

## **Promoting Quality of Life Through Family Reading**

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Thailand is moving towards establishing the learning society. The National Education Act 1999 provides challenging guidelines for development of Thai education to bring quality of life and prepare Thai people to be part of Knowledge Society with life-long learning facilities. Reading is fundamental and children need family reading at formative age to stimulate reading abilities. Family is the first school for every child and family reading, an activity shared among the family members. This paper details the reading, family reading, community reading, and partnerships in developing reading habits. Survey results using interview method are analyzed to find out the present status of reading, activities supporting reading in 13 districts of Maharakham province. Recommendations based on the findings are mentioned for initiating necessary actions.

*Keywords:* reading, reading habits, family reading, community reading

Literacy development begins in the first days of a child at home and this is a process to bring the child to reading. Parents are child's first and most influential teachers. At this early stage, pleasurable experiences with books and stories shared, can build a strong foundation for reading, and a good life: intellectually, socially and emotionally. Ensuring all children begin life with a strong foundation for literacy and learning should be the aim of all the citizens of Thailand.

The National Education Act 1999 states that the Thai citizen should become a life long learner. The 1997 Constitution and the 1999 National Education Act provide challenging guidelines for the development of Thai education, to prepare all Thai people to be part of a learning society in a knowledge-based economy. The National Education Act has introduced new initiatives and guidelines for comprehensive reforms of education. Following the Constitution and the National Education Act, the National Education Plan (2002-2016) is emphasizing education with equity and quality and aims at increasing the quality of life of its citizens.

To achieve the objectives set by the National Education Act, parents should think seriously on the family values, reinforced by child care, schooling, higher education and the non-formal education as life-long learning. Everyone can contribute to a child's development by creating new values and offering a learning-oriented environment and prompting, cultivating activities towards goodness, intelligence, happiness, energy and strength of the nation's future human resource.

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This paper is an outcome of the work based on factual data obtained using random sampling of families using interview method with structured questionnaire covering 13 districts in Maharashtra province. Effort is made to get the feedback on reading habits and also to know the present status of activities focusing on the family reading activities.

### *Why reading?*

No other skill taught at home and learned at school is more important than reading. Reading is the gateway to the knowledge. It is a basic for all human beings to read and communicate. Reading needs to be introduced, nurtured and developed at very young age for long time sustenance. Human behavior in a society has direct relation to the reading and understanding, which is an art and needs to be continued life-long. Reading habit formation from young age has bearing on the future abilities of human beings and the human resource for Nation building (Department of Education, 2007).

Reading is a process that leads to learning. Learning has to be a lifelong effort in every individual to be well informed and knowledgeable. Lifelong learning efforts of individual citizens make the country become a knowledge society. In addition, reading is a means of creating literacy (Wikipedia, 2007). Reading habits are essential foundation for any student to attain academic and research goals. It is essential to focus on the importance of developing reading habits among the young starting from home and school.

Professor Praves Vasri (2007), who claims himself a senior citizen, points out that reading is not only a means for education and knowledge, it can be a means for problems solving as well. He urged that reading habits among the Thai citizens to be developed. Good and relevant books should be acquired more in public libraries. Reading activities should be more encouraged as well. Professor Praves's point is much similar to Barbara Bush's. Barbara Bush (2007) said "I strongly believe that if every man, woman, and child in America could read, write, and comprehend, we would be much closer to solving many of our nation's serious problems."

Studies world over indicate decline in the reading habits among the young for various reasons. Thailand in particular is also facing the low rate of reading. According to the research, it has been said that Thai people do not like to read. They read only eight lines per year. Dr. Kanchana Naksakul (2007), a well-known educator in Thailand, also said that about seven thousand third grade students (Prathomsuksa 3) through out the country can not read. So the development of reading culture is a must in Thailand because development of reading habits among the children is a foundation for the creation of knowledge society.

### *Why family reading?*

Family is the first school for every child and also for family reading, an activity shared among the family members. Child's social environment is the family and more importantly, the parents and it has natural effect in the development of a child. Interaction and touching stimulates the bond between parents and the child, such as hugging or reading to a child. Such actions by parents are extremely important in stimulating the child's learning and emotional abilities. While parents hug, or read to a child, its favorite tales, the child activates its imagination, while at the same time absorbing the warmth and affection of its parents. This idea is clearly illustrated by Family Literacy Initiative Project. The Former Florida Governor, Jeb Bush (2007) said " In the U.S., the purpose of our Family Literacy Initiative is to establish literacy as a value in every family. I believe that by helping every family in the state to understand that the home is the child's first school, the parent is the child's first teacher, and reading is the child's first subject, that we will do more to dramatically improve our educational system than any test will ever measure."

Family reading serves as a mean to create a culture of literacy among members in the family as well as in the society. It is known that literacy -- the ability to read, write and communicate clearly -- will define a child's future success in school and in life. It is also known that literacy development, the process that brings children to reading, begins in the first years of life at home. Long before children enter school, early experiences with books build a strong foundation for learning. However, in some countries only 39% of parents nationally read to their children on a regular basis. In some communities, it is estimated that an alarming 20 - 25% of children enter a classroom for the first time having had few or no experiences with books at home.

The parents should read aloud to the child, which is the best brain stimulation to promote emotional development, including chatting with the child. This approach will channel the child's learning abilities towards reading, learning, vocabulary development and a creative mind. Most parents do not care to talk with their babies feeling that they are too young to talk to and they do not understand. This action unfortunately, deprives the child of a perfect opportunity to develop its learning capability.

### **Research Questions**

It is in this background, a research activity is undertaken to know the situation in an identified province by random sampling the survey using interview method. The following are research questions. These questions are relevant in the light of the New Education Policy focusing on the family reading and to bring in quality of life to the people.

1. What is the state of the art of family reading?
2. Who are the key persons supporting reading in the family?

3. What kind of reading materials are used? And how do families acquire these materials? and are they adequate?
4. What problems encountered by the family in practicing the family reading?
5. What kind of support they need to facilitate the family reading? etc.

### **Research Methodology**

To answer the above questions, a structured questionnaire was developed to interview purposively selected 780 families in 13 districts of Maharakham Province. There were 60 families representing each district. The interview was undertaken during 2005-2006. The questionnaire enquires into the status of the respondents, state of reading activities, and the activities supporting reading with some conclusions.

### *Findings*

*Status of respondents:* The random sampling representatives of 780 families consists of 55.4% female and 44.6% male and the age groups are in the ranges of 10-20 years (17.9%), 31-40 years (22.8%) and 41-50 years (25.6%). Occupation of the families includes: Farmers (26.8%), Sellers (20.4%), and Students (18.2%). The educational background of these respondents is: Primary education (28.8%), Secondary education (17.7%), and higher education (17.6%). The number of family members in each of the family consists of 4 members (37.3%), 5 members (23.8%), and 3 members (14.9%).

The random sampling has good balance in terms of gender, age groups, occupation, educational background and the number of family members in each family. The data collected from this representative samples from 13 districts of Maharakham province enabled the study to observe the status of reading and the activities supporting the reading to draw conclusions.

#### **Question 1:** What is the state of the art of family reading?

- It is observed that 52.3% read everyday, 30.8% read every other day and 14.1% read once a week. The key persons, who supports reading in the family include: Father (39.7%), Mother (34.8%), Siblings (16.9%) and others (8.4%).
- The family nearly 68% read newspapers; 63% read books; and about 27% read magazines/journals.
- The purpose of reading includes 54.3% read for information, close to 38% are involved in leisure reading and textbook reading and 13.3% read to solve specific problems.

Table 1  
*The Respondents*

Details	Number	%
Gender		
Male	348	44.6
Female	432	55.4
Total	780	100
Age		
10-21	140	17.9
>21 – 30	107	13.7
>31 – 40	178	22.8
>41 – 50	200	25.6
>51 – 60	108	13.8
>61 – 70	37	4.7
>70	10	1.3
Total	780	100
Occupation		
Farmers	209	26.8
Government services	105	13.5
Sellers	159	20.4
House wives	40	5.1
Workers	102	13.1
Students	142	18.2
Business	23	2.9
Total	780	100
Education		
Elementary education (Prathom 4)	225	28.8
Elementary education (Prathom 6)	102	13.1
Secondary education (Lower)	133	17.1
Secondary education (Upper)	138	17.7
Certificates	41	5.3
Bachelor degree	137	17.6
Master degree	4	.5
Total	780	100
Number of family members		
1	3	.4
2	32	4.1
3	116	14.9
4	291	37.3
5	186	23.8
6	69	8.8
7	35	4.5
8	26	3.3
9	8	1.0
10	14	1.8
Total	780	100

- In terms of time read: 62% of them read during the evening and night time, about 16% read in the morning and about 14% read in the afternoon.
- The majority (44%) read for 30 minutes, about 28% for one hour and 14% only 15 minutes.

- About 53.9% are involved in reading to children, 31.4% in story telling, 30.0% in organizing book corners and about 20.0% go on field trips or bookshops.

Table 2  
*The State of the Art of Family Reading*

Items	Number (N=780)	%
Purpose of reading		
Assignments from school	299	38.3
For information	424	54.3
To solve problems	104	13.3
For leisure (hobby)	299	38.3
Key persons For recreation	96	12.4
Frequency of reading		
Everyday	408	52.3
Every other day	240	30.8
Once a week	110	14.1
Once a month	22	2.8
Reading time		
In the morning	126	16.2
At noon	62	7.9
In the afternoon	108	13.8
At night	484	62.1
Time spent		
15 mins	107	13.7
30 mins	339	43.5
60 mins	216	27.7
90 mins	31	4.0
120 mins	87	11.2
Reading promotion activities		
Story telling	245	31.4
Reading to children	421	53.9
Setting up book corner	234	30.0
Field trip/to book shop	156	20.0

**Question 2:** Who are the key persons supporting reading in the family?

- It is found that the 40% are fathers, whereas 35% are mothers, and 17% are siblings.

**Question 3:** What kind of reading materials are used? And how do families acquire these materials? and are they adequate?

- Newspapers (67.5%), Books (62.8%), and journals/magazines (26.5%) were major materials used in a family.
- The result indicated that most families (75.5%) purchased the materials, some (19.6%) borrowed and received as gifts or donations (19.3%)

Table 3  
*Key Persons Supporting Reading in the Family*

Key persons	Number (N=780)	%
Father	310	39.7
Mother	272	34.8
Grand father	40	5.1
Grand mother	26	3.3
Siblings	132	16.9

- It is found that nearly 79% said that the materials were insufficient while about 22% said sufficient.

Table 4  
*Reading Materials*

Items	Number (N=780)	%
Reading materials		
Books	491	62.8
Newspapers	527	67.5
Journals/magazines	207	26.5
Novels	121	15.5
Documentaries	43	5.5
Tales	44	5.6
Cartoons	184	23.6
Acquisition of reading materials		
Purchasing	590	75.5
Lending	104	13.3
Borrowing	153	19.6
As gifts	151	19.3
Sufficiency of reading materials		
Sufficient	168	21.5
Insufficient	612	78.5

**Question 4:** What problems encountered by the family in practicing the family reading?

- Problems encountered by each family: 42.9% find no time, 32.9% not enough reading materials, 30.3% do not know how to read, 24.2% had bad eyesight, 23.7% cannot afford, and 19.9% lack of interest among children.

**Question 5:** What kind of support they need to facilitate the family reading etc.

- Supports required for the family reading: Nearly 55% wanted the increase in the number of village reading centers, 31.9% wanted more children books, 15.2% wanted knowledge on reading techniques, 12.7% wanted a guide or trainer to help them and 8.1% wanted the public library to be open everyday.

Table 5  
*Problems Encountered by the Family in Practicing the Family Reading*

Problems	Number (N=780)	%
No time	335	42.9
Do not know how to read	237	30.3
Lack of interest among children	155	19.9
Do not have enough materials for reading	257	32.9
Can not afford to buy books	185	23.7
Bad eyesight	189	24.2

Table 6  
*Supports Required to Facilitate the Family Reading*

Supports required	Number (N=780)	%
To have sufficient village reading centers	430	55.0
Children books	249	31.9
Reading techniques	119	15.2
A guide or trainers how to read	99	12.7
The public libraries to be open seven days a week	63	8.1

## **Discussion**

Based on the analysis, major issues are highlighted as follows:

- Although the majority read every day, it is necessary to create facilities to make them more regular readers by motivating with incentives including gift of books. The “Bookstart Project” of the Bangkok Metropolitan scheme can be implemented in Mahasarakham province by giving a package of books to the new born family. Encouraging and training the parents to read for their children and be part of the family reading activities (Office of the National Education Commission, 2005).
- The motivation for reading is good among the siblings, which is close to 50% and father and mother are also equally supporting the reading. However, more motivation by the parents should be increased and continues. The finding indicates that the more parents spend more time reading to their children, the relationship among the family members are likely to be tightened and reading achievement will be more successful (Office of the National Education Commission, 2005).
- Time spent on reading everyday needs improvement because it is found 44% read only for 30 minutes. However this finding looks better than what has been pointed out by the National Statistical Office, Thailand that the Thai people aged 10 plus read only 2.99 minutes per day



whereas aged between 10 – 14 read only 1.28 – 4.43 minutes per day (The National Statistical Office, 2001).

- Community reading centers or the public libraries need to be active, improve facilities and encourage more readers to visit them. The respondents wanted to increase in the number of village reading centers, more number of children books, wanted help in reading (mentors) and also opening of public libraries everyday. It is believed that public libraries play major role in fostering reading for the family. They are in a remarkable position to expose children to great quantities of print and meaningful language opportunities that researchers say are crucial to reading achievement (Celano & Neuman, 2001). Kupetz (1993) also points out that public librarians can serve as essential resources for parents and teachers. They can assemble collections of materials appropriate for the readers of all ages. They can guide parents in seeking books for their children. They are also to help parents who feel uncomfortable reading to their children by modeling reading techniques and to encourage the parents to enjoy reading themselves.
- Problems encountered by each family need to be addressed and more reading materials are needed, mentoring facility to help them to read and also providing them materials that help the bad eyesight readers.
- Lack of time seems to be the reason for most of respondents to support their reading. Counseling for time management, encouragement from parents and teachers is necessary. Lau (2006) suggests that the task can not be done by someone. It is the responsibility of all learning community including teachers, librarians, students, and the society in general.
- A comprehensive list of children books needs to be compiled, if necessary good children books in other languages can be selected and translated into Thai. A book is not only a means to information and knowledge. It is also a tool for developing many aspects of children such as physical body, mind, social aspects, attitudes, and language. Appropriate books for different age group need to be selected and evaluated (Office of the National Education Commission, 2005).

### **Recommendations**

Based the research findings, the following are recommendations and suggestions that may serve as guidelines for effective family reading initiatives in the future.

#### *Family Reading and Community Partnership*

Parents need to support their children with appropriate information according to their age. Effective education prompts children to learn, think, and be creative, flexible, and able to solve problems, disciplined, assertive and to possess a good self-image. Family reading should be developed as a social

activity with the involvement of all the parents to develop the reading habits and life long learning activities starting from homes.

This activity can be also developed in partnership with businesses, schools, libraries, community organizations, and dedicated group of volunteers and donors. The organizations can donate books to be given as gifts to families through different programs that promote family reading.

It is necessary to establish a community that is committed to ensuring that all children have joyful experiences with books in their young lives and all parents join together to make it happen.

It is necessary to establish a community that is committed to letting all the parents know that they should read to baby right from the beginning and all babies begin life with a gift of a book given at birth. Then, each time families celebrate special occasions or events, the child should be given a book and the parents should read or share the book with the child for sometime of the day. All these children and their families be given a beautiful book to welcome them and encourage reading aloud to continue at the time of entering the school.

It is necessary to establish a community that is committed to help children make friends with books and each year they should gather for a community book celebration that showcases local authors and involving more organizations, schools, and libraries. The community should be committed to keep the event free and each year more number of children and families are encouraged to join in the event.

It is necessary to establish a community that is committed to ensuring that low-income families have access to books to own, the community should donate their used favorites books so that another family also enjoys them. To help the families to have new books, the donors need to be identified to donate books to the low-income families.

### *Community Reading*

Developing lifelong love of reading requires lifetime literacy efforts. Parents, Teachers and Administrators who support these efforts need to have vision and device mechanisms to achieve it. They need to channel the students towards reading, giving them experiences with different texts, providing them with opportunities to select resources and to read them at home and in school, and helping them to acquire skills and strategies to interesting and meaningful contexts etc., to support the lifelong reading habits.

It is necessary to build a community by inviting individuals and families, schools, libraries, civic and government associations, labor unions, and others to join in building a nation of readers. Community activities can cover to teach someone to read; set family reading goals; give books and magazine subscriptions as gifts; use television and radio to encourage reading; encourage personal

recommendations of books worth reading; plan a summer reading program; give awards for reading achievement; become a book fair organizer; form a reading promotion partnership with a local school; and give books as gifts etc.

### *Parents and Sustainability of Reading Habits*

Parents are child's first and most influential teachers. Parents need to support their children with appropriate information according to their age. Effective education prompts children to learn, think, and be creative, flexible, and able to solve problems, disciplined, assertive and to possess a good self-image. But how do parents go about finding the information they need to do a good job at such an important task at home.

The local public library is one of the best choices and least expensive to consult resources. Libraries, even small ones, have shelves of books for parents and children. Librarian can help in finding the materials or get them, if needed.

Reading aloud to the children, and letting them see the parents reading, are two of the best ways to help them on the road to literacy. It's never too early to start.

Many books for both children and adults are available in a read-along format using audio cassettes. These are normally available in the public library or can be purchased in bookshops and may be especially useful while driving when you and your child would like to listen together to a tape.

Small children generally learn best while playing rather than by being instructed. Parents can involve children in lots of day-to-day activities and conversations that will help develop her/his literacy. Parents can talk to the child while playing, about whatever is of interest to both. Nursery rhymes and songs are fun to learn and say or sing together.

Ordinary daily activities can also be an occasion for learning. For example, recognizing commercial signs and logos while walking or driving is one of the first steps in learning to read. A trip to the grocery store is more fun, if the parents talk with the child about the things they are seeing, about colors and shapes; later on, about many places from which grocery items come etc.

Once a child learns to read, he or she needs lots of practice. The more the better and the old saying about "practice makes perfect" applies to reading as well as to most other activities. If a child has frequent opportunities to read aloud to a willing listener, often a parent or grand-parent or a sibling, he or she is more likely to become a fluent reader.

With a little encouragement, children's reading and writing development will proceed on parallel tracks. Even a very young child who sees the adults in her life writing letters and grocery lists and telephone messages will want to try writing also. At first, the efforts look like scribbles, but the child

actually trying to communicate with pictures and words. Encourage these efforts and the children will express their abilities.

### **Conclusion**

As we all realize that reading can make the difference in the society. It can improve the set of personal choices and options opened up for, and offered to, an individual in the context of personal, family and societal matters. It also improves quality and utility of education and training in both formal school settings preceding entry into the workforce, and later in informal vocational or on-the-job training settings. It makes people's participation of the individual effectively in social, cultural and political contexts, both at the local community level and at higher levels, and identifying and fulfilling professional goals and aspirations. With these regards, the family should be the first place to create reading habits among the family members by encouraging all members to read, setting up reading atmosphere at home, working with partners like the public libraries, and agencies concerned. However, the family should not work alone. At the national level, policies on family reading should be formulated to encourage individual families to be active in reading. Supports should be provided to families by the authorities concerned. It is believed that when people are able to read and love to read, they will be able to access relevant information and knowledge for their living. The person will then become a lifelong learner. The family will be a learning organization, and the society will be a learning society. Then people in the society can have a better quality of life which is a true meaning of the learning society. So the matters arise from this research should be taken into account.

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