

Community Book Clubs: How Reading and Discussion Can Help Keep Our Children in Schools

Introduction

Education remains one of the most important goals of developing countries in the world. In the Philippines, a review of the 2003 National Demographic and Health Survey reveals that education is negatively correlated to sexual activity, teenage pregnancy and childhood mortality¹ and positively correlated to knowledge of contraceptive methods and public health diseases such as HIV, AIDS, and tuberculosis.² In other words, one can deduce that individuals with higher educational levels are less likely to be sexually active, get pregnant during adolescence, and have children who do not survive to the age of five. They are, on the other hand, more likely to practice safe sex and know more about, thus avoid contracting, diseases such as HIV, AIDS, and tuberculosis.

The attainment of education entails several things. For government leaders and other stakeholders, this means enrollment in schools or institutions of learning and staying enrolled until the end of term. For the student himself/herself, education is attained, at its most basic, by mastering what has commonly been referred to as the three R's: reading, writing, and 'rithmetic.

Of the three, reading is arguably the most fundamental skill. After all, it would be extremely difficult, if not completely impossible, to proceed to writing and arithmetic without first having mastered reading. For all other subjects to follow in school—physics, history, philosophy—reading is, unquestionably, key.

Mastery in reading is measured by literacy levels. Literacy is defined as “the ability to read and write (usually the former) in a given (usually first) language.”³ Reports of literacy levels generally refer to functional literacy which has a more precise definition and is defined as the capacity of a person to “understand and employ printed information in daily life, at home, at work and in the community.”⁴ In other words, functional literacy is the level of literacy required of an individual to be able to successfully function in society.

¹ In the statement, we are referring to the education of the mother as the variable correlated to childhood mortality.

² Philippine National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) 2003

³ <http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/literacy>

⁴ <http://www.nationalliteracytrust.org.uk/Database/quote.html>

The Philippines is among the privileged countries with a relatively high literacy rate. In 1995, literacy in the country was 94.3%. In 2003, this increased to 95.8%.⁵ Despite the high literacy rates, however, education levels still leave room for improvement. While the vast majority of the population has had some form of formal education⁶, survey reports show a significant decline in educational attainment rates among the higher levels (high school, college or higher) especially among those in the lowest wealth index. This is supported by dropout rates⁷ which are seen to increase with grade levels. By sixth grade, dropout rates were reportedly 8.6% among males and 7.5% among females. Among those in the lowest wealth index, dropout rates have gone as high as 17.7% in the sixth grade.⁸

Dropout rates in both schools and literacy programs can be attributed to many causes. Financial difficulty in meeting costs related to schooling is probably the most prevalent reason. Others in higher grade levels may have been forced to drop out because of the necessity to start working. Still others may have chosen to do so because they feel the skills they have already learned are sufficient. While poverty is generally seen as the root cause of the problem, a lack of appreciation for the value of education may also serve to intensify motivation to dropout. Lack of appreciation may be due to a misplaced focus on the short-term benefits of working (as opposed to the long-term gains of education), the inability of programs to satisfy practical needs of the parent/child, or simple disinterest. Whatever the reason, there is a need to expand education and literacy efforts beyond simply getting children into school but also in making sure that they stay there.

In looking towards a solution to address the situation, I propose the formation of community book clubs (CBCs) as an integral part of the concerted effort to increase appreciation for education and literacy, and hopefully, help keep more children in school. The rationale, mechanics, and objectives of this proposal shall be outlined in the succeeding sections of this paper.

Before I present the details of the community book clubs however, I would like to share my personal story which, I hope, will shed more light on why I believe, even beyond these statistics, that education and reading are crucial to getting young people in school and keeping them there.

⁵ CIA World Factbook as cited in <http://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?c=rp&v=39>

⁶ The NDHS reports that only around 7% among women and 8% among men have had no formal education at all (NDHS 2003).

⁷ Dropout rate is obtained by getting the percentage of students in a given grade in the previous school year who is not attending school.

⁸ NDHS 2003

My Story

I grew up surrounded by books. My mother, who was a teacher and worked part-time as a retail dealer for educational books, bought as many books as she sold and my father built shelves for the dozens they brought home every year. My parents also owned a book club which was situated alongside our educational supplies store in Cagayan de Oro where we lived. The book club operated as sort of a library, giving members the chance to borrow books for a one-time membership fee and a minimal charge for every book borrowed. It was the only book club in a small city which didn't really have any major bookstores at that time. I remember this because my parents had to bring me once to the city of Cebu, which was an overnight trip away by boat, to buy more books for the book club. That day when my mother asked me to pick out all the books I'd ever wanted to read remains one of my most favorite memories of my childhood.

You see, my parents did more than surround me and my siblings with books. From an early age on, they taught us to *love* reading. Every night before bedtime and even before our compulsory naps in the afternoon, my parents would take turns reading us stories—from Philippine folktales to Dr. Seuss to Shakespeare to parables from the Bible. Up to this day, reading before going to bed has become such a habit for me that no matter how tired I am, I cannot go to sleep without reading a few lines of the book I've started.

My love for reading also led me to another passion—writing. I don't think I would ever have started writing if I didn't love reading. Today, I work as a freelance writer, splitting my time between contributing articles for print and online publications and drafting up technical reports for research projects. I am also the founder of one literature discussion group on the net and a member of four others, three online and one, sponsored by a major bookstore, which gets together every month.

Because I enjoy reading, I somehow never managed to muster up a customary dislike for school which most of my classmates seemed to have. For me, reading assignments (which were numerous and often) were less of a chore than a pastime without which would have left me wasting away with boredom. Looking back, I know I was more fortunate than most because I had parents who urged me toward academic pursuits and had the financial means to pay for my education.

Shortly after I graduated from high school, however, my family went through a terrible ordeal—my father had an accident and was paralyzed from the neck down. He was airlifted to a hospital in Manila and had to be hooked up permanently to a respirator to help him breathe. For my family, it wasn't

only a tragic experience; it was also a big blow to us financially. My father was the main breadwinner of the family and my mother had to devote all her time to taking care of him rather than hire a personal nurse. The insurance was quickly running out, hospital bills and loans were piling up and none of us children had started working. I was supposed to enter college in a month but with the state of our finances it seemed unlikely that we would be unable to afford a university education. We considered deferring my education until we could somehow raise enough money to pay for it. It was the only reasonable thing to do and yet I couldn't help but feel disappointed because I knew the longer I stayed away, the harder it would be to go back. After days of praying and searching for a solution, a friend of mine managed to bring my case to the attention of the Ateneo de Manila University which offered me the chance to apply for a scholarship even though the deadline had already passed. I immediately took the opportunity, passed the interview process and was awarded a full scholarship (plus dormitory allowance!) for the entire duration of my course.

I share my story with you because I hope to show that despite so many obstacles, despite financial constraints, education still remains a viable option as long as there is the will to fight for it. Finding the means to pay for education is half the battle for parents and legislators alike. But the other half is in imbuing our students with the desire for learning. Because what use is it to have a priceless commodity if nobody recognizes its value? I believe that we need to start creating a community of people who understand the true value of education, and the first step to getting there is getting people to read—to love reading and to understand what they're reading so they can choose later on to learn, and to stay in school, and to gain a better future.

Why read?

There are many useful benefits to reading which should be equally important for those who practice it and for stakeholders wishing to promote it. The following points below detail some of the more obvious benefits and may serve as a starting off point for crafting messages to be used in the advocacy/marketing campaigns of the community book clubs:

1. Reading improves critical thinking. Reading necessitates looking beyond the written words and learning to reflect and ponder on their significance. Regional offices of literacy programs have observed that people who read become more critical and analytical in discussing issues and thus, are able to participate more meaningfully in community and group affairs.⁹

⁹ EFA 2000 Philippine Country Assessment

2. Reading improves creative thinking. Because books are generally more textual than visual, readers learn to exercise their imagination instead of depending on stereotypical images fed into their minds. It is a well-accepted that books teach children to be creative and think “out-of-the-box.”
3. Reading safeguards from ignorance. People who do read become aware of their rights as members of a community and how to access the services available for them. A study of a functional literacy program showed that one of the perceived impacts of the program was that it increased utilization of available social services in the community, including schooling opportunities.¹⁰
4. Reading safeguards from intolerance. When people read, they learn to respect the views and opinions of others. People who read are people who know how to take time to listen to the stories of other people. Through reading, we learn to simultaneously appreciate our similarities and celebrate our differences.
5. Reading helps imbue a love of learning. Books are veritable treasure chests of knowledge and wisdom. Every time we pick up a book, we learn something. Therefore, those who learn to love reading, unconsciously or otherwise, have already learned to love learning.
6. Reading provides a safe outlet for escape. So many young people try to escape from their problems by taking up drugs, falling in with a bad crowd, and generally picking up bad habits here and there but a well chosen book can provide sympathetic friends to its reader and a good dose of comfort, laughter and excitement to those who look for it. As author/playwright W. Somerset Maugham once wrote, “to acquire the habit of reading is to construct for yourself a refuge from almost all of the miseries of life.”
7. Reading helps promote leadership. Books, like every good teacher, are instruments which can help develop knowledge and unlock potential. History is replete with examples of great people, from Confucius to Lincoln to Gandhi, who were also great readers.

Community Book Clubs

How do we get our students to enroll in school? And how do we ensure they continue to stay there? One of the best and most effective ways to start is to get people to read. This is evidenced by the high value placed on literacy in just about every aspect of education. However, while previous literacy campaigns have focused on teaching people to read and write and getting more books into libraries, schoolhouses and community centers, not very many have actually attempted to promote reading through behavioral change—that is, getting people to not just appreciate the value of reading but to

¹⁰ EFA 2000 Philippine Country Assessment

actually enjoy reading. I believe one of the best ways to do this is through organizing independent book clubs in every community.

Definition

The community book club or CBC is defined as an organized group of people composed of various stakeholders (youth volunteers, community workers, concerned parents and educators) in the community working towards the goals and objectives of the club in furthering the promotion of literacy in their area. It is suggested that CBCs be convened under the “Education For All” (EFA) Program implemented by the World Bank, UNESCO, and other organizations in developing countries. Every CBC, however, should be recognized by and work in collaboration with local government (i.e. Bureau of Non-formal Education) to avoid duplication of efforts and establish proper reporting, monitoring and evaluation systems.

Goals and Objectives

The main goal of CBCs will be the promotion of reading in the community. By doing this, it answers the call made in the 2000 Philippine EFA Country Assessment for employing “more non-traditional means of ensuring that children stay in school.”¹¹ The objectives of the CBC are as follows:

1. To provide access to books, magazines, and other reading materials for members of the community
2. To establish an environment where children, youth, and other individuals in the community can read these materials for free or for a minimal cost to be determined by the CBC
3. To conduct discussion groups between and among members of the community on a selected book or reading text on a regular basis
4. To provide assistance to individuals, most especially those among the ages of 9 or below, struggling with reading and writing
5. To provide assistance or guidance to members of the community in initiating other activities which promote, literacy, education and schooling
6. To work towards the accreditation of the regular discussion groups as a form of non-formal education program which may be recognized as a requirement for an elementary or secondary certificate or a vocational training course

¹¹ EFA 2000 Philippine Country Assessment

7. To establish a monitoring and evaluation system which will serve to measure literacy levels of the members of the community, take note of other points for improvement for the CBC and document best practices or lessons learned from the program
8. To maintain connections with CBCs in other communities through quarterly sharing of performances and strategies and to coordinate in activities involving areas beyond each community's reach

Mechanics

While it is not necessary to require that a CBC be based in a fixed facility or office, establishing an area which can serve as the base of operations for the club is highly encouraged. Partnering up with local community learning centers, libraries, or daycare centers are the most ideal way to go about this since these facilities share a common goal and there are already existing resources such as books and volunteers to build on. If this is the case, then the CBC's role may be seen as empowering the existing facility, helping to improve/complement those of the facility's already existing activities while, at the same time, reaching the objectives set by the program. The CBC will also work to bring in more of the targeted users of the facility.

Each of the objectives listed above may be accomplished in a variety of ways. For Objective #1, for example, partnering up with the local library ensures the availability of reading materials for the community. However, the CBC may still work towards improving this by conducting fundraising activities to buy new books, asking for donations of old books from people in the community, approaching donor agencies, or seeking publishing companies who would be willing to donate their surplus copies of publications. No specific methodology will be endorsed in these guidelines for now since every community should be free to adopt whatever methodology will best suit its needs. Of course, a documentation (Objective #7) of the various methods used will help shed light after the first few stages of this initiative to determine which strategies are most effective and should be shared with and replicated in other communities (Objective #8).

For Objective #2, the CBC can easily achieve this again, by partnering up with a library and community learning or daycare center. As much as possible, lending of books should be made free especially if done within the confines of the facility. For sustainability purposes of the facility, however, a minimal fee may be charged for items taken out of the facility. However, if the CBC is unable to partner up with a facility, then a system for getting books to readers must be established. For example, the CBC head can take an inventory of books which each community member is willing

to share with others. This list will be made available to all so that if someone wishes to borrow a book owned by someone else, the CBC merely puts these two people in contact with each other or facilitates the borrowing itself. In this way, old schoolbooks or out-of-print editions may be made available to those in need. The CBC should also be responsible for the safe retrieval of the borrowed item once the borrower has finished reading the book.

The second can also be accomplished by holding book fairs in the community. Book fairs consist of getting others (usually publishing companies but may also be people wishing to help) to donate books (new or used) to be given away for free to everyone who needs it. Books given away should be affixed with a stamp or mark which prevents people from re-selling the books and making money.

Objectives #3 and #4 are the core objectives of the CBC. In fact, I would probably say that a CBC would only be partly successful if it managed to accomplish all the objectives except for the third and fourth one. I say this because these two objectives are really the ones that work towards strengthening people's love for reading and desire for learning. Efforts to bring books to the public are only halfway successful unless you find a way to get people to really read and appreciate them. This is the intended effect of Objectives #3 and #4.

Objective #3 means getting a group of people together to read a particular book or text and afterwards engaging everyone in a discussion to ensure everyone understands the texts and to share insights or lessons learned from each individual reading. Getting people together for discussion groups is a fairly simple thing to do among booklovers. Getting to do this among people who have not yet developed the habit of reading for pleasure is another story. Efforts to do the latter may have to begin by having school set them as compulsory activities to be conducted within a class. The CBC may arrange to have volunteers come in and facilitate a session or work with the teachers to get this done. Alternately, attendance in a certain number of discussion groups (say 3 or less) may be arranged to serve the equivalent of submitting a book report and students can be allowed to choose the sessions they wish to attend. Once accreditation for the discussion groups as a form of non-formal education program (Objective #6) has been attained, establishments dependent on functional literacy among their workers may set this as a requirement for employment. Other non-compulsory means of getting people to join the discussion groups include designing a marketing campaign (this can focus, for example, on the opportunity to meet new friends through the discussion group), getting respected leaders and local celebrities involved, and integration with other skills and livelihood training programs.

Objective #4, on the other hand, can be achieved by partnering with schools, daycare centers and other groups to ensure that those struggling with reading have all the resources needed (good books, good teachers) to help them learn. While this objective is not limited to young children (ages 9 or below) alone, particular focus is given to reaching them since survey has shown that this is the group most vulnerable to repetition rates in school.¹² Repeating grades can be a very discouraging factor in a child's motivation to study as well as an additional, unnecessary expensive for families who can barely afford it. The concept in the fourth objective is very similar to providing tutorial services to students except that the CBC should also ensure that aside from a teacher, all other resources such as books and a working environment are taken care of and provided for. Group storytelling sessions, where students are asked to read one by one, are another good way to ensure that everyone, especially the young ones, are taught to read.

Another target group for discussion sessions should also be adults or youth who complete basic literacy programs. This is because, according to the 2000 EFA Philippine Country Assessment, "lack of practice in using reading and writing skills make[s] literacy graduates revert to their former state." Partnering up with community learning centers whose main focus is to teach literacy ensures that the gains of one facility are sustained by the other.

Finally, Objective #7, the setting up of a monitoring and evaluation system for each CBC is important so that CBC coordinators can measure their performance and assess which initiatives are working and which are not. A system for measuring progress of the readers should be established and another one for books or reading material which are most likely to stimulate discussions should also be implemented.

Mobilizing Resources

Many of the physical resources for the CBC are, more often than not, already available in a community. These include books, a base of operations, as well as literary and discussion guides to facilitate group sessions. All these resources need to be mobilized, however, through partnership, coordination, and collaboration with donor agencies, government and non-government organizations. Human resources, I have always believed, can be tapped by involving volunteers and young people in particular. While an overall head or point person needs to be designated by the EFA council or

¹² The 2003 NDHS shows that repetition rates in school are highest among those in the first grade level among both males and females.

government agency convening the CBCs, majority of the task force can be composed of all types of volunteers. Students majoring in education, literature, or English, for example, can serve in the CBC as discussion group facilitators or tutors while studying. This can serve as their practicum or on-the-job training in their respective fields. Authors of particular books or professionals in the field of the books' topics can easily be tapped to facilitate discussions and local leaders, celebrities, students themselves or concerned parents (from Parent-Teacher Associations for one) may be asked to help tutor struggling readers. Of course, to ensure quality standards, not everyone who wants to volunteer may serve as a discussion group facilitator or tutor. Capacity to perform in their job assignments should also be assessed and, if possible, training programs to build on this capacity should be made available. If funds are available and minimal service fees are charged, salaries may be given for some of the assignments. I know some students, for example, who are in need of tutors, and other students (I was one of them) who would be happy to work part-time tutoring others. In this case, all the CBC needs to do is set up a system to easily bring the two groups together.

The Final Chapter

I believe in the idea of community book clubs because it is founded on the principle that reading is the key to education. Get more people to read and you get more people to stay in school. Get more people to stay in school and you have the foundations for a better future. The core objective of the CBCs is the promotion of literacy through the facilitation of discussion groups and the provision of tutorial services (group or individual sessions) for struggling readers.

I believe that the first step necessary to getting the CBCs organized is to call a meeting among all relevant organizations and identify the stakeholders interested to take a lead role in this initiative. This should be followed by several brainstorming sessions to iron out in greater detail the roles, objectives and mechanics of the program. Initial sites on which to concentrate efforts should also be identified during these sessions. After this, designated point persons need to be identified, partnerships formalized, and human resources need to be recruited. The identification of human resources and the performance of duties to reach the objectives will undoubtedly be the hardest tasks we have set before us. But I am willing to participate. And I can name at least twenty others from my peers who would be willing to do the same. Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to throw out a challenge to every person who is reading this right now, who can look at the letters I have written down and understand what I am trying to say. Because you have probably been blessed with a good education. Or have a favorite book to answer if I ask. So you know what I am talking about. You

know why this is important. And you, yourself can help others help themselves. All we need to do is right now is do it.

References

Education For All 2000 Philippine Country Assessment in
<http://www2.unesco.org/wef/countryreports/philippines/contents.html>

National Initiatives Concerning Non-formal Education and Training – Philippines in
http://www.logos-net.net/ilo/195_base/en/topic_n/t15_phi.htm

National Statistics Office (NSO) [Philippines] and ORC Macro. (2004). *National Demographic and Health Survey 2003*. Calverton, Maryland: NSO and ORC Macro.

<http://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?c=rp&v=39>

<http://www.nationalliteracytrust.org.uk/Database/quote.html>

<http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/literacy>