A child's success in school and throughout life depends largely on the ability to read and children will usually learn reading skills when they begin pre-school. One concern is that Singaporean children may not be entering formal schools equipped with the fundamental pre-reading or early literacy skills to actively participate in the learning process. There are few free extra-curricular reading programmes for pre-schoolers outside of childcare and kindergartens

In addition, not all adults understand how important it is to develop skills required for reading in very young children. Such parents are not aware that early literacy skills in children are needed to ensure that they are prepared for learning when they start formal schooling. Hence, raising public awareness of the importance of early childhood literacy is integral to helping young children acquire reading skills.

The Public Libraries is in a strong position to drive these initiatives for the following reasons. First, early literacy development requires direct engagement of parents, and Public Libraries has established robust engagement and programming platforms with families. Second, libraries can provide proportionately more learning time outside of short formal schooling time for pre-schoolers. Third, reading in the early years involves family, social and emotional engagement that is better supported by recreational reading in libraries than a purely academic acquisition of literacy skills in pre-school.

The Early Read agenda has a three-prong approach:

- Implement measures that support and guide parents and educators understand and adopt early reading habits, equipping them with competencies and toolkits that inculcate good reading skills and habits in children;
- Establish a strong foundation in the area of reading literacy from a young age; and
- Sustain interest in reading as an important lifelong skill to have in all children.

These are achieved through:

- (i) Early intervention measures designed to inculcate early reading skills in children, in the pre-school environment. These include conducting research work alongside

academia and educators, establishing parent networks for the effective dissemination of competency training and early reading and learning resource aids, and commissioning a study on the understanding of early childhood reading, in particular the extent of parental involvement in reading literacy development.

- (ii) Creating an awareness initiative designed to raise parents and educators knowledge of the importance of early literacy. This is to be achieved through outreach activities to relevant community touch points to promote and advocate the importance of early reading and literary programmes for children that encourages learning through play and social interaction. Financially disadvantaged families will receive special starter reading kits that contain both books as well as appropriate tools to help parents encourage the reading habit in their children.
- (iii) Provision of a one-stop Early Literacy Library providing integrated programmes, resources and specialist advice on all areas of early reading. The library will provide a focal point for the public to get relevant information as well as gain access to reading resources that will imbue early reading skills in children. It specifically promotes the inculcation of pre-reading skills and the enjoyment of reading among children aged 0-6 years, both in direct interaction with the children as well as indirectly through parents and childhood educators. Interspersed within the floor space of the library are defined areas for children and their care-givers, parents and family members, to sit and enjoy reading together. The library will provide the following:
 - A collection that focuses on the early literacy theme, with age-appropriate picture and concept books for the target audience;
 - Experiential learning elements that encourage children to develop an innate sense of curiosity and imagination;
 - A play-based learning corner for parents and educators to model after in their home or pre-school environment;
 - Programming zones that offer a mix of activities, workshops and programmes that advocate the necessary know-how and information on early literacy itself as well as activity-based workshops, and storytelling sessions for pre-schoolers;
 - Learning communities set up as support groups so that like-minded parents can bond and mutually learn from each other; and
 - Reading advisory services and relevant supporting collaterals such as flyers, brochures and packages on early literacy for the public.

(B) kidsREAD

Officially launched in 2004, the kidsREAD programme is an initiative to promote early reading and language competence among children from low income families, specifically the 4 to 8 year olds. The majority of these kids come from non-English speaking environments, many of whom do not speak English at all. They have also not been exposed to reading materials of any kind.

Prior to the launch of the Readers for Life strategy, the kidsREAD programme reached out to children for only a one-year engagement. Upon graduating from the club after one year, the child was no longer obliged to continue his or her reading. There was little follow up with ex-kidsREAD children beyond the one year engagement, unless they chose to rejoin the club in the next year. A survey done with past participants of the programme showed that the children emerged from these clubs as more confident readers, who are better able to cope on

their own with reading. The reading clubs provide for the right environment to encourage reading in these children and provide them with the necessary literacy skills to begin school.

As a result, under the Readers for Life strategy, the programme has been developed into a sustained five-year reading engagement for the children. This provides disadvantaged families with much-needed learning support that prepares their children for formal schooling. The longer term engagement also inculcates a love of learning and awareness of its importance in homes where parents have little education or are ill-equipped to provide learning support for their children.

The programme aims to:

- Leverage on the strengths of various partners to develop and manage a programme to promote among Singaporeans from early childhood a love of reading and cultivate good reading habits;
- Strengthen social cohesion and equitable access to knowledge for children from low-income families, thereby enriching their lives and enhancing opportunities for future success;
- Enhance racial harmony by providing an avenue for children from various ethnic groups to interact at an early age;
- Enhance the quality of the lives of the children and their families; and
- Provide enriching and rewarding volunteering opportunities.

In addition, as part of the expansion of the programme under the Readers for Life strategy, starting from 2013, older students (i.e. 13 years and above) from secondary schools and junior colleges are given the opportunity to volunteer and help nurture the reading habit in the younger primary school children. This is achieved through collaboration between NLB and the Ministry of Education (MOE), in which kidsREAD clubs in primary schools are partnered with neighbouring secondary schools and junior colleges. Currently, 16 secondary schools have signed up for this programme.

Since its inception in 2004, kidsREAD has reached out to more than 17,000 children through a cumulative total of 777 clubs at 200 locations. In 2012, there were a total of 119 clubs at community centres, primary schools, preschools, volunteer welfare organisations and family service centres.

(C) Read@School

Reading for pleasure is an important enabler for learning. Results from the OECD's 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) revealed that "students who read fiction for enjoyment performed significantly better in Reading Literacy," and that this was "consistent with research showing that enjoyment is an important precondition for becoming an effective reader"⁵.

In Singapore, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has taken active steps to promote reading as a means to boost academic success in children. Despite MOE's efforts to encourage reading among students, a study⁶ made of Primary Three students and their reading lessons uncovered

⁵ OECD (2011). Education at a Glance,
<http://www.oecd.org/education/highereducationandadultlearning/48630763.pdf>

⁶ Wong,R. (2004). Reading in Singapore primary classrooms: realities and aspirations. Proceedings of the RELC Seminar: innovative approaches to reading and writing instruction. Singapore:
[http://CPR18_03AL_Conf04\(RELC\)_Wong.pdf](http://CPR18_03AL_Conf04(RELC)_Wong.pdf).

substantial opportunities to nurture reading skills and habits. Many children studied in this research were shown to have mastered basic reading skills like word recognition, decoding skills and answering literal questions though some children clearly lacked the pre-requisite reading skills expected of them especially in terms of comprehension. Another finding was that most classroom reading sessions comprised largely of reading aloud by either the teacher or students as opposed to encouraging the students to gain a good appreciation of what they were reading. If reading sessions were such as described in this study, there is every danger that reading is construed to be associated with school-work rather than pleasure.

To encourage students between the ages of 7 to 17 to read for pleasure and nurture a reading habit, the Public Libraries developed Read@School, a structured and in-depth reading programme for primary and secondary schools. The programme adopts a holistic approach to reading, in which we envision every student a reader and every teacher a reading role model. For each participating school, READ@School customises a set of structured reading programmes that aims to help students pursue reading as an enjoyable activity. Reluctant readers are encouraged to read by pegging reading materials to their needs.

The READ@School outcomes are:

(i) A holistic approach to reading

The programme offers schools a comprehensive range of reading activities structured to deliver holistic reading and literacy developmental goals. The reading activities are pegged to the appropriate developmental reading age of the students. READ@School also offers electives that cater to weaker readers and advanced readers.

(ii) Every student a reader

Reading will be positioned as an enjoyable life habit that goes beyond a diet of textbooks. This outcome will be measured by the frequency and volume of books or materials read by the students. In addition, to cater to the digitally savvy students of today, an online reading portal known as discoveReads has been created to allow them to showcase their understanding of what they read, in the forms of creative expressions like book reviews, book trailers, and alternative story endings and book covers. discoveReads enables both peer-to-peer as well as librarian-to-student interactions over the appreciation and understanding of literary works.

(iii) Every teacher a reading role model

With teachers having a high level of interaction time with students, their influence cannot be understated. It is important for teachers to demonstrate their support and involvement in the culture of reading. To assist teachers, READ@School offers a genre appreciation workshop to help teachers develop a deeper understanding of children and young adult literature, gain insights into global reading trends, discover suitable books and be able to recommend titles for students with different reading and maturity levels.

(D) Young Read! Singapore

Young Read! Singapore is part of the annual Read! Singapore campaign that aims to make reading part of the Singapore culture. First launched in 2005, READ! Singapore encourages Singaporeans aged 15 and above to read and share the joy of reading by creating common topics of discussion and conversation amongst people. This campaign aims to hone Singaporeans' thinking skills and give them room to express their creativity through communal reading, book discussions and other activities. In 2012, Read! Singapore was

expanded to include young readers aged 7 to 14 years old. Young Read! complements other programmes by the Public Libraries to encourage regular reading from a young age.

Recognising the importance of peer influence, a Youth Book Selection Committee comprising 25 students aged 15-19 years old from secondary schools, junior colleges and polytechnics, was formed to cultivate a love for the literary arts and promote a reading culture among the young. They recommend a set of stories that are interesting and relevant to young readers to form the reading list for the annual campaign. These students are avid readers who also serve as reading ambassadors in promoting the joy of reading and appreciation for literature across cultures.

(E) **Quest**

Launched in June 2009, Quest is a reading programme with the objective of converting reluctant readers, particularly boys, to become readers and lifelong learners by leveraging on the current craze of collecting collectible cards, reading fantasy adventure stories and manga.

Quest was created to tackle the declining library loans of boys aged 7-12 years in Singapore. The problem of older children not placing any importance on reading is unfortunately not exclusive to Singapore. A 2008 global Scholastic study⁷ on reading showed that:

- (i) After the age of 8 and between the ages of 9 to 11, only 65% of children placed any importance in reading. This represents the greatest drop in percentage across all age groups from 5 to 17 years old.
- (ii) A lower percentage of boys placed any importance in reading as compared to girls.

Since June 2009, over 4.5 million quest cards had been redeemed and over 5.5 million loans were generated with a total of about 220,000 participants have taken part in this programme.

(F) **Junior Reading Ambassador (JRA)**

Peer influence is a powerful factor in the development of children. According to a 2004 Marketing Week survey⁸, although a range of factors influence the choice of a book that a young person picks up, more than 43 per cent of those surveyed says that having a friend talk about a good book he or she has read makes them want to read that same book. Under the JRA initiative, young student ambassadors promote the joy and benefits of reading to their peers at various public platforms.

JRAs are recruited each year from primary schools and trained by the librarians in areas like storytelling, book talking, handling media interviews, and writing book reviews. Through the initiative, the following is achieved:

- Creating a multiplier effect by showcasing special individuals who love to read and to inspire their peers to do the same;
- Presenting reading as a fun and rewarding activity;
- Encouraging a sense of leadership and confidence to those who are able to articulate and share their passion for reading with their peers; and

⁷ Scholastic. (2006). New study finds that the harry potter series has a positive impact on kids' reading and their school work. Retrieved from http://www.scholastic.com/aboutscholastic/news/press_07252006_CP.htm

⁸ Marketing Week. (2004). Kids aren't out of the words yet. Retrieved from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=545865491&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=13402&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

- Strengthening the Public Libraries working relationship with schools by encouraging their students to read and to highlight the deserving ones.

In 2012, graduates from the earlier JRA batches were roped in to assist the librarians in mentoring and training new intakes of JRA recruits during the annual JRA training camp. This is a significant progression in terms of levelling up the more experienced JRAs from being purely reading ambassadors to reading mentors to their juniors.

(G) Conquest

Launched in November 2011, Conquest is a board game that aims to nurture a nation of lifelong readers among children aged between 10 and 15. The backdrop of Conquest is a Singapore-based story, the Legend of Bukit Merah, delivered in a set of story cards. This game sets young readers on a learning journey about Singapore's history and culture while bonding with their peers.

Studies have shown that non-fiction genres such as history ranked among the lowest among young adults while the adventure genre ranked the highest for fiction. There have also been increasing number of works on historical fiction that has grown in popularity through drama and movies such as 300 (Greek History) and a local drama entitled Little Nyonya. Furthermore, it was noted that there was also interest in board games among the tweens. Thus, Conquest was formulated.

Since its launch, more than 50,000 starter packs had been redeemed and loans generated have exceeded 1.1 million with more than 14,000 participants playing the game.

(H) 101 Things for Teens, by Teens

Engaging young adults is important, thus in 2011 the Public Libraries initiated a programme called 101 Things for Teens, by Teens. It was designed to provide opportunities for young adults to connect with and learn from one another in new and refreshing ways. One special feature of these programmes was getting young adults to facilitate their own learning activity. Video production, science, gaming, public speaking and beauty tips were some of the topics selected by them for their learning activities. The value propositions for this programme were:

- (i) Young adults can teach
- (ii) Learn from peers
- (iii) A reason to be engaged

(I) MOLLY

MOLLY®, the Mobile Library, reaches out primarily to the disadvantaged groups, including special education schools and homes for children and young persons. A converted bus with 3,000 books, library equipment, reading space and library staff on board, MOLLY aims to bring to the disadvantaged an opportunity to discover the joys of reading, and to increase their awareness and use of libraries. In February 2012, MOLLY was upgraded with additional multimedia capabilities featuring iPads and Playaways from TumbleBooks.

(J) Project Deliver Me

Project Deliver Me was conceptualised to reach out to people who are homebound. What makes this initiative meaningful is that it is run by the community – a group of volunteers who either select the library materials or deliver the items to the homes of the physically challenged. This project enables people with physical disabilities to have easy access to the

wide range of library materials from the comfort of their own homes and at the same time, engages the community with meaningful volunteering opportunities.

5 LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Conceptualizing and implementing such a wide variety of reading initiatives is no easy task. Thus, it is crucial to provide all librarians with a comprehensive range of learning and development opportunities in order to equip them with the essential knowledge and skills to cope with the demanding roles of public librarianship.

NLB's learning framework is made up of 2 key approaches:

(A) Learn.Immerse.Practice (LIP)

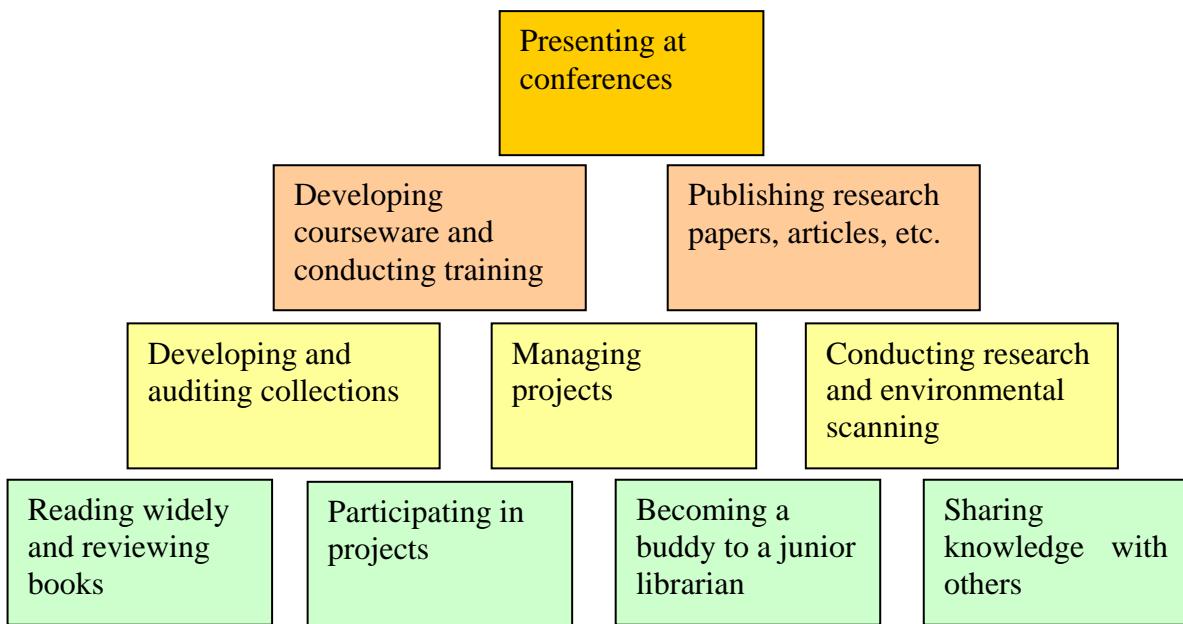
This is a multi-prong approach that leverages on different learning modes to enable librarians to gain new knowledge, insights and enhance their skills and experience. The learning modes are as follows:

Learning Modes	Learn	Immerse	Practice
Courses	●		
Conferences	●		
Professional Mentoring	●		
Self-directed Learning	●		
Attachments OR study trips		●	
Professional Development opportunities		●	
Job Assignments		●	
Projects			●
Professional Research			●
Participation in Professional Working Committees/Groups			●

(B) Self-directed learning

Librarians are strongly encouraged to take charge of their own learning by seeking out and seizing opportunities to learn, both formally and informally. Suggested self-directed learning activities based on a building-blocks approach that begins with foundation activities and moving up to higher level activities can be seen below:

Self-directed Learning Building Blocks



NLB's learning framework has contributed significantly towards developing a high-performing workforce.

6 CONCLUSION

The initiatives highlighted in this paper have been implemented to instil a love of reading among children and young adults, and ensure that no one is left behind in the pursuit of knowledge and learning. Readers for Life, with its focus on reading for pleasure as a sustainable and enriching activity, supports the Public Libraries in building a whole nation of readers.