

Community Partnership Improves Reading Abilities

EduQuest and School Partners
DepEd Divisions of Makati City and Sagay Coty

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It is indeed quite simplistic but true; there are just about three steps to encourage and develop in students the discipline and love for reading, and thus develop reading skills. First, students must read a lot. Second, to encourage students to read a lot, they must be motivated to read. Finally, to be motivated to read there are resources and tools that need to be available, like books and ICT-enabled diagnosis and assessment tools.

As parents and teachers, we have driven these efforts relentlessly for the longest time, and yet, today we all face grim realities:

1. **1998 World Bank Study:** "While 9 out of 10 children can read and write, Filipino children between 9 & 14 are two standards below international target mean scores in Math, Science, Reading." Students have difficulty understanding problem statements.
2. **2001, Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS):** They ranked second from the lowest out of 38 countries.

This was attributed to poor understanding (reading comprehension skills) of the Math and Science Problems

- 3. 2002, The National Education Testing and Research Center Study (NETRCS):** Diagnosed 1.63 M Grade 4, 5, & 6 students and 1.57 M 1st year High School for mastery of skills in English, Math and Science. Results reveal that: English skills, only 30% master; Science, only 28% mastery; Mathematics, only 27% mastery. Study interprets that reading disability in prescribed level begets difficulty in using language to comprehend and communicate effectively.

More recently the Department of Education certainly expressed their alarm over "reading problems". Undersecretary Fe Hidalgo, during the 2004 Educators' Congress announced "that many elementary and high school students are non-readers, meaning that they know how to read ... but cannot comprehend what they read. She claims that no actual statistical data show such conclusions although "the dismal results of the DepEd readiness test for high school bound students last May & August seemed to indicate the extent of the students' reading problem." (*Manila Bulletin, 29 October 2004*)

But perhaps the more pressing reality this very day is the fact that we are gathered here in this Conference to discuss about ICT (Information and Communication Technology) integration in Basic Education at the time when we acknowledge our students barely know how to read. When we started EduQuest, 10 years ago, our Chairman of the Board, muttered a statement that became my motto to this day, "What good is word-processing if one does not know how to read or write". (*Tan, P.*)

I'd like to pose the following statements that I would like our discussion to revolve around the following beliefs, premises I bring with me today:

1. ICT is not the only solution. It can only be a solution if it can be made to address a specific educational objective, concern, a specific process that can be made more efficient. For instance, technology tools that enable awareness of literacy rates and identifies exact dosage of intervention needed for growth will certainly lead towards reading growth.
2. Reading literacy development is a function of interest, a function of a desire to open the windows of the world, a function of community interaction. Two of our EduQuest partners will attest to the fact that it takes a community, a community venue, a community experience to achieve reading growth.

To bring home the point, let's begin with then realities in the classroom. The larger the class sizes, the more difficult for teacher to attend to individual needs of students. This is especially important in building core competencies in Reading. To determine individual competency levels, teachers traditionally use exercises in the nature of skills and drills that develop mastery of certain skills and competencies. Performance assessment and testing is a core activity of the educational process. But because of high student headcount and the need for intensive drilling, this becomes a chore that consumes the time and energy of the teacher. It is difficult to design frequent tests that can assess progress and are safeguarded from cheating. For example, repetitive use of the same set of items leads to biased results because students ultimately get hints or advanced indications.

It becomes desirable to implement an automated method of random quiz generation for purposes of scoring and tracking progression of individual and group achievement. The teacher no longer needs to spend time developing test questions and checking student work. The time saved enables the teacher to make individual student assessment, class assessment and formulate plans for remedial action. Again, teacher acts as manager of learning, ready to immediately acknowledge and recognize student achievement or apply timely solutions to address problem cases. ***The teacher now assumes the role of coach, partner, and mentor*** as opposed to a law enforcer or a disciplinarian.

Using an automated skills tracking and progress assessment tool, the teacher conducts a diagnostic test to determine student individual competency levels in reading or mathematics. Quiz items in the nature of drills are generated from an item bank. Student takes the quiz. The tool instantaneously scores and performs an analysis of data.

The resulting report articulates to student, teacher, and even parents, specific student competency levels and suggested interventions for improvement. A class record provides consolidated analysis of the class competencies giving the teacher solid information about the class and enabling her to design a more relevant instructional program. Teacher can focus on giving immediate feedback to students and individualized intervention approaches, creating opportunities for enriched teacher – student teacher relationship.

Moreover, automated method of assessment makes it possible to achieve other pedagogical objectives. For example, it is known that reading is a core intelligence function that is crucial in developing many other forms of intelligence. It is particularly a critical skill for developing basic mental structures needed when studying other subjects and useful for developing life-long interest. It is known that reading skills must be developed during pre-teen years because subsequent remedial actions will not be totally adequate and successful.

The use of the machine – based assessment and tracking methods makes it possible to allow efficient cycles of reading assignments to be given. Students have a wide range of subject areas to read about within his/her level of readiness and proficiency and more importantly within his scope of interest. The process enables students to set and understand an assigned progress objective and track his/her own progress in a personal logbook, in essence, develop a sense of ownership of objective.

The resulting classroom management system enabled by the machine-based assessment and tracking methods moves towards a more **learner – centered model**. In this situation, the student begins the process of self – discovery: progress begets positive reinforcement and success encourages **self – reliance and exploration**. As teachers become more aware and focused student progress, the design of lesson interventions and remediation acts address the specific needs of those students, who need special attention. At the same time, because the student is allowed to set his/her competency goals, he/she **assumes responsibility for self-learning**.

The machine – based classroom management system also offers opportunities for rallying all members of the school community to support the student, and work hand-in-hand towards improvement of their individual core competencies. In essence, it can be made to service and address the desire and expectation of parents, that indeed the school administration can assume responsibility and accountability in developing students' competitive advantage.

Finally, our partnership experiences, DepEd Makati City and DepEd Sagay City. We had chosen to present them to you today as a fitting example of how communities of commitment to reading literacy has helped students not only acquire reading comprehension skills but more so the love for reading.

Forged collaboration of communities inspired the beginning of The Makati Reading Together Club that offered opportunities for students to experience fun in reading for eventual development. The club aimed to improve the students' love for reading through frequent reading practice and interactive learning sessions, assess students' development in their reading abilities, and provide books appropriate to students' reading level to promote love for reading.

More than the improved reading abilities of its members, the concerted efforts provided by the school administrators, the local government and the industry made the program worthwhile. Diagnosis tools were utilized to identify and measure reading levels and growth of 278 students who actively participated for two months. Carefully chosen Reading teachers were trained to facilitate learning sessions utilizing activity modules integrated with Reading intervention strategies and to act as reading mentors to club members from November 2003 to January 2004. A radio show also became a venue for members to demonstrate their reading abilities

developed. Parents also took an essential role of bringing moral support to better encourage their children to read more as they enjoy it. Monitoring activities were conducted to gather feedback that took into account the diverse views of the teachers, students and parents.

A profiling of reading literacy competency levels of Grades 2 and 3 students from DepEd – Division of Makati City was conducted last September 2003. 91% of the student population was diagnosed as pre primer readers, 2 to 3 notches below their expected reading level. The results served as baseline data to help track students' growth. The awareness prompted the division to collaborate with communities to help implement the club as an intervention strategy to address identified needs of the students.

Of the 600 students invited to join the club membership program, a total of 390 pupils participated in the club activities but 278 members underwent and accomplished the post-diagnosis test. After two months of program implementation, post diagnosis results indicated that the reading performance of the 278 members increased by 15%, indicative of a high significant improvement.

The same goes with our experience with DepEd Sagay through Project Read where communities worked together towards a common goal of providing opportunities for students to experience fun in reading for eventual development. Similar to the Makati Reading Club, Project Read also aimed at developing among students the love for reading through frequent reading practice and interactive learning sessions, and progressive assessment of the students' reading abilities. Project Read, however, was integrated in the division's school curriculum covering school year 2002 – 2003.

Inspired by the combined efforts provided by the school administrators, the teachers, the parents and the industry, the program indeed obtained positive results. Close supervision and monitoring activities were conducted by the administrators to ensure smooth and successful program implementation. Diagnosis tools were utilized to identify and measure reading levels and growth of 1,132 grades 3 – 6 students from 6 selected elementary schools of the division. Twenty (20) carefully selected Reading teachers were trained to design and facilitate activity modules cum Reading intervention strategies. Summer programs and supervised lunch programs also became an avenue for implementing reading activities for identified students who needed added guidance and interventions. Parents also took an essential role of bringing moral support to encourage their children to read by learning to read themselves.

A profiling of reading literacy competency levels of Grades 3 - 6 students from DepEd – Division of Sagay City was conducted for 2,000 students. 57% of the student population were diagnosed to be several notches below their expected reading level. The results served as baseline data to help track students' growth. The awareness prompted the division to collaborate with communities to help implement the club as an intervention strategy to address identified needs of the students.

Of the 2,000 students diagnosed, a total of 1,132 pupils underwent intervention activities and accomplished the post-diagnosis test. After a year of program implementation, post diagnosis results indicated that the students' reading performance increased by 56% among Grade 3 students; 33% among Grade 4 students; 38% among Grade 5 students; and 48% among Grade 6 students, indicative of high significant improvement.

Again, I bring you back to my premise as I further reinterpret them to you after having heard of our experiences:

1. ICT is never an answer to enhancing educational processes; it only serves as machines that will make efficient your bid towards successful student products.
2. Communities of common advocacies, of common desires and aspirations will naturally take up roles and responsibilities that will help schools produce better students, functional graduates and participative community members. Then and only then will the cycle of learning become fulfilling: **Communities dedicated to the cause of education begets communities dedicated to the cause of education.**