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## Getting Children from Low-Income Families to read: What works

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### Abstract

*This paper is an excerpt from the author's Master of Education dissertation. The author carried out a study to evaluate a community-based reading programme, kidsREAD for children aged between 4 and 8 of different ethnic groups from low-income families. These children, who are most at risk of reading failure, were exposed to one hour of weekly reading intervention for a year at various reading clubs where volunteers read aloud stories to them in groups before engaging them in a variety of other reading-related activities. Analyses using paired t-tests and intercorrelation were conducted on variables to establish the significance of the effects, and to examine the links among the reading activities measured. Drawing from the research findings and literature review, the author discusses how the underlying elements of the kidsREAD programme might have worked to benefit slow or poor readers.*

*Key words: kidsREAD, low-income families, reading programme, reluctant readers, slow readers*

### Introduction

In the last few decades, there has been much interest in how to help young children read, especially those identified as at risk of reading difficulty or academic failure. As a result, reading programmes initiated by various agencies for helping children, especially reluctant or poor readers have sprouted. This is in part fuelled by national interests in literacy problems as well as the wealth of research findings on reading and its effects on readers. Programmes initiated at the national level are normally funded and use teachers or certified reading specialists to deliver the instruction. This can be costly, especially if one-on-one tutoring is practised. An alternative explored is the utilization of volunteers to facilitate the reading sessions to a group of children. However, little is known about the effectiveness of such programmes.

### Background

There is considerable evidence to show that reading is highly related to academic learning and hence useful as an index of general academic achievement (Chall, Jacobs & Baldwin, 1990). Studies have consistently demonstrated the high correlation between reading and academic success (e.g., Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Chall et al., 1990; Cipielewski & Stanovich,

1992; Cox & Guthrie, 2001; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991; Krashen, 1998; Madden, Slavin, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1993). Studies further inform us that the benefits of reading are phenomenal, extending beyond academic to other skills such as language and general knowledge development, critical thinking, listening, imagination, cognition, communication, character development and social development (e.g., Arizpe & Blatt, 2011; Billington, Dowrick, Hamer, Robinson & Williams, 2010; Dickinson, Griffith, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2012; Justice, McGinty, Piasta, Kaderavek & Fan, 2010; Maloch & Beutel, 2010). Reading has also been found to increase children's social skills and community participation (Guthrie, Schafer, & Hutchison, 1991). Research shows that among the children from low income families and among the struggling readers, reading success is positively associated with good social skills, social behaviour and a child's general disposition (Ashcroft, 2004; Miles and Stipek, 2006).

At the same time, research studies also abound with findings that relate higher frequencies of reading difficulties to socio-economic status (e.g. Burney & Beilke, 2008; Chall et al., 1990; National Institute for Literacy [NIFL], 2008; Parcel and Dufur, 2001; White, 1982). Research has reported that poverty is a strong correlate of low reading achievement (Cunningham, 2006) and on average, cognitive scores of children at age 4 in the lowest socio-economic status (SES) groups were 60% below the scores of those from the highest SES group, and this gap was likely to stay or even increase throughout the schooling years of children (Neuman & Celano, 2006). Torgesen (1998) too reported compelling findings regarding how children who got off to a poor start in reading rarely caught up; poor readers almost invariably continue to be so, thus, the importance of catching them when they are young. Therefore, there is a compelling need to get children to read, especially those from families with low income.

## Reading

To evaluate the success of a reading programme, the standard of literacy should be understood and defined. According to Saksena (1970), the most fundamental concept of literacy is to be able to read and write. In his paper 'Bridging Reading and Writing: A Cognitive Equation of Literacy', Chia (2007) stated, "Reading and writing are uniquely human and most complex of all cognitive activities" (p. 6). This complexity was exemplified in his explanation of the evolution of the concept of literacy to meet the changing demands of society. Myers (1996) effectively traced this process from *signature literacy* (the ability to read and write one's name) to *recitation literacy* (ability to orally recite memorized texts) to *decoding/analytic literacy* (ability to read and understand previously unseen text, including ability to spell correctly and write fluently), and finally *appreciative literacy* (ability to appreciate the aesthetic beauty of written language in reading). Hence, participants of a reading programme can be evaluated based on any of these standards, a combination or even a continuum of standards, based on the entry-level ability of these participants.

## Reader's Profile

Similarly, when developing reading programmes, it is important to understand and cater to the reader's profile so as to facilitate the development of the readers. There are many ways in which

readers can be profiled. As early as in the 60's and 70's, readers were grouped according to their reading readiness (Eisenberg, 1966) or reading proficiency (Erickson & Erickson, 1977). In the 80's and 90's, readers were categorized according to their intellectual abilities (Detterman, 1982), reader interest and motivation (Lee, 1984), and learning or reading styles (Carbo, Dunn, & Dunn, 1986). By the 90's, readers were profiled by reader attitude and enthusiasm (McKenna & Kear, 1990), and reading behaviours, feelings, and needs (Chia, 1999).

In *A Comprehensive Model of Reader Profiles*, Chia (1999) proposed four different profiles of readers as a theoretical concept that served to provide information about the behaviour, feelings and needs of the readers for the purpose of facilitating the development of the readers. Of relevance to the author's study (Law, 2012) is his proposed type 2 profile: the reluctant reader, defined as one who can read but does not read. Also known as the slow or poor reader, this type of reader lacks confidence in his or her ability to read or learn to read well. A slow or poor reader may have very low motivation to read and choose to avoid reading situations. This could be due to a lack of reading materials as well as fear of failing to read fluently.

Findings from the research conducted by McKool (2007) suggested that there were differences between avid and reluctant readers due to the economically diverse backgrounds of their home lives and literacy experiences in preschool. In particular, more children from middle- or high-income families were read aloud to when they were young as compared to their peers from families with low income. This finding is consistent with the concept of "blue collar value" as discussed by Allington and Cunningham (1996) and McKool (2007). It refers to parents holding blue collar jobs working hard during the day who expect to wind down and spend time relaxing when they get home. So, instead of espousing home literacy practices such as reading aloud to their children, these parents who have blue collar jobs expect the schools to educate their children.

From the myriad research findings linking reading or literacy outcome and family factors, it can be established that owing to what Molfese, Modglin, and Molfese (2003) classified as distal measures (family income, parental occupation, and parental education), proximal measures (educational resources, parental involvement, and parenting practices), or both, poverty and its concomitant challenges appeared to impede student learning and contribute to the academic achievement gap experienced by children from low-income families. As a result, children from families with low income are most likely to fall under the category of reluctant readers as profiled by Chia (1999). According to Stanat *et al.* (2002), poor readers (i.e., reluctant readers) are considered to be an at-risk group for failure in both academic and social life.

## **Children at Risk - Poor or Reluctant Readers**

An "at-risk reader" as defined by Tierney, Readance, and Dishner (1995) is one "who fails to have the skills and strategies to maintain the ability to read and to grow as a reader" (p. 410). To Kadzin (1993), "at risk" referred to the "increased likelihood over base rates in the population that a particular outcome will occur" (p. 129). In the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (1992) report 'National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988: Characteristics of At-Risk Students in NELS: 88', students who failed to achieve basic proficiency in reading were

also considered at-risk of school failure. According to Chall et al. (1990), “children at risk” is defined as children who are variously known as “socially deprived”, “culturally disadvantaged”, “urban-disadvantaged” or simply children of poor families who, regardless of the label, generally perform below norms in literacy on national, state and school assessments and whose lag in reading achievement becomes greater in the later elementary school grades and in high schools. It follows that children from families with low income can be considered as children at risk for reading failure.

This was further supported by Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) who stated that other than developmental disability, children could be at risk for reading difficulties due to poverty and limited home support for literacy. Snow *et al.* (1998) presented a list of risk factors in learning to read for young children that included residing in low-income families which could expose children to the risk of reading difficulties as a result of having acquired relatively lesser literacy-related knowledge and skills during preschool years either through limited home literacy experiences or some inherent cognitive limitations. In fact, it was reported that in the United States, the largest group of children at risk of school are the children of the poor (Vernon-Feagans, Hammer, Miccio, & Manlove, 2001). Hus (2005) also reported that studies showed that there was a disproportionate representation of children who were poor, racial minorities and non-native speakers of English in population of children with significant reading disabilities, and children in lower income families suffered from higher frequencies of academic failure and grade retention.

The children in this study were the participants of *kidsREAD* whose family income must meet the criteria of “low-income” set by the National Library Board (NLB) and the major ethnic community self-help organizations (NLB, 2010). To qualify for the programme, the declared monthly gross income for the family should not exceed \$2,500 or per capita income should not be more than \$650. With effect from April 2011, the eligible income criteria had been revised to \$3,500 or per capita income of not more than \$900, in line with the revision of the Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme (KiFAS)’s income criteria set by the government. Most of the children attending this programme were either granted the KiFAS (for preschoolers) or the Ministry of Education Financial Assistance Scheme [MOE FAS] (for children attending primary schools). Benefits enjoyed under these schemes included kindergarten subsidy, start-up grant of up to \$200 per child, free textbooks and school attire, waiver (full or partial) in fees (e.g., examination fee), and others. These children came from a disadvantaged background where resources were limited, where exposure to a model for reading was lacking and where the love and habit of reading might not be inculcated at home since birth. Arising from these, these children were at risk of reading failure. They could certainly do with some help to give them a head start for reading and writing: help that could level the playing field for at-risk children from low-income group against their peers from the higher income group.

Thus, it would seem reasonable to say that the very children most in need of literacy support are those from low-income homes and from families who speak languages other than English at home as reported by Dickinson, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek (2010). Moreover, according to Chia (1999), “A reluctant reader should be viewed as one with a very special learning need as through avoidance, the reluctant reader may eventually lose some of his/her earlier reading skills” (p. 67). Therefore, in working with such readers, it is of utmost importance to overcome their reluctance

to read, through motivating them to become habitual readers. To this end, the methods used in the intervention are the keys to overcoming the problem. Without such an intervention, a reluctant reader may risk failing as a competent reader and consequently experience academic failure in school.

### ***kidsREAD* Programme**

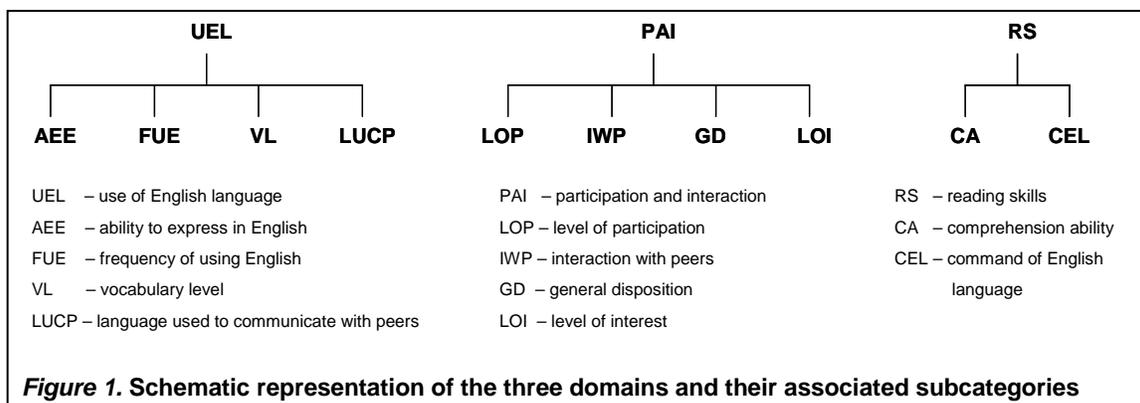
*kidsREAD* is a nation-wide early reading project launched in 2004 born out of a collaboration between NLB, People's Association (PA) and the major ethnic community self-help groups in Singapore namely, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC), Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA), the Eurasian Association, Singapore (EA) and Yayasan MENDAKI. It has been supported by various members of parliament and cabinet ministers. This national reading programme is an initiative to promote the love of reading and language competence among children from families with low income, mainly pre-school to Primary 2 children (ages 4 to 8), regardless of ethnic background. According to NLB, the majority of these children come from non-English speaking home environments, many of whom do not speak English at all. Most have also not been exposed to reading material of any kind.

Through weekly one-hour read-aloud sessions, the programme aims to:

- leverage on strengths of partners to create a reading programme for the children,
- promote love of reading and cultivate good reading habits among the young,
- provide children with an opportunity to advance in reading, writing and speaking English,
- provide an avenue of interaction for young children of different races, and
- enhance the quality of life of members and their families.

The *kidsREAD* classes are kept to a small group size of not more than 30 children, with volunteers managing and facilitating the sessions. Lessons are normally conducted over the weekends with volunteers reading aloud one to two stories to the children before breaking them up into smaller groups to engage them with a variety of activities related to the stories read or to reading in general. In a nutshell, it is a literature-based intervention programme for children from economically disadvantaged background that seeks to provide enjoyable and facilitative interactions among volunteers and children from various races, with the presumption that love for reading and literacy skills will be enhanced.

The children in the programme were evaluated in 10 areas (i.e. subcategories) at the start, middle and end of the programme. For her study, Law (2012) used data collected at the beginning and end of the programme as pre- and post-test data for comparison. The standard of literacy that determines the reading success of these at-risk children was evaluated on a continuum from *signature literacy* to *appreciative literacy* based on entry-level ability of the children in the 10 areas evaluated. These 10 areas were primarily classified under three domains: (a) use of English language (*UEL*), (b) participation and interaction (*PAI*), and (c) reading skills (*RS*). Figure 1 illustrates the three domains and its associated subcategories.



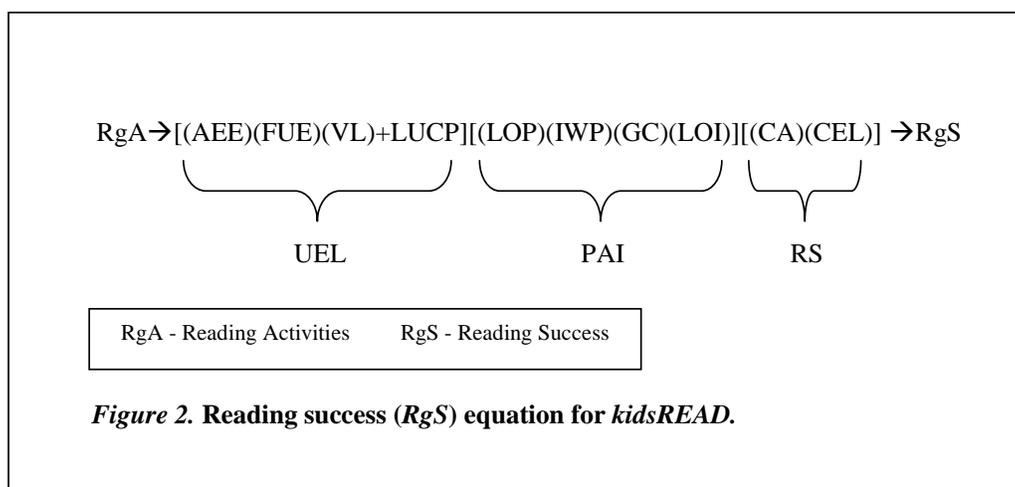
## Summary of Results

In summary, the results for the domain on *UEL* suggested that as a result of having undergone the *kidsREAD* Programme for one year, the participants showed a significant improvement in their ability to express in English with increased frequency of its usage and also an improvement in their vocabulary or word knowledge in English. However, the results also suggested low use of English by the participants to communicate with their peers. The intercorrelation analyses among the various subcategories measured yielded the first part of an equation for success for *kidsREAD* as follows:  $UEL \rightarrow [(AEE)(FUE)(VL) + LUCP]$ .

The results for the domain on *PAI* suggested that as a result of having undergone the *kidsREAD* programme for one year, the participants showed a significant improvement in their level of interest in reading as well as their participation in its activities and interacting with other readers or peers. Their general disposition as a reader also improved in terms of them becoming more enthusiastic or cheerful readers. Intercorrelation analyses of the subcategories measured for the *PAI* domain yielded the second equation for *kidsREAD*'s success as follows:  $PAI \rightarrow [(LOP)(IWP)(GD)(LOI)]$ .

For the third domain on *RS*, the results suggested that as a result of having undergone the *kidsREAD* programme for one year, the participants showed a significant improvement in their ability to comprehend what they read and a good grasp of command in English. The intercorrelation analyses further yielded the final equation for success of *kidsREAD* as follows:  $RS \rightarrow [(CA)(CEL)]$ .

In conclusion, this author summarized the findings of her study (Law, 2012) into an equation for reading success for *kidsREAD* as depicted in Figure 2.



## What Really Matters?

To better understand the domains measured in *kidsREAD* that define reading success, it is essential to discuss the instructional approach and strategies adopted for the programme. The following discussion will unveil the underlying elements that appeared to have worked to benefit the at-risk children from low-income families who could be reluctant, slow or poor readers.

## Make Learning Experiential

*kidsREAD* is not just a conventional reading programme in a classroom environment. Traditional code-based reading readiness skills taught in other well-researched reading programmes are not its focus. Recognizing the importance of experiential learning, *kidsREAD* had organized regular storytelling performances by professional storytellers, ambassadors and prominent artistes all over the world. It had also brought children in the programme to educational trips to the museums, parks, Science Centre, and other places of interest. The children were also provided opportunities to attend performances by theatre arts group as well as meet-and-greet sessions with favourite characters from Nickelodeon, British Broadcasting Corporation or McDonalds. Themes of these trips and outings were closely related to the books read to these children. Hence, learning to read for the young participants of *kidsREAD* occurs through a natural and experiential process where words are put into meaningful sentences and context in the form of stories, performances and excursions for their enjoyment with the hope that they would be motivated to go on reading. This method of intervention – experiential learning – unlocked the key to motivating these reluctant, slow or poor readers.

## Make Learning Holistic and Joyful

In *kidsREAD*, volunteers try to make learning to read easy, which according to Smith (1985) “means making reading a meaningful, enjoyable and frequent experience for children.” (p. 143).

Children in the programme are regularly exposed to interesting and quality materials that are meaningful and can be connected to their background knowledge and experience. Volunteers will model positive reading behaviour and extend the children's comprehension and oral reading skills through use of related arts such as speaking, listening, writing, art and craft, and drama. Games like *Bingo*, word puzzles, word searches and *Snap* (matching of cards with same word or picture) are commonly incorporated as part of the supplemental activities to connect the children to the stories read and to develop their language skills. Puppets (hand or finger puppets and story aprons), a fun medium, are also used during read aloud to engage the children, get their attention and hold their interest. The programme also elicits the participation of all children, including the shy ones, thus developing their social skills. Singing songs (e.g. *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*), using ipads or apps on iphone to show concepts like sounds and movement of animals are among the repertoire of tools and strategies that volunteers may use to facilitate the reading sessions. In this programme, children's reading opportunities are thus facilitated through the organization of meaningful classroom and out-of-classroom activities. There is active student engagement to achieve the programme goals. These principles for reading and writing, and teaching and learning are whole language based (see Goodman, 1986, for more detail). The instructional strategies adopted serve to meet the broadly defined literacy standard in terms of cognitive, affective goals and behavioural goals of the programme. These are categorized under the three domains, covering the 10 specific goals that formed the criteria for evaluating the success of the programme. Learning is holistic in *kidsREAD*. Instead of rote memorization, concepts are learnt through relating it across different stories and supplemental activities. Therefore, by making the reading sessions holistic, fun and enjoyable, without the traditional phonemic drills and systematic phonic instruction, the programme further unlocks the key to motivating the slow and poor readers and overcoming their reluctance to read.

## **Make Learning a Social Experience**

Children develop linguistic and communicative competence through learning in a natural environment and in context (Clark, 2000). In the natural environment such as the home or school, children learn to interact with members of their families, peers, teachers and others. The children attending *kidsREAD* were regularly interacting with other children and the youth or adult volunteers in big and small group settings. While the programme was taught in English, the children were observed to continue their habit of using their mother tongue to communicate with their peers during the programme. The children in *kidsREAD* hailed from a home environment where their mother tongue (mostly Malay and Chinese) was the primary language of communication. English was their secondary language. This habit showed that most of the children were attached to their primary language although they had been taught about reading and communicating using English. It is possible that communicative efficacy could be the primary driving force in the choice of the language used by the children when communicating with their peers in class. Such a behaviour is consistent with suggestions from previous investigations where choice of language used with peers reflects the language spoken at home (Ting, 2010), where bilinguals develop knowledge on how and when to use their two languages depending on the topic discussed, the situation, and the person talked to (Fantini, 1985; Halmari & Smith, 1994; Zentella, 1982, 1997), and where children do benefit from transfer of learning from L1 to L2 (Jiang and Kuehn, 2001; Karim, 2003; Reyes 2004; Ringborn, 1992). It is thus

characteristic of bilingual children to adjust their language differentially with parents, teachers, friends and strangers as part of their communicative competence (Reyes, 2004). Children should be allowed to respond contingently and positively, using their own language during their interactions with peers so as to foster bondage and interaction (Black & Logan, 1995). Although the volunteers had consistently served as a role model to the children in using English to communicate with them, they could have recognized and acknowledged this, allowing the children to continue speaking to their peers in their mother tongue. Doing so could have a positive impact on the children's interests and disposition towards the programme, besides developing their social skills.

It is also noteworthy that the study had found that the level of interest did not significantly determine the levels of participation and interaction of children in this programme (Law, 2012). It appeared that participation level did not necessarily affect a child's interest (i.e., attentiveness and responsiveness) in the story read or activities conducted during the programme. A plausible explanation would be that instead of interest, the children participated for social acceptance by their peers and the volunteers who were playing the role of teachers. If this was true, enrolling young reluctant or poor readers into a community-based reading programme might provide the added benefit of developing the adaptability and social acuity of these children, further developing their social skills.

## **Make Teaching Easy**

Summarizing decades of scientific research on reading instruction, the National Reading Panel Report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) identified five essential components that are critical for an effective reading programme as follows:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension

To provide explicit and systematic instruction in these five areas as recommended, teachers or certified reading specialists must be used to deliver the instruction. This is not feasible for a community-based reading programme such as *kidsREAD* where there is limited government funding and volunteers are used to facilitate the lessons. The programme is dependent on these volunteers, primarily made up of working or retired adults and youths (secondary schools or junior college students) who have a passion to contribute to society or be involved in the community through reading to the kids. To tap on this pool of invaluable resource, the programme must be flexible and easy to deliver. To this end, a simple aim has been crafted for the programme which is to inculcate a love of reading so as to reduce the need for instructors who are specialized in the field of literacy. In addition, guidebooks, resource kits, pre-selected storybooks, donated storybooks, stationery and craft materials are provided for the reading clubs. Templates for lesson planning are also provided. Every new volunteer would undergo basic training in storytelling and reading aloud. Clubs are given the flexibility to use other storybooks

outside of those provided. NLB also introduced the appointment of a knowledgeable person, in the form of a coordinator at reading clubs, since 2008. Other than supervising the running of the club, a coordinator's role includes other responsibilities such as administrative duties, overseeing events and outings, keeping track of achievements at the clubs, serving as a mentor to the volunteers and assisting them in the planning and delivery of the reading lessons as necessary. It takes the specialist load off the volunteers and makes teaching easy and fuss-free for them.

## **Make It Free**

The high cost of commercially run reading programmes put them out of reach for children from low income families. Making it free to the children from low-income families will attract parents to enroll children who are reluctant or slow readers into the programme. Since the programme is offered free, it can only afford to use volunteers to deliver the lessons. As such, parents who need not pay for the programme will also not make unrealistic demands on the programme delivery and the volunteers. As it is free so as to serve the needs of those from low income background, it provides a meaningful cause for the volunteers. In a society where there is fierce competition for these invaluable "free time" resources, positioning the programme to serve the low-income segment of the population is an effective strategy for recruiting volunteers (Haski-Leventhal & Meijs, 2011). When individuals volunteer for a cause that matches their values and beliefs, they are also more likely to derive greater fulfillment and satisfaction and hence commit for a longer duration. This is a win-win situation for the children, volunteers and the organization.

## **Conclusion**

The primary research objective of the study was to determine the impact of *kidsREAD* on the reading success of children at risk. In the process of looking at how the various reading goals in the programme were instrumental in achieving the success of the programme, certain insights have emerged.

With the success of *kidsREAD*, NLB had recently announced its plan to extend the programme from one to five years to allow the children to build a stronger foundation in early literacy (Chia, 2012; Channel News Asia, 2012; TODAY, 2012). It is the hope of this author that the study of *kidsREAD* could add to the current literature and discussion on volunteer-delivered intervention programme as well as inspire more works or research into this topic. The author further hopes that this would in turn encourage sharing of practices and methods that work to develop the reading culture, transform reading attitudes and raise the level of attainment in the reading ability of children from families with low income. This could potentially benefit thousands of children in years to come.

It is this author's belief that no child should be made to feel incompetent in reading or learning as a result of his family background or home environment. Given the right training for volunteers, provision of appropriate materials for instruction, and a safe, positive and conducive environment for reading and learning, children who may be disadvantaged at the start as

compared to their peers can experience accomplishment and success in their own journey of reading and learning.

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