

The Power of Series Books

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Reading continues to be a pivotal focus in the recently updated *English Language Education Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide* (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). Schools are encouraged to further promote reading by introducing to students a wide range of print and non-print resources which include stories and information texts, electronic materials with multimodal features, multimedia resources such as videos, e-books, interactive games, application software and authentic online resources. In addition, to promote the development of a sustainable reading culture, various stakeholders such as teachers, panel heads and librarians are advised to work closely together and devise a strategic approach at different levels. At the classroom level, teachers help students acquire basic reading vocabulary and decoding skills; and develop a positive attitude towards reading. At the panel level, through adopting reading materials of various themes and complexity as instructional resources, teachers help students expand their world knowledge, widen their vocabulary and master an array of reading skills. Principals, teachers and librarians, by setting aside regular reading sessions, providing a rich collection of reading resources, levelling books in the libraries and reading corners, and organizing various book activities, help create a supportive reading environment at school.

Teachers at *Ma Tau Chung Government Primary School (Hung Hom Bay)* have always adopted a whole school approach to promote reading. To make the impact

more significant, for the past two years, teachers have selected at least one series book for the Reading Workshops in P. 2, P. 3 and P. 4. Generally speaking, series books for children share these common features: **(i) familiar characters; (ii) repetitive plots, and; (iii) simplistic writing** (Hiebert, 2009; Witucke, 1979). The *Mr. Men Little Miss* series written by Roger Hargreaves is a good example of series books. There are altogether 37 books in the *Little Miss* series and 50 in the *Mr. Men* series. All characters in this series are named after their personalities (e.g. *Mr. Forgetful*) or physical appearance (e.g. *Mr. Small*). Their names dominate the action and the plots. For example, *Mr. Busy* is busy all the time and *Mr. Chatterbox* likes talking a lot. Readers can more or less predict what happens to the characters based on their names. The stories are hilarious, full of humour and exaggeration. Yet a moral lesson is learned in the end. For example, in one story, the main character Mr. Slow is slow in every way of his life. One day, he tries to get a job. He becomes a news reporter, but he reads the evening news until midnight. Finally, instead of changing himself to fit the job, he finds a job that suits him.

Benefits of series books

Reading is a cognitively demanding task for young children, particularly second language learners. Students need to identify words rapidly and accurately, and to combine various information from the text to construct meaning. This involves a whole list of word-identification and comprehension skills. Clearly, students need a lot of assistance and facilitation in the reading process. One strategy is to (re)visit the same or similar text multiple times to enable comprehension to happen automatically. However, frustration may easily arise if support is not well given and boredom happens when fun is missing in the learning process.

According to McGill-Franzen & Botzakis (quoted in Hiebert, 2009), **series books can**

enable the development of automaticity for readers at different levels.

Automaticity is an important developmental step to groom students from beginning to fluent readers. Only through repeated practice can reading become an automatic activity. Series books, with simple plot lines, familiar characters, predictable text features and high frequency of repeated words, word patterns or phrases, can provide a favourable environment for this kind of cognitive practice. In addition, in the reading process, readers can activate their prior schema and connect new stories with the old ones. This allows prediction to happen and helps overcome the fear of unfamiliar words and phrases. Lastly, when readers are engaged with the recurring characters, they usually have the strong urge to finish the whole series.

Using series books in the Reading Workshops

Mr. Slow, a simple story in the Mr. Men series, has been chosen for the P.4 Reading Workshops. This selection has been made out of two considerations. First, teachers have integrated **high order thinking skills (i.e. summarizing and evaluating)** into the workshops, thus a simple story is deemed suitable. Second, teachers have always wanted **to arouse students' interest in reading at the classroom level, then extend and sustain it at the school level.** Since the school library has a large collection of Mr. Men Miss Little series (over 100 copies), out of practical reason, *Mr. Slow* has been chosen as one of the set texts in the Reading Workshops.

Knowing the author and his characters in the series

To start with, students learn about Roger Hargreaves, the author and illustrator of the Mr. Men Little Miss series. Then, through games and videos, **students get familiarized with all the characters of the Mr. Men series.** They learn that

characters such as Mr. Small, Mr. Tall and Mr. Skinny are named after their appearance whereas other characters such as Mr. Grumpy, Mr. Chatterbox, Mr. Cheerful and Mr. Forgetful etc. are named after their personalities. In addition, **students follow the drawing steps of a YouTube video and learn to draw these characters.** Since there are over 50 characters (most are adjectives related to personalities) in the Mr. Men series, it is not possible for students to remember all these vocabulary at once. Teachers make the task appealing **by posing these character images on Padlet (an interactive e-platform for sharing ideas), students are encouraged to respond by telling which character they like and state the reason(s).**

Learning the writing style: Exaggeration

In the subsequent lessons, the workshops focus on the character Mr. Slow and the story. Students **watch a cartoon about Mr. Slow.** Simple comprehension questions are set in the pre-viewing stage, then checked in the post-viewing stage. In this way, students know Mr. Slow well before they read the book (i.e. build up the schema). In the process of reading, teachers support students to guess meaning of unfamiliar words (e.g. extraordinarily, for instance) and make predictions. Moreover, special attention is drawn to the stylistic device **exaggeration**, which is well illustrated throughout the story. For example, Mr. Slow is so slow that when he eats a cake for afternoon tea, it takes him until bedtime to finish. Students **learn to identify these episodes in the story and respond by creating their own examples.** Teaching this writing style explicitly is important as it can help students enjoy other Mr. Men Little Miss series books which share similar characteristics.

Sharing books with others: One minute book talks

To promote reading outside the classroom, students are asked to borrow other Mr. Men Little Miss series books from the school library. Reading is a pleasurable activity, yet it can be lonely as well. Teachers believe that **leisure reading can be turned into an engaging social event if students learn to share books with the others.**

Conducting book talks is different from writing book reports. Clearly, the former focuses on speaking whereas the latter on writing. Also, **book talks are more socially oriented.** They aim at communicating readers' views about a particular book with the audience. In addition to language, **non-verbal means** such as facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice and eye contact help convey meanings.

Appendix A provides an example of a book talk based on the Oxford Story Tree series book *Dad's Run*. Students read this book last year (when they were in P.3). The sample book talk lasts for one minute. It starts with a short introduction which includes the book title, author, illustrator and publisher (book concept), then followed by a summing up of the story. Since one purpose of book talks is to motivate audience to read the book themselves, the summary usually does not include the ending of the story. Finally, the reviewer shares with the audience their thoughts and feelings.

Using SWBST to teach summarizing skill in a book talk

To help students sum up stories in book talks, teachers need to teach students summarizing skill. **SWBST** is an effective strategy to teach summarizing skill. It stands for “**Somebody Wanted But So Then**”. This strategy works particularly well with narrative texts such as stories, journals and diaries. Students, guided by the

prompts, learn to summarize stories by asking these questions¹: “Who is/was the main character? What does/did the character want? What is/was the problem/conflict? What does/did the character do to solve the problem? What is/was the ending of the story?”

The graphic organizer below shows **using SWBST to summarize the story *Mr.***

Slow:

SWBST	Using <i>Mr. Slow</i> as an example
Somebody (Who was the main character?)	Mr. Slow was the main character. He was slow.
Wanted (What did the character want?)	He wanted to get a job.
But (What was the problem/conflict?)	But Mr. Slow was too slow.
So (What did the character do to solve the problem?)	So Mr. Slow worked as a steamroller driver.
Then (What was the ending of the story?)	Then Mr. Slow did a good job.

Since most lower primary students are familiar with story grammar (character, setting, problem and solution), they may not find SWBST difficult to understand. However, SWBST is a strategy that is easy to learn but difficult to use. Evidence shows that when there is more than one problem in the story, students may have difficulty identifying the problems and struggle with their complexities. Mr. Men series books are found to be a good means to practice SWBST as problems faced by the

¹ Since there is no strict rule about the use of tenses in book talks, students can choose to use either present tense or past tense to sum up the story. However, to avoid confusion, students are advised to follow the tense used in the story and be consistent.

protagonist tend to be simple and repetitive. For higher level students, teachers may consider, before the lesson, assigning videos related to SWBST on YouTube for self-preparation (“Flipped Classroom” Strategy). Then the class time can be used to clarify students’ misconception and practise this skill.

The following strategies are used in the lessons on book talks:

- Teachers introduce to students the main task: book talks. They show students a **book talk video** (i.e. Appendix A read aloud by a student) which lasts for one minute and tell them that there are three parts in a book talk: information about the book, what the story is about and what the reviewer thinks or feels about the story.
- Teachers introduce the strategy SWBST explicitly. They model, using *Mr. Slow* as an example, this strategy to write a short summary. Then students **work in pairs** to focus on “But” (What was the problem/conflict?). Students soon learn that they do not have to report all problems. They just need to choose an interesting example.
- Since the purpose of a book talk is to motivate people to read the story themselves, students are reminded to leave out the ending “Then”. They can make a hook in the summary by **ending it with rhetorical questions** (e.g. *Did Mr. Slow do a good job? Would he be fired?*)

Using “Making Connections” strategy to write about thoughts and feelings

In the last part of the book talk, students share their thoughts and feelings. Most students tend to give simple and short answers such as:

“I like this story because it is interesting.”

“I like the story because Mr. Slow is slow and he is very funny.”

To help students deepen their understanding and create new thoughts and perspectives, teachers employ the strategy “**Making Connections**” (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). Students are encouraged to relate their prior knowledge and experiences to the content of the story. When reading the story *Mr. Slow*, students are reminded to think about themselves, their family members and friends who share similar or different characteristics; and, think about in what ways they are the same or different. They can also link the content with their own previous experiences and knowledge (i.e. **Text to self**²). Teachers use prompts such as “***I choose this book to share with you because the story/the character reminds me of....***” to help students start their writing and use examples taken from *Mr. Slow* to brainstorm ideas.

From one book to the whole series

Having learned to do a one minute book talk on *Mr. Slow*, students are asked to use other books to practise this skill. They can visit the school library and borrow one of the Mr. Men Miss Little series books. To promote self-directed learning, students are allowed to choose other books that they enjoy. The school librarian has set up a **special Mr. Men Miss Little reading corner**, with attractive decorations and clear signage, to facilitate easy and direct access to the whole collection. Students, throughout the term, share their book talks with the others through **live broadcast** during lunch breaks.

Inter-class reading activity in the hall

Another highlight is the reading activity held in the school hall. This event involves

² The other strategies “text to text/ text to learning experiences” and “text to community or world” can also help students connect ideas and express their views. Teachers may refer to *Basic Education Curriculum Guide – To Sustain, Deepen and Focus on Learning to Learn (Primary 1 – 6)* (Curriculum Development Council, 2014, Chapter 3B, p. 4-5) for more detailed explanation.

all P.4 students and lasts for two lessons. The purpose is to promote reading in a fun way; and, to connect students' classroom learning experience with the other learning activity.

- Before the hall activity, students are encouraged to read as many series books as possible. Teachers have set questions based on the series books. In order to develop students' leadership quality, students from each class are trained to run the reading competition themselves.
- In the hall, students watch a Mr. Men video and answer related questions. Representatives from each class then share their works (book talks and character play) in the hall and students vote for their favourite book talks and performance. In the reading competition, students are divided into groups and cooperative strategies are used to promote cooperation and interdependence.

Impact on teaching and learning: A school-based experience

Students' performance inside and outside the classroom, their book talks and reading records were used to evaluate the effectiveness of this initiative.

In the workshops, some students **had difficulty identifying problems** faced by Mr. Slow. Through teacher modelling, scaffolded instructions and pair work, most students could eventually complete the task. However, teachers observed that when students practised this skill in another context (i.e. summarizing other stories), some students still struggled with the problem part. As for making a hook with **rhetorical questions**, most students could use this technique appropriately and end the summary in an interesting way. Simple stories with recurring patterns are found to be appropriate resources to demonstrate and practise summarizing skill.

Students showed marked improvement, when compared with their past performance, in expressing themselves. **They could connect the text to self and elaborate on their thoughts and feelings.** The following is an example of work by an average student:

"I choose this book to share with you because the story reminds me of myself. Because I am the same as Mr. Slow. I often eat slowly. I eat lunch. I need one hour. And I often wear clothes slowly. I need 10 minutes. I sometimes write homework in a slow way. My parents always talk to me 'You need to be fast!' But I think my brother is slow too. He eats dinner. He needs two hours. He does homework slower than me."

This student's ideas are simple and straightforward, but they are personal and highly original. Most students were serious when they conducted the talks. They really wanted to recommend their favourite books to their classmates. Most importantly, **they did not regard book talks as homework assignments as they enjoyed sharing their views.** They expressed themselves freely and did not have to worry about making grammatical mistakes. They just needed to correct them orally when they shared with the classmates. **The audience enjoyed the presentations; and there was real communication between the two parties.**

"Reading is fun" has become more than a catchphrase but a real happening. **The reading activity in the hall has brought much novelty to the students' reading experiences. And the library records have shown a noticeable increase in the frequency of borrowing English books.** The librarian observed that the record could have been higher because some students finished reading the books in the library and did not take them home.

In this presentation, teachers will walk you through their lessons through videos,

teaching materials, task sheets and students' work. They will also show you how they use other series books in P.2 and P.3.

References

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2. Curriculum Development Council. (2017). *English Language Education Key Learning Area English Language Curriculum Guide (Primary 1 – Secondary 6)*. Hong Kong: Government Logistics Department.
3. Hiebert, E. H. (Ed.) (2009). *Reading more, reading better*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
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Appendix A:

Hi, my name is _____. Today I'm going to review the book Dad's Run (*book title*) with you. It is written by Roderick Hunt and Alex Brychta (*author*).

It is one of the Oxford story Tree's book and it is 25 pages long with lots of colourful pictures.

There are many characters in the story. They are Dad, Mum, Biff, Chip, William, Kipper and Floppy. Dad wants to join the Fun Run to raise money to help children. But Dad steps into a hole and falls. He hurts his leg, so he cannot finish the Fun Run. Can anyone help Dad? What will happen next?

I choose this book to share with you because I really love to read Oxford story tree's books. They are so interesting. In this book, I like Dad because he reminds me of my dad. He is also very clumsy. He loves doing sports but he always hurts himself. However, Dad teaches me 'Never gives up'!

I hope you like this book. You can borrow this book in the school library. Thank you for listening.