

READING HAPPILY EVER AFTER --
Making Independent Reading Time
Enjoyable for All

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School-based Curriculum Action Research Series

The 21st century marks the development of an information or knowledge society with fast-changing needs and environment. In order to prepare our younger generation for their future needs, schools, through constant endeavours in search of excellence, have to provide students with different learning opportunities and experiences. In this respect, the school curriculum should best be aligned with the social development as well as the students' interest.

Since 1998, the School-based Curriculum Development (Primary) Section (SBCDP) has been collaborating with school teachers in curriculum development in various Key Learning Areas. Building on the strengths and successful experiences accumulated over the years, the Section has initiated action researches jointly with teachers, aiming at empowering teachers to make informed decisions on curriculum research and development.

Why Do We Promote School-based Curriculum Action Research?

Collaborative school-based curriculum action research aims to:

- ⇒ enable teachers to enhance quality learning and teaching through knowledge generated and constructed in the process of critical and systematic inquiry into different learning and teaching issues;
- ⇒ develop teachers' competence in curriculum development and research literacy as well as their sense of curriculum ownership; and
- ⇒ develop schools into learning organizations through collaborative team work within schools and professional sharing in school networks.

How Do We Conduct Collaborative School-based Curriculum Action Research?

In the course of school-based curriculum development, teachers' critical reflections will help them identify issues worth addressing in the form of an action research. The following steps illustrate the basic cycle in action research:

1. Examine critically learning- or teaching-related issues worth researching into
2. Define the research focus and review literature for current theories and practice
3. Develop action plans or intervention strategies
4. Implement action plans in contexts
5. Collect evidence and reflect on effectiveness of actions

6. Draw conclusions and use feedback to improve learning and teaching
7. Start a new cycle if necessary

As teachers progress through this spiral cycle, they improve their teaching through continual reflection and move closer to the solution of the identified problems. Taking the role as facilitator, Curriculum Development Officers from the SBCDP Section work as partners with teachers, rendering professional support throughout the research cycle, assisting them in reflecting and conceptualizing tacit knowledge embedded in their practice.

How Can These Reports Be Used?

This series of action research reports portrays the participating teachers' educational beliefs and philosophy, and the developmental pathway undertaken to improve the school curriculum. The curriculum design, intervention strategies, action plans, research tools and instruments, as well as the findings and recommendations may be valuable references for teachers who intend to launch school-based curriculum development and/or collaborative action research in their schools. We sincerely hope that this series can serve as a platform to stimulate professional dialogue in curriculum research and development, and to spark off a research culture in primary schools in Hong Kong.

For comments and inquiries on the series, please contact

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I. INTRODUCTION

This piece of research aims to engage students in independent reading in class so that they can develop greater interest in reading on their own. The school, ELCHK Hung Hom Lutheran Primary School, has identified reading as their particular focus for improvement throughout the past 3 years. Besides developing an integrated English curriculum, the most important change is that the teachers have built in shared reading in the English lessons to expose students to stories and let them experience the joy of reading different kinds of stories in a comfortable atmosphere. Reading interest and skills have been enhanced in the process. However, towards the end of the second year, the students still did not have a habit of reading on their own. The teacher, Ellen, who has been working with me, a curriculum development officer, as partners for these years, was very concerned with this and wanted to explore strategies to encourage her students to read independently. We felt that independent reading, like shared reading, should be made part of the teaching/learning process and it could start in class before students really read on their own in their free time.

It is hoped that through different activities and independent reading time in class, students can have more time for reading, have access and know how to choose appropriate books for themselves, and develop better skills as well as greater interest in independent reading. It is also hoped that they will read more in their free time and begin to build up a habit of reading on their own. Since this is an entirely new attempt for us, this research is really exploratory in nature: to find out how we can motivate students to read and how to create a positive environment for reading. We have to explore how teachers should organize independent reading time in class, observe how students read and develop reading interest ultimately.

This account, which aims at portraying Ellen's and my observations of students' reading behaviour in the independent reading time, is presented mainly in the form of journals. The research is a case study and it intends to provoke discussion about reading behaviour, not to offer prescriptions for practice. We have observed very interesting reading behaviour among this group of students and we find it a very valuable experience reading with students and seeing how students actually read. We have taken things for granted for too long and have some myths about how students should read. For instance, students should read silently on their own, like what Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) has been trying to promote. Our beliefs in how students should read are somehow challenged through this year's experience. Through the journals, we intend to document the teacher's day-to-day struggles in helping students become independent readers, reveal how reading is happening among this group of students and discuss how it sheds light on the complexity of the children's reading process. The experience documented in this report will hopefully contribute to a wider and richer understanding of how students read and some of the facilitating factors which enhance students' reading. We understand the limitations of case studies and we are not seeking total acceptance of all that is presented. Teacher development in this form is certainly personal and unique to particular classroom contexts. However, if any part of this report stimulates discussion among teachers and sharpens awareness of the students' reading process, we will be very satisfied.

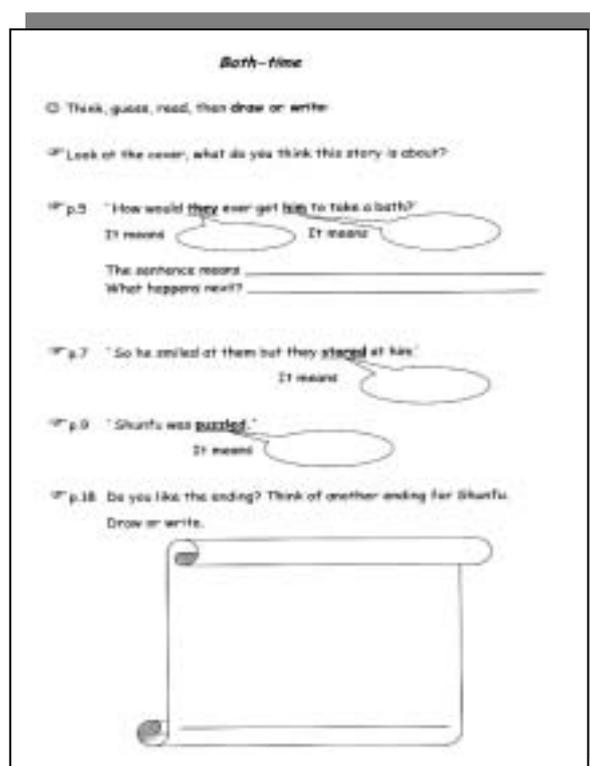
II. WHAT WAS THE PROBLEM?

Independent reading is always regarded as an essential part of a balanced reading program in the primary grades and beyond. However, in Hong Kong, independent reading is rarely made an integral part of the curriculum. Very few primary schools have time for students to read independently for even a short period of time regularly. For the schools which provide independent reading time, there are no strategies to explore how students read and how teachers can help the students read. Library facilities and provision of interesting and appropriate books are also inadequate. These were also the problems we had to tackle in this school. Although we have started shared reading in this school and made it a regular sharing experience for our students here, they had no or very little opportunity to read on their own. They also lacked the essential reading skills and confidence to read. Shared reading experience does not naturally lead to independent reading. The children here are largely from the neighbourhood with little family and language support and most of them have no access to library books outside the school. How to make reading part of the daily classroom routine and our students' habit was the most important issue that we had to consider. Actually, we had two questions in mind: 1) How to motivate our students to read more and independently? 2) How to create a positive environment for reading?

III. WHAT DID WE DO?

We started the independent reading time fortnightly in P.3A in October 2001. Every session lasted for about 30 minutes. Considering the resources available and the students' needs, we planned to have one to two guided reading groups in each session, while the rest of the class should be reading on their own or in pairs. The students could choose the mode of reading most suitable to them. Since guided reading was new to us, we read up literature and tried to learn from different experiences. We hoped to use guided reading to support and encourage the development of strategies for independent reading in small groups. As teachers, we would act as a facilitator to set the scene and, through skillful questioning, engage the children in a discussion that enables them to unfold the story and read the text themselves with confidence (Literacy 2000). To engage our students in

purposeful reading, we had specific reading tasks (Worksheet on 'Bath Time') for the students to discuss and complete based on the book they had read. The questions mainly aimed at developing students' reading skills and personal response. We felt that it was particularly important for the students here to have guided reading so that they could have the opportunity to develop as individual and independent readers while being involved in a supported activity.



Worksheet on 'Bath Time'

After the first term when all the students had a chance to have guided reading with the teacher on either 'Bath Time' or 'Big Bird the Copy Cat' (4 sessions altogether), we decided that from the second term in March, all students would be engaged in independent reading. Owing to the limited manpower resources, we could not carry on with guided reading in class. Altogether, we managed to have 8 sessions for independent reading up to late June 2002. We had 2 interviews with some students, one in January and the other in July, to collect their responses and views towards different reading activities and their interest level in reading. All along, Ellen and I did reflections and wrote journals after we had some observations of the students' reading behaviour. Ellen's journals reflect more on the general change and her impression of her students' progress in reading. As a teacher, she is concerned with the development of her class as a whole and how they change in the process. Mine is more on individual reading lessons and my contact with some particular students. I focus more on the things that impress me most. It is hoped that these journals can help to shed light on how students read and what we can do to help them become better readers.

VI. WHAT DID WE OBSERVE?

A. *Ellen's Journals*

Having studied some literature on `guided reading' and `independent reading', Ellen obviously had certain expectations of her students in the reading time. She hoped that her students could read silently and attentively on their own. At the beginning of the lesson, she briefed the children on how to behave and what to do in this reading period. She told her children that the class had turned into a library and so they should keep quiet and behave properly. She then made arrangements with her children, telling one group to stay with her while leaving the others to the hands of another teacher (very often it was me). But unfortunately, the children did not know how to behave in a class library as this might be a foreign experience to many of them. The following extract from her journals reflects some of the problems she encountered in her reading class.

Date: 17/10/2001

1. *Initial problems*

'The first period was disastrous. The students did not know how to behave in the reading class. There was so much noise and students kept moving around talking to each other. I failed to give very clear instructions on how students should behave and the students could not maintain even the very basic discipline. I just told them that the classroom had turned into a library and they had to read in silence. Obviously, my students did not know how to behave in a real library. The naughty ones were even worse. They started fighting sometimes. Some even went crazy and kept coming out of the seats to change books. I actually told them to read one book only in each lesson. But because there was no

Initial expectations turned out to be quite unrealistic

(Remark: Some students' names would be mentioned in the journals and all of them are fictitious.)

control and I was occupied with the guided reading group, many students lined up to take another book after they finished the first one. I thought I had to set very firm and clear rules for students to follow. It was necessary to have some helpers at the beginning; at least one more teacher was needed in order to take better care of the students. However, even that could not guarantee that the students would behave themselves. I found that my weakest point was I could not maintain the discipline and make my students read silently in class. My children simply did not have a sense that they needed to sit quietly and enjoyed reading on their own. There was no such atmosphere.

Besides, there were not enough easy and interesting storybooks for the students. At this stage, I got only around 60 books in the class library. And, surprisingly, many students preferred to choose the more 'challenging ones'. Even the weaker few laid hands on the more difficult books. The very easy books were very unpopular. Maybe they found the easy books childish and they wanted to show others that they could read the difficult books. Anyway, more books were needed and we kept increasing our stock from time to time. But there were difficulties seeking the suitable books for our students, especially the weaker ones. To make things worse, I have got the weakest students in my class.'

While feeling frustrated with students' independent reading, Ellen found great satisfaction in her guided reading session with a small group each time. She was more aware of what her students needed in the reading process and also the elements conducive to



effective reading. The journal extract reflects how she and her students responded

positively to small group reading and offers insight into what is essential to enjoyment in reading.

Date: 5/12/2001

2. *The impact of guided reading*

'Considering my students' standard, I felt that guided reading was very useful and students could enjoy reading more. My students felt more secure when they could read together and share with each other. The weak ones were particularly puzzled in their first reading without the teacher's guidance. However, after I had

Facilitating factors:
1. supportive / cooperative environment for reading and building up confidence



gone through the book with them and stimulated them with different questions, they actually understood the story well and had a sense of achievement. Some students were also able to work out the meaning of unfamiliar

words and complete the tasks assigned with confidence. The good ones could even cooperate and help each other in understanding

2. small group sharing and personal attention

the story through discussion and sharing. During guided reading, I noticed that all students, even the weakest ones, were attentive and motivated. Although the weak students might not be able to read and give answers, they still paid a lot of attention.

When they were invited to read together, they would try to follow. I made sure that everyone had a chance to read at least one to two sentences and answer my questions. Every student also had the opportunity to express



their personal response to the story and share it with the others. So, the most important thing was to give attention to my students and involve them personally. It turned out that they treasured the teacher's attention very much.

In an attempt to compare students' behaviour in guided reading and independent reading, Ellen reflected on her personal struggle and began to adjust her expectations. She learned to be more positive, have more trust in her students and respect their personal choice. She began to shift her focus on the more positive reading behaviour and try to make meaning of it. At the same time, she showed great concern for the weaker students and questioned whether she could do more to help them.

Date: 24/1/2002

Comparatively speaking, the free individuals were more difficult to control and there were more discipline problems. I was frustrated sometimes as I could not pay attention to all students in class. I was not sure whether they were really reading the books and how much they understood what they read. I was not in control and I had to combat this feeling. However, most of the time, I tried to think positive and focused on what they could read and share with me. I made use of every minute to share with different students. I believed that most of them were enjoying the books they were reading and that was most important. On the other hand, I felt that my children were not used to reading on their own and they did not have a habit doing so. Many of them enjoyed exchanging books with each other so that they could read a few more in each lesson. I also noticed that a few girls formed their own reading pairs and enjoyed reading aloud to each other. I respected my students' choice and

Build up trust in students and mutual concern

Encourage personal choice

encouraged them to choose the mode they preferred. I thought they would enjoy more that way.

I felt that the students liked to join the guided reading because they preferred to read and share with each other. I thought that guided reading had its advantages because both the students and I felt more secure and we were in control of the learning situation. Such small group interaction stimulated me to rethink reading instruction and allowed me to help students learn the strategies essential to independent reading. For the independent reading individuals, the good ones really benefited and such habit is what we want to cultivate in the long run. I just felt frustrated with the weaker students when I failed to help them. I knew that they had great problem and they were not really reading properly. Some did not try hard enough and some simply could not manage. I hoped that I could spend more time reading with them and helping them. But I really could not afford to do this most of the time. I simply had too many to take care of. '

How to cater for learner differences?

After a few more reading sessions, students' change has helped to shape and reinforce Ellen's beliefs which underpin her view of enjoyable and effective reading. Her concern for both her students' needs and interests has the greatest impact on her thinking. It is interesting to see what she recognized as important elements of promoting reading in her class. The following journal illustrates how Ellen's students impacted her and how she strived to make sense of her students' change. Her own learning and struggles were most impressive.

Date: 3/3/2002

3. *Students' change*

'During the first few reading lessons, I was really very unhappy with my students. They could not even maintain the basic discipline. However, after the first few times, students improved a lot. Grace and I kept reading with different students and this helped to boost a lot of interest. The students also got used to the reading session and the atmosphere of reading began to have effect on most students. The majority were really reading and they showed great enjoyment most of the time. They were not afraid of reading more difficult books and they were willing to guess and try. They applied the skills that we covered before, using picture or contextual clues and they developed their own response towards reading. Instead of just looking at the pictures, the students tried to read the words as well and enjoy the story. They had better confidence and competence in reading on their own at last. For instance, I once noticed that David and Ann were absolutely good at guessing the meaning of the unfamiliar words with the picture cues. They were able to link up different pages to work out the whole story. They could turn to previous pages in order to fill the gap they missed during the first reading. The 'pair-up' and their cooperation gave them more confidence and enjoyment and they had better understanding in the end. I commended their ability and encouraged them to carry on with such attempts. I was happy to see this and this was exactly what I expected from my students after all such struggles.

Helping students nurture the reading habit and positive beliefs about reading

Encouraging students by offering positive feedback

All students were thrilled when they knew that they were going to have reading time. Honestly speaking, I knew that some were happy not because they liked reading, but simply because they could play and be free. Some, though only a

few, just filled in the record sheets without really reading the books. When I was busy reading with others, the naughty ones would chat and play around. They happened to be the weakest students as well. I was unhappy that I could not offer them more help and attention.

Learning to think positive and establish cooperative reading atmosphere

However, I still believed that most students really read and enjoyed a lot. I never gave up reading with my students. And whenever time allowed, I tried to read more with the weak ones and tell them that they could read. As time went by, I saw that even the weak and reluctant ones began to read storybooks on their own, showing a slight increase in confidence and interest.

I also had a lot of satisfaction. Many students were serious about this lesson. They really tried to read and enjoy the book they chose. They applied the reading skills learnt whenever necessary. For instance, Henry and Annie were very conscientious readers. They even prepared a small notebook and wrote down all the vocabulary items learnt from reading. However, this might also show that this made them feel more secure if they knew all the words. While appreciating their effort and serious learning attitude, I had to release them from their pressure and encourage them to have more confidence in reading as well. I knew that when they were alone, they would make sensible guesses and read on instead of relying on the teachers.

Many students liked to ask teachers the meaning of the unknown words. They kept asking questions and raising their hands for the explanations. Usually, I would first try to guide them to work out the meaning using clues. However, when there were too many students asking for the meaning, I might just give them the answers straightaway as time was a problem. My

Struggling to help students read with confidence and effective skills

students still cared too much about the vocabulary meaning and hoped to get help from others. I had to struggle to make them become really independent readers and use their own skills to solve the reading problems.

Ellen's final reflections towards the end of the year reveal what she found as the most impressive elements in her reading class. She questioned whether she was satisfied with her students' reading. Since Ellen's concern for her students' needs and enjoyment dominated her reflection, she learned to accept her children's choice and as her insights emerge in the following journal, the complex nature of reading becomes more and more apparent. This year's experience has helped Ellen to know her students better and shift her understanding of the students' reading needs. Ellen's last journal actually demonstrates her dilemma and thereby professional growth as she evaluated the meaning of 'noise' and change in students' attitude. Her final statements reflect her continuing struggle to push forward in the hope of helping her students to read better and more happily.

Date: 8/6/2002

Throughout the whole year, my students still failed to have silent reading in class. Though the noise level was not so serious as the beginning as time went by,



my students still preferred sharing with each other when they were reading. So, there was a lot of movement in the class. The students liked reading with each other, talking about how

'Noise' means positive emotional environment for reading and sharing

they felt and exchanging or recommending books to their students. When Grace or I was reading with one student, the others would like to join in. I also observed that

many students liked to have paired reading, reading aloud to each other, sharing and laughing at the characters/pictures together. They really enjoyed reading together, rather than on their own. So, we never achieved sustained silent reading in



class. At first, I was frustrated. SSR was originally what I wanted to see in class. But as I observed my students and their reading behaviour, I understood that sharing was the most important

Students enjoy the social function of reading

part of reading to them. Forcing them to read silently on their own

might only kill the reading interest in them. The reading fun lay very much in the excitement of sharing and talking out loud the personal feelings. So, I started to change my expectations. With a class like this, I had to allow them to share as much

as possible. The most interesting thing was none of them minded the noise. They all thought that the noise would not affect them at all if they concentrated on their own reading. And this was what happened in class. So, the class was



still noisy, but such noise became more positive and meaningful for it involved so much fun and sharing.

Some students have become really motivated readers. They always look forward to more reading lessons and their desire for reading has been triggered off by this series of reading lessons. All students like to receive English storybooks as presents. Sometimes, we might fail to

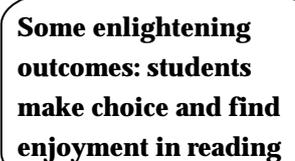
More students become voluntary and enthusiastic readers

have regular reading lessons owing to the holidays and examinations. These students could not wait and they would borrow books from elsewhere, e.g., public or

school libraries. They would also bring back the books and share with me and Grace. I was excited and I encouraged them to bring more books back. The response was very positive. I could not expect all students to do the same thing. But at least this could have some impact on the students. More students actually got books back to share with others as time went by.

One thing I felt a bit disappointed was that many students still lacked the confidence to read aloud the stories. When I asked them to read aloud to me, they would normally refuse or read in a shy way. However, towards the end of the year, with more reading opportunities provided, more students were willing to speak up and read aloud. Usually, I would read with them and this further increased their confidence.

I really feel that it is a long way for students to move from shared reading to independent reading. The students' perceptions of reading, their standard and their preference have to be taken into consideration. At the beginning, my students had a lot of burden about reading and they confused intensive with extensive reading last year. They thought they had to understand every word before they could read and enjoy the book. They lacked the skills to guess word meanings from picture and contextual clues. All these were great obstacles to their reading. Through a lot of shared reading and explicit teaching of the basic reading skills last year, I felt that they began to have more confidence in reading and apply skills acquired occasionally. But they did not have the habit to read all by themselves. This year, through the independent reading sessions in which they did a lot of reading on their own or with their classmates, the students began to really read and enjoy themselves very much. They



Some enlightening outcomes: students make choice and find enjoyment in reading

learnt to choose books for themselves, read and understand, share with others and develop their personal interest. I feel that they can enjoy reading much better, and they are not so troubled by the unknown words as before. The greatest thing is we have started the process and provided students with the opportunities and I hope they would then read happily ever after.

B. My Journals

While sharing most of Ellen's feelings, I also wrote journals after each independent reading lesson in the second term. I want to share with you some interesting episodes of how students read and what they need in the reading lessons. You can find a lot of echoes between my journals and Ellen's. Like her, I can see the positive signs of reading behaviour and the atmosphere on the whole is very encouraging. As I was responsible for reading with the free individuals, I had ample opportunities to observe individual reading behaviour and discern some of their specific problems. I did adopt some intervention strategies at times but they did not always work. As Ellen has mentioned in her journals, I also see the great need to cater for the needs of the weaker students. The experience revealed in these journals confirms that the students treasure the reading time and enjoy reading to each other. It is essential for the teacher to provide supportive emotional environment for reading and sharing and the students can develop very positive attitude towards reading as time goes by. With various incentives provided, the power and pleasure of reading is too great to resist. It also seems inevitable that we have to offer more help to the students in need and remind them of the purpose of reading from time to time. Most of the episodes I want to highlight happened towards the end of the term starting from May 2002 and so only the last few journals are extracted below:

Date: 6/5/2002

This was the 7th time I joined the independent reading time of this class. As I stepped into the classroom, the whole class roared with 'hurray' and they clapped their hands. This was really the greatest excitement I have ever experienced so far. Ellen asked them why they were so thrilled. Some of them put up their hands and shouted, 'I like reading', and 'The books are interesting'. Most said they were happy that they could read in class. Because I always join their reading time, I have somewhat become a symbol of reading to them. So, when they see me, they know they are going to read. Ellen has given me a very beautiful name 'Happy Teacher' (開心老師). So, I actually mean happy reading time to them. Although some kids gave very different answers, e.g. one girl said it was because she liked me and the other boy said that he was happy that there was no teaching for that lesson, the majority did show their enjoyment in and preference to reading. That was a very positive and encouraging sign to us.

Students show positive beliefs about reading

This was still a very noisy class and Ellen had to discipline the kids from time to time. A few naughty ones kept causing troubles and they could not concentrate on reading like the others. Some forced the others to exchange books with them. However, despite the noise and occasional fights, most kids read happily. They were enjoying reading to different degrees. No one was afraid of reading English storybooks. They showed genuine interest in the ones they could manage and enjoy. I once invited a very naughty boy to read a difficult book to me. Even he tried very hard, went through the entire book and told me the ending after reading.

Students enjoy the social function of reading

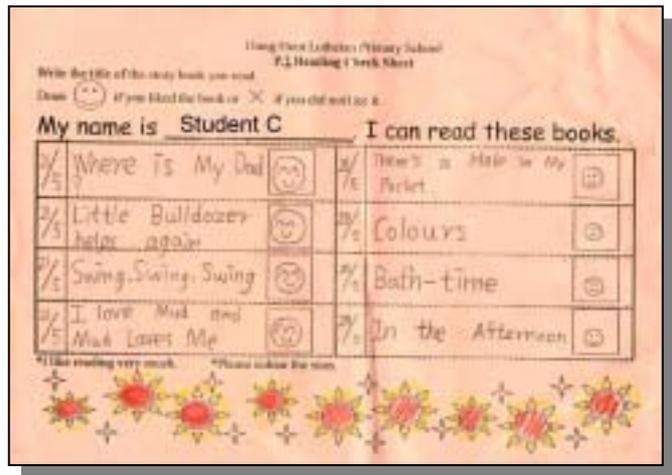
Unlike silent reading time, this class made a lot of noise. It was mainly because many kids in this class enjoyed sharing with their classmates. They read to each other or talked about the book among themselves. They exchanged books and told each other about the book they had read. Some of them walked around talking and exchanging books. At the same time, a few quiet ones preferred to read on their own. When I walked around and asked the kids questions, most were eager to discuss the book. Many asked me questions voluntarily, either about the meaning or simply sharing their feelings with me. When I invited them to read to me, most of them did try and I observed that a few were doing very well. Although their phonics skills and reading aloud were still immature, all kids were really paying attention to the words and they were able to understand the gist (though not all the words) of the stories. A few could apply reading skills like making smart guesses and reading confidently. However, a few weaker ones still needed a lot of help before they could enjoy reading on their own. For instance, I once talked to a boy and he said he did not understand the story. He obviously had chosen a difficult book for himself and I suggested that he could choose an easier one. He was quite confused then. He needed more help in selecting the right book for himself. I actually led him to the big box of books and chose books with him, taking the ones with more pictures and simpler sentences.

Some students have great difficulty in reading

There was a problem with the record sheets. We originally intended to check how many books each student read and what they felt about the stories. However, to some students, the record sheets turned out to be the major tasks they had to complete. When they got a book, the first thing they did was to write down the title and draw the smiling face on the record

Students place importance on records rather than intrinsic value of reading

sheet. They might not really read the book afterwards. This was not what we intended to happen. Ellen had to remind the students from time to time that filling in the record sheets was not the most important thing, they needed to enjoy reading per se.



Record Sheet

Date: 14/5/2002

The class was full of excitement when I stepped into the classroom. They showed enthusiasm in the reading lesson. Discipline was still a problem. The class tended to be noisy and restless.

This lesson, I focused more on the weak ones. I first approached Tony. He had chosen a difficult book about a bear. I thought Tony would not be able to understand this. I asked him why he chose this book. He said he liked the bear. But he did not really understand what the book meant. I told him to choose another book, an easier one. He chose 'Baby bunny'. This was easier but still there were too many words he did not understand. He obviously had some problem in choosing the right book for himself. So, I led him to the box and helped him to choose an easier one from the Butterfly series: 'It's Playtime'. This book was quite suitable for him. He was able to read at least 50% of the book. He could understand the story well. However, when I asked him whether he understood the book, he lacked confidence and said he did not know. I encouraged him and praised him because at least he could read more than half of the book. He

Weaker students need more support and books which match their ability

made very good effort despite the fact that he was very weak. Then I advised him to choose some other books from the same series as this was more suitable for him. However, when I turned to him again, he had chosen another book which was a bit too difficult. Choosing the right book was still a big problem, especially for the weak students.

Stephen was as naughty as usual. He kept seeking attention from the others. At the beginning, he read a book to me and he showed very good understanding of the story. He was a capable boy who had the ability to understand and read correctly. However, his attention span was short and very soon, he tried to disturb the others. Then, Ellen set a very good task for him, asking him to teach his neighbour to read. He liked the job and he showed some effort in teaching his classmate.

Some students need more specific tasks

This class was still noisy. But as what I have observed before, all students were enjoying reading. Whenever I invited a child to read and share, others wanted to join in and they showed the eagerness to read together. This is a deprived group of kids and whenever they are given the attention and concern, they treasure the chance and learn eagerly. Once, I asked a girl to read to me and she managed very well. She was an average student and I saw that she was progressing fast and she really enjoyed reading very much. I think this is the greatest gift of independent reading time: providing the kids the time, the books and the sharing (with classmates and teachers) opportunities so that they can find enjoyment in reading. No kid is afraid of books and they all want to be invited to share the reading.

Students enjoy reading with each other

However, I still find a great challenge to us. The average ones and the good ones are okay on their own. But the weakest few have difficulty in finding the right books and understanding the stories. Their foundation is too weak and they need more support. Like Tony, they need guidance from selecting the books, reading for understanding to reading aloud. Actually, guided reading/paired reading is more suitable for them. While realizing that we cannot sacrifice the majority because of a few weak ones, we have to start thinking about how to help those in need. Should we have some different arrangements (like separating the easy and difficult books) to facilitate a better choice of books for the weak students? How can we find the time and resources to cater for the needs of the weakest students? This has to be explored later when things get more settled.

Need to cater for learner differences

Date: 21/5/2002

The students started reading after they had borrowed the books. Since I found that the average students were able to manage on their own and they were doing quite well, I decided to observe and spend more time with the weak students this lesson.

I read with Tony. He still had problems in choosing the right books for himself and he could not manage to read well. Understanding was a great problem for him. However, he had a very positive attitude. With some guidance, he was able to read some easy books. I had to keep encouraging him and offering assistance to him. I went to the boxes with him and helped him choose the right books. He became more confident obviously when I spent more time with him. He began to believe that he could read better.

Weaker students need more support

Stephen was extremely naughty this lesson and he had fights with his classmates. Once he asked whether he could get any prizes from me. I made use of this chance and made an agreement with him: he would get a present from me if he could read 5 books each lesson and behaved himself. He promised and he did behave much better in this lesson. I hoped that he could improve in the next few periods.

Students need more incentive for reading

The class was still noisy most of the time. Clusters of students gathered sometimes and read together. Some naughty students kept making noises and



disturbing others from time to time. Despite this, I was at one time impressed by a scene: those who were sitting in their seats were all reading very attentively, fully absorbed in their books. For instance, a boy who was sitting at the back right

hand corner of the classroom was so absorbed in his reading that he did not talk with his classmates at all. Another girl sitting at the back left hand corner liked to read to herself and read very fast, totally undisturbed by the noise and people around. This was a really beautiful scene, although it lasted for a short time only. At least, this tells us how children enjoy reading when they are given the chance.

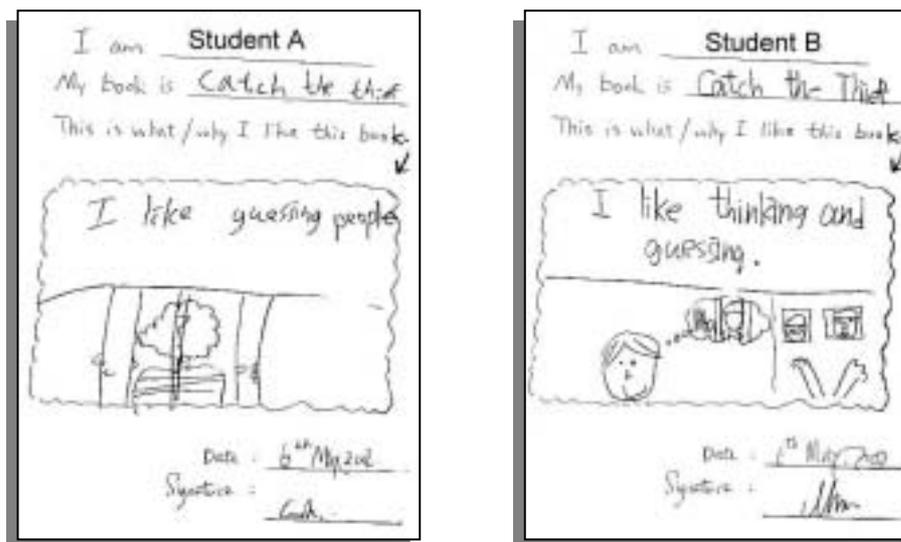


Ellen invited me to select the best 3 readers in this lesson. This was a difficult task because there were more than 3. At last, 2 were chosen and they got compliments from the teacher and the whole class.

Date: 28/5/2002

Ellen started the lesson emphasizing that the class had turned into a library. Students should read quietly and enjoy reading. She commended the students' book reports, referring particularly to Stephen's because he mentioned things he learnt from the book in specific. She also showed her appreciation towards some other good book reports. Some students asked if there could be more new books for them to choose. Ellen replied that if they could read better, she would buy more books later. Besides, students could seek other ways in borrowing the books, like the public libraries. Ellen encouraged students to take up more challenge and enjoy reading.

Students' Book Reports



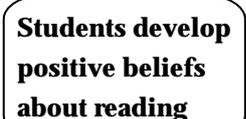
The class started reading very quickly. A girl gave me a book she borrowed elsewhere and recommended it to me. She said this was a very interesting book. I found the book interesting too and I was so happy that she wanted to share with me her joy in reading. I told her to recommend more interesting books to me next time. I lent the book to Tony and encouraged him to read it. However, he found the book difficult although he managed to get the key meaning in the end. So, I told him to find another book. At last, he got an easy book and he managed to read the whole book quite well. I was happy for

Students can have a sense of achievement with some support

him because he had been so weak. Reading through one book was a great achievement for him. He was very happy too and I encouraged him to read some more.

I noticed a very interesting scene. The two naughtiest boys in the class, Stephen and Jimmy were reading with Ellen. I believed that all children enjoyed reading with one another. Reading in the lessons had served a very important social function to all children. After that, Stephen read a book with me too. Two other kids joined in and they read very loudly. They enjoyed the process very much and they tried to learn to read the words they did not know. In the end, Stephen told me that he failed to finish 5 books that lesson because he had been reading with Ellen and me. However, he really behaved much better and he showed genuine enjoyment in reading. So, I said I would count this as well and I hoped he would keep up with this.

Once I watched a girl read. I thought the book was quite a difficult one. I asked her whether she understood the story. Her reply was positive. I asked her further if she understood all the words. She said no but she still pointed out that she understood and enjoyed the story. I thought this was a very encouraging sign of students' confidence in reading. The whole reading process in lessons had some positive impacts on the students. Last year, we found that most students did not feel comfortable with reading books with words they did not know. Guessing word meanings was not reassuring to them. However, with the teachers' effort and this year's experience, I found that all children were more relaxed in reading. They did not have so much burden and they had more confidence in reading difficult books. In the past when we asked the students whether they read English storybooks, their first response was usually no because they found the books

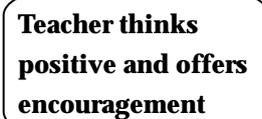


Students develop positive beliefs about reading

difficult. However, now when we talked about the books, all of them immediately would tell whether they liked the book or not. So, I felt that they cared about whether the book was interesting or not, not the level of difficulty. It was most important for them to enjoy the book. That was true for most students, except maybe the weakest few whose foundation was so poor that they really had problem with reading many books in the class collection.

Date: 3/6/2002

At the beginning of the lesson, Ellen pointed out that a few students did not read books properly and they just jotted down the names of the books on the record sheets. She stressed the value of reading and enjoyment, rather than making the records and enlarging the number of books read. She hoped that they could really read the books seriously. She was happy that some students approached her and read with her. She hoped that more students could come up to her voluntarily. She encouraged students to really read a book and enjoy it. It was the process and quality of reading which mattered, not the quantity. Ellen also encouraged the students to apply what they had learnt recently including the past tense verb forms and the vocabulary skills while they were reading. When Ellen was briefing the students, some students were waiting very patiently.



Teacher thinks positive and offers encouragement

The class started reading very quickly. Wu lent me a book she got from elsewhere. She also gave one to Ellen. She showed great enthusiasm in reading and sharing with others. Tony was improving and he got a book which he could manage. However, he still needed guidance from time to time. Anyway he showed more confidence and enjoyment in reading.

The class was still noisy most of the time. But as I observed the class, I could tell



that around 20, more than half of the class, was reading attentively. They were absorbed in reading and I found

Students reveal the power and joy of reading

it a very encouraging sign. 5 of them were impressive as they

were so eager to read and learn. 2 even kept a vocabulary book and jotted down things they learnt from reading. They were very conscientious readers.



Stephen was still very naughty. Sometimes, he did read books. However, he was very restless. Once he had fights with another classmate and he knocked him down. It was a pity that he could not keep up with his good performance and he failed to get a present from me. Despite that, the rest of the class was not disturbed. They carried on with their reading as usual.

The less capable ones and naughty students were still a big problem and we did not have time to help them out. The rest of the class could definitely benefit from the reading sessions and they enjoyed reading more. Although they still had problems with vocabulary and they kept asking for the meaning, they were learning to be more independent readers.

Students are moving towards independent reading

They chose books, tried to read on their own most of the time and shared with the classmates happily. They could tell the gist of the stories and they enjoyed reading. I cannot help feeling that the major targets of reading have been achieved already. The problem is, can the students read happily ever after on their own and how can we make this happen?

V. WHAT DID THE STUDENTS THINK?

We felt that the students were improving on the whole although our original expectations had to be adjusted from time to time. But what did the students think? We interviewed some students towards the end of the term and their views on reading are summarized below. You will find a lot of echoes from them....

A. I like reading

'I have read more books than before, much more than before.'

'I think I have not read enough. I still want to read more.'

'I like reading in class. I can ask the teacher. I can also read with the teacher and my classmates. Reading alone is boring. If I find things interesting when I am reading, I really want to share with my friends.'

'I want to have more reading lessons, at least once a week. If there is no such reading lesson, I may think: 'If others do not read, why should I?' My confidence will be gone. The impact will be great.'

'Is the class noisy? A little bit. But I won't be affected. I just concentrate on my book and I cannot hear what they are talking about. I am too absorbed in reading. I use my eyes in reading, not my mouth. If I read very interesting books and make myself happy, I won't be bothered by the noise.'

B. I like to share with others

'If I have to choose, I prefer noise to complete silence. It is because the atmosphere is better and I have a better mood. If it is too quiet, I will feel bored.'

'In comparison, guided reading is better than shared reading. The teacher can pay more attention to me and there is more care in such a small group. In shared reading, if I don't understand, the teacher would not know. In guided reading, I have more chances to read, answer, understand and express myself.'

C. I can read better than before

'I won't choose books without pictures. If I have to read books without pictures, I will make up the pictures in my own mind using my imagination.'

'When I see words I don't understand, I will ask the others. If there is no one I can turn to, I will guess the word meanings by the picture and contextual clues. Miss Kwok taught me that before. These are very useful methods.'

'I think I can read better now. I have read more and learnt more words. I have improved my comprehension power. I can't believe that I can get so high marks in the reading part of the test paper in the second term.'

'I have more confidence in reading. When we share our reading, I will say to myself, 'My classmates can read, why can't I?' Then I will try harder and have more confidence.'

D. The school helps

'If the school does not give me books to read, I don't know where I can get the books. The books chosen by my teacher are very interesting. I may not know how to choose suitable books for myself.'

E. Reading helps

'I think reading is important. I can learn more words and write stories. I can also find better jobs and talk to foreigners in the future.'

As we have mentioned before, our students vary in their ability and confidence level as far as reading is concerned. We have not been very successful with the weaker students because we do not have enough support for them. However, from this interview, we can see that students in general hold very positive views about reading and they have developed feelings of control over it. The encouraging emotional environment we have created in the reading time has definitely helped many students to combat the fear and anxiety in reading. It is the joy and sense of satisfaction they emphasize most of the time, not the difficulty or a sense of helplessness.

VI. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

We failed to collect all the reading records in the end and somehow, as our earlier sharing indicated, we knew that the figures might not reflect the true picture. However, these records still give us some ideas of how well our students have improved. For instance, on average, our students have read around 38 books in the second term (4 months in total). The highest figures can amount to 60 to 70 though the lowest are still below 10. So, the students have definitely read more in general. As for our collection of library books, we have increased the number tremendously, from around 60 to more than 200. We regard these as some evidence of our achievement in the process.

Motivating students to read

From the journals and students' interviews, we have got more understanding of the keys to developing motivation to read, mostly related to intrinsic motivation. We have motivated our students to read by nurturing their positive beliefs about reading. Even the weak students like Tony derive joy and satisfaction from it. Most of the students begin to see the value of reading as an intellectual and social tool and their anxiety level is greatly reduced. Besides, by allowing our students to choose the mode of reading most suitable to them, reading with students from time to time and encouraging them to share, we have created a positive emotional environment for reading and widened students understanding of the social functions of reading. Despite the noise, the reading time is full of trust and mutual concern. Instead of checking on our students constantly and doubting whether they are really reading, we prefer to believe that they are enjoying reading at different levels and we share with them. We give students choices about what they want to read and how they want to share. The environment is completely safe for reading and no one gives pressure to anyone. Reading is a voluntary activity and the desire comes from inside. We have also provided a supportive context for reading by encouraging peer support and

offering positive feedback. During our interactions with the students in guided reading and paired reading, we teach our students the essential skills with meaningful tasks and offer assistance whenever necessary. With such a cooperative reading atmosphere, the students begin to have more confidence and believe that they can read. The most important thing is we all enjoy reading together and the students have shown us how they enjoy reading in such an environment.

Promoting the joy in reading

We have learnt from our students that reading can be so much fun, especially when it serves a very important social function. Our students in particular enjoy very much sharing their reading experiences with others. That is why they can't keep silent in class. And it is where all the satisfaction and joy of reading lie. Most of our students have chosen not to have silent reading. So, we have to change our perceptions of how effective reading takes place. We really need to rethink what each group of students' need and how to help them read. At least, silent reading is not suitable for our students at this stage. Like shared reading or guided reading, the support from each other and the relaxing atmosphere are most significant for very young kids to have joy in reading. We have to allow or even encourage a certain amount of noise in the reading lesson as such noise means happy exchanges and sharing of reading fun. Maybe later when our students become very mature readers who can enjoy reading all on their own, SSR is a more suitable mode.

Need to cater for students' needs

More importantly, we have to really observe our students' needs and try to cater for them. This group of children helps us see the power and pleasure of reading. Once the students are given the opportunities and the facilities, their interest and confidence will be

enhanced, no matter what their standard is. This year's experience has been both painful and rewarding. It is painful because we really do not know what to do at the beginning. Guided reading and independent reading are things we have not done before. This year, we have tried all modes of reading, from shared reading to independent reading. From the journals, you can see that we are still groping our way, learning about how to make each mode meaningful and making adjustments all the time. Most important of all, we have to observe how our students learn and respond to each mode. Obviously we have not been very successful and we are still learning to improve. This is an on-going process.

VII. LOOKING FORWARD

Reading does not take place all of a sudden. A lot of support and preparation has to be done in advance. Our students need to be trained to develop basic reading skills and the proper attitude towards reading. It takes time for students to cultivate such a habit and ample opportunities have to be provided. It is essential to start as early as possible. We managed to start in P3 this year and we realized that it might be already a bit late. The situation should have been much better if we had started the reading session earlier, preferably from P1. Our weak students have to struggle very hard because they lack the previous training and their foundation is too poor. So, this year, we decide to have independent reading lessons for all the 3 levels: P1, P2 & P3. Ellen and the school's continued effort to persevere with measures that encourage students to be independent readers is evident. We have this goal in mind: help all our young students to read and let them choose to read happily. We start the fun in class, hoping that our students would then read happily ever after

THE AFTERMATH

We understand that there is no guarantee that our students will read happily ever after.

There are so many factors affecting the students' desire to read. Since we focus on developing independent reading habit in our P1 to P3 students, the P4 students have to be really on their own. Can they sustain their interest and continue to enjoy reading like what they did last year? To be honest, we are in great doubt. The seeds of reading have been sown, but will the plant grow? However, we must not lose heart. In October 2002, Ellen sent me the following episode and told me enthusiastically how one of her former P.3A girls grows to be an English bookworm:

Date: 8/10/2002

I would like to share an episode with you. Annie, the quiet girl in 3A last year, came to me last week and showed me a thick English storybook. It's a detective story series. She told me that she tried to guess and work out the meaning first, then she would use a dictionary to confirm her guesses. That's why I can see lots of footnotes and Chinese meanings of the difficult words. I saw her mother the other day and she told me that Annie enjoys reading English storybooks and loves English. She even makes it a habit to read a few pages every night before going to sleep.

I know this may be an individual case. But isn't it encouraging?

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