

For the Love of Reading

Reading is far more than just another school-based activity

BY SAULAT PERVEZ

THE REVELATION OF THE QURAN began with the command to read (96:1-5). The unlettered Prophet (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) even freed prisoners of war if they taught Muslims how to read and write. This early emphasis on learning led to a robust scholarship-based culture that spurred the glorious history of Islamic civilization.

As Muslims, we know this and cite it quite often. However, the reality today is that we, as an *ummah*, lag behind in literacy, reading habits and knowledge production. Our education, whether religious or secular, has increasingly regressed into an exercise of rote learning, a mass of discrete knowledge, as well as a frenzied race toward what we deem “useful” skills. The reasons for this current state of affairs are many, one of which is the massive disruption Muslims experienced due to colonialism and Western imperialism.

Instead of delving into the past though, this article focuses on addressing a fundamental question many parents and teachers face: How do we inculcate a lasting love of reading in children?

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Learning *how* to read does not necessarily or automatically lead to *wanting* to read. And yet while this may seem to be perfectly logical, too many homes and schools operate as if this were not the case.

In fact, raising literate children requires parents and teachers to proactively employ various methods, such as constantly exposing them to books and reading aloud activities. Once children become proficient readers, this engagement tends to dwindle due to the assumption that they should now read independently. However, what goes largely unnoticed is that this is the time when they are moving from picture books to chapter books, from glossy pages and vibrant pictures to black-and-white text with hardly any illustrations. Soon, that hearty mutually active reading environment is overtaken by a one-way rhetoric and nagging to “read something,” which turns a once-joyful activity into a burdensome task that leads to “reader fatigue.”

This situation is compounded in bilingual homes. For instance, children might be studying in English at school but speaking in another language at home. Novice readers may face more serious comprehension issues over time. The lack of a reading culture at home also plays a vital role, for we often tell our children to read even though we do not. Yet another example of “Do as I say, not as I do.” Our failure to role-model reading at home may impact our children’s personal efforts in this regard.

Inordinate access to screens can be another barrier. As Trevor Noah states in his “Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood” (2016), “If you add up how much you read in a year on the Internet — tweets, Facebook posts, lists — you’ve read the equivalent of a ... ton of books, but in fact you’ve read no books in a year.” Comparing this to a hamster wheel, he concludes, “It’s maximal effort put into minimal gain.”

READING ALOUD TRULY EMPOWERS TEACHERS TO IMPACT EACH ONE OF THEIR STUDENTS — NOT JUST IN TERMS OF DEVELOPING A FONDNESS FOR READING, BUT ALSO IN SOWING THE SEEDS FOR HIGHER ORDER THINKING SKILLS AND REFLECTION AS A HABIT.



Although many of our kids do blossom into avid readers despite these challenges, we must never forget those who fall through the cracks.

THE PLOT THICKENS

Reading is a thinking activity. According to Robert Fisher, author of “Teaching Children to Think” (2005), fluent readers can extract meaning from the text while reading it, whereas those who struggle with reading cannot and suffer from “cognitive confusion.” This directly impacts their ability to “read to learn” as schoolwork becomes more and more demanding, especially for those who only read what the teachers assign.

Scholars refer to this decline as the “fourth grade slump,” a downward spiral in reading scores first identified in fourth grade and that, in the U.S., is often linked to lower socio-economic status. However, this research has monolingualism embedded in it and multilingualism can actually complicate this situation regardless of one’s socio-economic status. In fact, many students of higher socio-economic families can succeed without being readers thanks to their access to private tutoring, including online enrichment courses.

Reading for pleasure can actually help children improve their academic achievement and enjoy their textbooks more. But how can we sustain such reading as they progress through the grades? In a classroom full of children with various skills

and interests, what is the lowest common denominator that may motivate them to start reading again or to keep at it?

SHOW, NOT TELL

The American Commission on Reading’s “Building a Nation of Readers” (1985) terms reading aloud the “single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading.” It was deemed essential at home and indispensable in the classroom “throughout the grades”! Yes, not just when we are trying to teach them how to read, but during their entire academic career. Indeed, research shows that elementary and middle school children say that the favorite part of their school day is when their teachers read aloud to them.

Jim Trelease mentions two important facts in his “The Read-Aloud Handbook” (2001): Humans are pleasure-driven and reading is an accrued skill. In other words, we like to do what we enjoy and the more we read, the better we get at it. When children experience reading in a positive way, their brain receives a “pleasure” message. The greater the number of such signals, the more they come to associate reading with fun.

Reading aloud truly empowers teachers to impact each one of their students — not just in terms of developing a fondness for reading, but also in sowing the seeds for higher order thinking skills and reflection as a habit. According to the Fountas and


Pinnell, exposing children to consistent reading aloud helps them develop cognitively and improves their fluency and reading habits. As students can listen on a higher language level than they can read, reading aloud makes complex ideas more accessible to them and exposes them to vocabulary and language patterns that are not part of their everyday speech. This, in turn, helps students understand the structure of books when they read independently.

We know that fluency in conversation, richness in vocabulary, depth in comprehension and creativity in composition all stem from reading. So instead of telling students to read, it’s high time to show them the pleasures of reading. However, it cannot be emphasized enough that here we are talking about supplemental reading aloud. Reading assigned textbook selections aloud is perfectly fine, but note that these are also weighed down by affiliated assignments. Therefore, to get the best results teachers must introduce additional books that are not part of the curriculum *per se*. Complement the classroom syllabus with an unabridged book that does not have the cumbersome baggage — report writing, homework or marked assignments — to prove to students that reading can be fun.

Let one teacher — not necessarily an English teacher — start the book and another one continue it whenever the opportunity arises. Give students a chance to read with expression. Invite guests to participate: the

principal and teachers/students from higher grades, as well as parents and local librarians. As kids get older, reading aloud is a great way to introduce them to quality literature, especially since they may have become stuck in reading and re-reading the same kind of books. Audio books can be very helpful in this regard.

Select an easy first book and then, once they’re hooked, raise the bar. Imagine the thinking skills being developed while they follow a plot over an extended period of time only by listening. In addition, the beautiful thing about reading aloud is that we can choose books above their current developmental level in order to challenge them. Above all, such activities prepare them for independent reading. When the school has developed a reading aloud culture through consistency, time should be allotted for sustained silent reading during the class.

Parents and teachers should incorporate these useful tips into their daily routines. While it is extremely important to cultivate reading habits among our children, it is equally vital that we, as parents and teachers, do likewise. If not, how can we possibly be surprised to learn that our children aren’t really interested in reading? 

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