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## **‘Build a nation of readers’**

**By HO JIA WEN**

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MALAYSIANS’ reading habits are far from desirable, said Taylor’s University School of Education senior lecturer Hema Letchamanan.

Several studies done by Taylor’s University, Universiti Teknologi Mara Melaka and Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia found that many Malaysian tertiary students rarely read outside of textbooks, and have poor reading habits.

In 2014, it was reported that Malaysians on average read 15 books a year, just over one book a month. To get the latest picture of our reading habits, the National Library of Malaysia, together with the National Unity Ministry, is conducting a study. And, the early findings look promising — Malaysians now read 20 books a year on average.

However, with a high literacy rate of 95% in 2019 according to World Bank data, the reading culture is still lacking.

Advocating the importance of developing a better reading culture among Malaysians in conjunction with World Book and Copyright Day, which is observed annually on April 23 to promote the enjoyment of books and reading, Hema said children who read frequently are more likely to excel in school and perform well in standardised tests.

One’s reading skills do not only apply to language subjects, but also form the basis for learning other subjects such as physics and chemistry. When students can’t read, or read poorly, they will not be able to cope with other school subjects, she said.

In other words, children, she emphasised, need to learn to read first, before they can read to learn.

Besides literacy skills, essential life skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making can be obtained through reading, added the project leader of her varsity's Projek BacaBaca which, since 2021, has helped primary school pupils from B40 and underserved communities to improve their reading skills.

Weighing in on the issue, Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (Melta) president Dr Ramesh Nair said reading improves students' grasp of the English language or any other languages they are reading in.

Besides being an excellent way to learn languages as it builds vocabulary, reading exposes the reader to how words in a language work and interact, and how they are used in different contexts, he added.

Reading, Hema went on to say, also promotes empathy and social understanding by exposing children to different cultures, values and experiences; it opens a world of possibilities for students and sparks their imagination.

"Reading is the single most important tool for learning about the world and themselves. It also provides a safe space for children to explore their emotions and feelings," she said.

"For children from underprivileged families, reading could be the key to breaking the cycle of poverty and intergenerational poverty that they are trapped in," she added.

### **Fostering a habit**

Despite its benefits, University of Nottingham Malaysia Emeritus Professor Dr Malachi Edwin Vethamani said cultivating the reading habit, especially for leisure, is a huge challenge.

The reading habit, he asserted, needs to begin very early, with parents or elder siblings reading to young children.

In instilling a love for reading, he is of the view that "anyone in every age" should be given the opportunity to read literature. He said reading literature, unlike reading other materials for information, involves the reader's intellect, emotions and sense of appreciation.

"It is a personal experience where the individual gets to enter the world created by the writer, and see new and different things," he said.

Prof Malachi, who is also a prolific poet and writer, and is actively involved in the local and international literary scenes, added that reading literature helps develop individuals through empathising with characters in stories and poems.

"Readers become more aware of the people and the world around them because of reading literature," he said.

Pointing to three prominent places in children's everyday lives where reading can be fostered – at home, in school and in public spaces – Hema said there must be dedicated reading time in every household, and parents must be role models by being readers themselves.

“Parents with low literacy should not fear reading; they can read newspapers, or a simple book,” she offered.

Public spaces, she added, must encourage and cultivate the reading habit among Malaysians.

“These spaces should be interactive and fun for children and families,” she said, adding that reading spaces can be built in shopping malls, train stations, restaurants, supermarkets and public housing.

While every school typically has a well-resourced library, she said it is usually underused. Reading can be encouraged in school, she stressed, adding that it should not be seen as an extra activity.

“Instead, reading can be incorporated into schoolwork, and school projects can also incorporate reading beyond textbooks and workbooks,” she said.

She added that every class should have a reading corner where students can go after completing their tasks.

On ways to instil interest in literature among students, Prof Malachi said teachers should give students literary texts that are written for their age groups, instead of going for adult canonical texts.

“Students need to be given texts they can connect with, and texts that resonate with their interests and lives.

“In language classes, there should be more children's literature and young adult literature. These texts are generally short and fast-paced, which young people enjoy reading,” he said.

### **Efforts in school**

In order for reading interest to take root in students, the overemphasis on examinations among teachers and parents has to change, said Prof Malachi.

Recalling his experiences of implementing reading programmes in schools over the last few decades, he said teachers tended to focus on examinations and if the literary texts were not tested, they were not read in the classrooms. Parents also wanted teachers to

focus on examinations, he said, adding that poor text selection and lack of motivation for students to read were among the factors in the limited success of the programmes.

According to Ramesh, there have been extensive reading programmes in Malaysian schools across the decades. One of the longest, he said, is the Nilam programme, which has students keeping records of the number of books that they have read.

Although the intention is to encourage more reading, he said it has translated into a burdensome system not just for the students, but also for teachers and school administrators.

“It has become an administrative task to record books, which takes away from inculcating a love for reading. “A successful extensive reading programme must prioritise the importance of inculcating a love for reading,” he said. Citing the “Drop Everything And Read” (DEAR) programme, which is implemented in other countries, he said it sets an allocated time slot every day or week during school hours for students and teachers to “drop everything and read”.

Students, he added, can select any book they want to read so long as it is appropriate for school; the duration can be as short as 20 minutes.

“The DEAR programme has been found to be quite effective and allows students to look up to their teachers as role models for reading. We really need to rethink the way we implement reading programmes in schools, and find a way that does not add to the burden the teachers already bear,” he concluded.