The Star

More books, higher scores

Sunday, 21 Jan 2024

WITH the Covid-19 pandemic taking a toll on teaching and learning, countries from around the world, with few exceptions, reported score declines in the recently released Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 results.

However, it was found that students who had more books in their homes scored better than their country's average.

While it comes as no surprise that those with more books scored better in the reading domain, what is noteworthy is that they also performed better in science.

The average overall score for reading, mathematics and science in Malaysia is 388, 409 and 416, respectively.

But students who possessed more than 26 books at home, irrespective of the genre, exceeded the national average scores for reading and science.

A similar situation can be observed in our neighbouring countries, such as Brunei and Vietnam (**see infographic**).



Universiti Malaya Faculty of Education Department of Language and Literacy Education head Dr Shanina Sharatol Ahmad Shah said access to reading or the presence of books at home can facilitate high academic achievement, besides demonstrating stronger language skills.



Shanina Sharatol

“The more books they have and read, the greater the benefits they gain,” she told StarEdu.

She said studies have shown that the habit of reading is a top predictor of academic achievement, regardless of the children’s parents’ socioeconomic status and level of education.

Shanina Sharatol added that it is important to understand that students’ environment, the reading culture they are part of, and other contextual factors also lead them to differing levels of academic achievement.

“Hence, this translates to different reading habits among students. Some have good reading habits while others have poor habits depending on their access to reading culture and materials.

“Consequently, those with high academic achievements acquire more knowledge by being avid readers,” she said.

According to Shanina Sharatol, the type of book does not matter; what is important is that the book is interesting.

“The most potent books are those that are comprehensible and interesting for the readers.

“It is impossible to list the specific type of books that would promote high academic achievement and literacy, but when students select reading materials that they find interesting or compelling, they gain good input and this leads not only to literacy development but also excellence in their academic studies,” she said.

She emphasised that the reading material selection must be made out of pleasure, self-directed and self-selected.

“Once these are fulfilled, they will develop effective reading skills, becoming fast, frequent and fluent readers,” she said.

While acknowledging the impact of the Internet, mobile phones and visual content on children’s reading habits, she said children can read in any environment – digital or print – and thus one should honour their choice.

“In this era of technology, we can explore various choices but the aim is to promote, develop, sustain and motivate the love for reading among children.

“With more reading choices in digital form, it is easier to skim and scan, especially with longer texts,” she said.

Shanina Sharatol also said it is crucial to help children understand the importance of reading.

“Reading could help them navigate the complex world, deal with various issues, broaden their imagination, improve their writing and speaking, as well as excel in their school work,” she said.

Besides creating a conducive reading environment at school, home and other convenient locations, she said the material needs to match their reading level.

“The vocabulary and content should not be too intimidating as these would scare reluctant learners away from building an interest in reading.

“If these are too easy, children will also lose interest in reading as it does not challenge them to improve,” she said.

Taylor’s University School of Education senior lecturer Hema Letchamanan said reading is crucial, even in subjects such as mathematics and science, where questions are usually posed in a way that requires complex reading and deciphering of information.

Hema, who runs the university’s Projek BacaBaca, said she saw this for herself when working with students aged seven to 12 in Kemensah, Selangor.



Hema

“None of them could do a Year Two Science paper. I was very surprised because I had taken it from a Year Two workbook.

“When I read out the questions to them, they were able to answer all of them,” she said, adding that they knew the content but could not respond to the test because they could not read.

Agreeing with Hema, Universiti Sains Malaysia School of Educational Studies senior lecturer cum Bachelor of Science with Education Programme chairperson Dr Nur Jahan Ahmad said students with good reading abilities would find it more comfortable completing science and mathematics tasks.

“In PISA, as far as science is concerned, students are expected to draw upon moderately complex content knowledge to identify or construct explanations for familiar phenomena.

“Students can demonstrate this by constructing explanations, with relevant hints or support, in less familiar or more complex situations,” she said.

As for mathematics, Nur Jahan said students need to integrate parts of texts to identify the main idea, understand relationships and construct the meaning of words or phrases.



Nur Jahan

Melaka Action Group for Parents in Education (Magpie) chairman Mak Chee Kin said while reading can broaden one’s knowledge, it is not just in terms of growing one’s vocabulary.

“If one reads more science-related content, surely it will help one to score high in science,” he said, adding that reading articles online also counts.

“It is a fact that many youths prefer digital content,” said Mak.

And it does not have to be costly to give children a variety of books to read.



Mak

Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia (PAGE) chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim said if there are space or budget constraints, there are always nearby libraries and bookstores that encourage on-site reading.

Some even offer reading corners with light refreshments, she said.



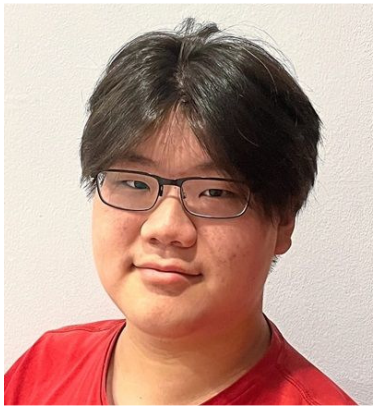
Noor Azimah

“Aim for a level where not a single book is untouched, or at least stimulate curiosity to read any topic until a certain genre becomes a favourite choice,” she added.

Adding on, Shanina Sharatol said schools, teachers and local communities can collaborate in creating and organising extensive reading programmes that promote regular or consistent reading pleasure outside the classroom at a convenient time.

Through the programmes, she said children would have free access to books or other reading materials provided by the schools.

Fruits of fictional delight



“For the past few years, I’ve read a lot of romance stories. It has helped me in understanding emotions and how to convey them properly through writing. It gives my writing a more human and realistic touch.

Another genre that has helped me is science fiction. Even though it shouldn’t be the main source of information, I’ve learnt various things from sci-fi books. For example, the difference between poison and venom; and how the magnetic field protects the earth from the sun’s solar winds. That said, you should cross-check with other sources before you accept the facts, as some things could just be made up for the story. Reading these genres has helped me to score high marks in my examinations over the years.” – Dominic Lim, 17



“I enjoy reading a wide array of genres but fiction holds a special place in my heart. As I started reading at a young age, it has enhanced my knowledge of the English language and enriched my vocabulary.

However, it benefits me in subjects other than English too. For example, the fictional books I read often contain substantial content related to science and medicine. Once a topic piques my interest, it inspires me to do more independent research on it.

Moreover, many fictional books are set in a world filled with history, which includes geographical aspects. This encourages me to be interested in my own studies involving history and geography.

Reading fiction that relates, even in the slightest way, to my studies urges me to explore how and why it’s related because the idea of fiction and my studies being connected is far too interesting not to explore. So, yes, reading has definitely been one of the main reasons I can score high academically.” – Devya Kuganesan, 15



“Some of the books on my shelf are from the historical and geographical genres. I was first introduced to these subjects when I was in seventh grade, and began to unknowingly excel in them. Then, I started digging deeper by reading and referring to additional books that weren’t in the curriculum but were somehow related to the topics that were discussed in school. My grades subsequently improved.

Academic results serve as motivation for students to explore their interests, as they have done for me through reading, which in turn invokes a heightened sense of curiosity and passion to strive academically. This cycle of self-improvement goes on and on, and has truly enriched my learning experience.” – Tina Low, 14

All three students featured here are participants of the BRATs Young Journalist Programme run by The Star’s Newspaper-in-Education (Star-NiE) team. For updates on the BRATs programme, go to facebook.com/niebrats.