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## TEACHERS AND LIBRARY BOOKS

BY

Dr. Ruth Wong

In many countries of the developing world, the quantitative progress in education during the decade, 1960-70, has been considerable. In the Asian region, for example, the first eight years saw a sixty-one per cent increase in the number of students at all levels of education. The proportion of students of five to twenty-five years of age which had amounted to twenty-five per cent in 1965 increased considerably and reached thirty-four per cent.

It was pointed out at the Asian Conference of Ministers of Education in Singapore, 1971, that the maintenance of the quantitative progress at its present level would no doubt give rise to financial problems during the decade of the 70's. A fifty per cent increase in educational expenditure was estimated to be necessary in order to maintain the current level of access to education. Indeed the countries concerned could not afford much more than what they had been investing in education in recent years. Also there was general dissatisfaction over the fact that, despite the heavy expenditure, the educational output was too low to satisfy the needs of socio-economic and cultural development.

The reasons for this state of affairs are obvious. Even while financial inputs have increased, the distribution of educational benefits has had to thin out continuously in the face of a growth rate in the demand for education (largely generated by rapid population increases) which far exceeds the capacity for the supply of learning materials and knowledgeable teachers.

The expressed fervour for the cause of universal education has compounded the problems of shortages. How egalitarian can a system be if everyone did not receive a basic educational diet! Once the irreducible minimum has been determined, it tends to assume the place of the

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acceptable norm even when it is much less than what is desirable. And, indeed, to generate benefits where both underdevelopment and perpetual shortage co-exist is extremely difficult. In the case of book production, for example, the high price of materials is aggravated by a poor production infrastructure with no proper printing services; absence of specialists. Such as graphic artists, and so on. For the poor everything is dearer. And, over and above these complications is the expensive language issue which makes it impossible to borrow learning materials too freely from more advanced countries. Local authors who come mainly from the teacher ranks are few and far between, even though a highly lucrative practice awaits writer of textbooks. Translation, also, requires those who have a sufficient foreign language to render concepts clearly and correctly in the local lingua franca.

Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that education in terms of years of formal schooling has not helped to solve the problems of development. Quantitative recitals reveal nothing more than just how great a strain public education is increasingly placing on the public purse. And, even while the case for qualitative improvement is being pressed, a somewhat dubious concept of education very commonly accepted (in the Asia context, at least) is being left unexamined, namely that the outcome of schooling, as measured in quantitative terms, is education itself, the number of readers completed, the number of language structures learnt, the number of texts and course modules to which a person has been exposed, the number of examination hurdles successfully overcome, and the number of papers, testimonials, and degrees acquired in the process-- these which are the means in the education of the individual have become synonymous with the individual's actual attainments in education.

With such a simplistic view of education, the case for books in education can hardly go beyond the provision of a few texts or the offer of programmed materials, work modules and packaged courses which comprise a currently popular solution to the shortage of good teachers.

The effects are visible in the typical school and classroom wherever one goes in the developing countries. Reading as understood by teachers and children has become more and more associated with a special diet about which the individual is not particularly consulted either as to taste or choice. Where the social context is one of comparative affluence, children stagger under the daily load of required texts to be used in the classroom. They have to do so with the seeming connivance of teachers and parents. Teachers insist on all books being brought to school every day. At least in

one country I know of, parents write to the press if textbooks are not prescribed. Textbooks contain all the wisdom required in schooling: from them the predilections of examiners can be anticipated years in advance! Where means are not so readily available schools stock multiple copies of texts for free distribution to pupils. Even when the luxury of a so-called classroom library-corner exists, the few books available are considered temporary pleasures meant only for the fast learner. Textbooks are more important and abide with children for a purpose! Thus the popular opinion goes and reading for pure enjoyment beyond the requirements of the school task negligible.

I am aware that some teachers do make attempts to require children to find out things for themselves from the school library where such exists. Even then they are let loose in the school library to "copy". The pupil is not guided to respond to thought with thought; he develops no skill in the appreciation of the nuances of meaning, the expressions of emotion, the choice of words.

The general mode of instruction in the classroom too induces this uncritical acceptance of book knowledge. Children are literally made to swallow whole contents, line upon line, precept upon precept. By calling for the under lining of sentences and paragraphs, which often happens, teachers give the cue to their pupils that the facts in the underlined passages are important enough to be committed to memory. Here again the prescription is so precise that no room is left for the individual to exercise judgment, to skim or to linger, and eventually to choose. It is always a continuous effort to teach acceptance without active personal response besides that of agreement. Between books and the learner there grows up no intimate association. The completion of each level of education is attended by the putting away of certain sets of books or the putting up of these for sale. Few persons continue to read for pleasure or build up personal collections of books.

The low priority which books and the library have among school concerns is indicative of the general attitude of administrators and planners with respect to the importance of non textbook-bound reading. In a report of library development in eight Asian countries<sup>1</sup>, the composite picture which emerges, except for the case of Korea, highlights the following shortcomings with respect to school libraries.

1. Collections are haphazard and random.

2. Most are donated books inappropriate for use in schools, many having obsolete contents.
3. A majority of books are multiple copies of texts, almost nothing else. Reference materials except for a few encyclopedias are sadly lacking.
4. Except for Korea the number of books per head of pupil population in primary and secondary schools is an average of less than one per pupil.
5. There are no specific plans for the development of school libraries nor is there standardization in the classification of books.
6. Where given, volumes for school libraries are mere token sums, not sufficient for any significant development to be undertaken. Some class collections for the classroom library corner are bought with a sum of money comprising the total of a modest library fee payable by each child.
7. Very few school libraries can boast of a trained librarian. Those who help to distribute or loan out the books are teachers filling in time, or voluntarily assisting during a free period.

What about the teacher situation? At its worst the system has to cope with large numbers of untrained or underqualified teachers. In the many crash programmes devised to furnish them with a little more of the wherewithal to teach, the very fact of their inadequacy and the need to train them for service in as short a time as possible have given pretext for a heavily prescribed methodology with regards to practice and the assignment of much of the curriculum time to remedial work and the study of language.

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<sup>1</sup>Kaser, D. and others. *Library Development in Eight Asian Countries*. Scarecrow Press, Inc. Metuchen, New Jersey, 1969. pp. 243.

Where better conditions exist at a training college, the tendency is for the teacher trainee to be left entirely to his reading devices with its reading lists. These are often so comprehensively supplied that they become more a source of worry than of help. With large numbers of students pursuing courses there are just not enough copies in the library to go around. Students read indiscriminately all down the list, not knowing what emphasis should be given to each book. It would be better for them to be prescribed a few typical books, well-written and stimulating and be taught some simple principles about the methods of knowledge retrieval by which they can themselves select the relevant, than to be given the name of almost every book on the subject and then be left to flounder, not knowing which to read in depth or which to skim.

As a teacher has received, so he gives. A teacher who has not himself learnt the art of reading nor enjoyed it as a personal pursuit can hardly be expected to impart emotions which he does not feel. There is a discipline which he himself must learn in verbal usage and ideas. "Unless words are found, ideas do not exist,"<sup>2</sup> so said Northrop Frye. Paraphrasing his statement for our present purpose, a teacher cannot teach proper concepts unless he has a facility with words and is skilled in their use. This surely he comes by through reading, more so than through any particular instructional device. A reading teacher is an infectious being; he knows the challenge of great thoughts and ideas; he knows his own limitations and that the time at his disposal will not suffice for him to teach his pupils every thought and idea contributed by great minds. So his recourse is always to entice his pupils to read. I had one such teacher. She used to come to school with a bagful of books every day. There was no school library in those days when I was a student. She would give a brief synopsis of the life of the author or authoress, provide an enchanting glimpse of the story written and just enough to whet our appetites--and then offer the book as a reward to those who make some particular verbal contribution or other in class that day. The more we read, the more she brought. As I look back I see her as the one mainly responsible for my

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<sup>2</sup>Frye, Northrop. University of Toronto Installation Lectures. "Humanities in a New World." University of Toronto Press, 1958. P.18.

introduction to the world of books, for not only did she loan us books, she made us aware of more available in the town library. She brought us membership forms and stood as guarantor for our good conduct for each one willing to join; so that we might tap the resources of a vaster collection.

There is little which this teacher did which other teachers cannot do, with one difference. She was a reader herself and many are not.

Perhaps there are some who think that in a day of scientific and technological progress,

the printed word will play a lesser role besides other media systems. But, in the words of Maddox:

Those wishing to belong to information retrieval networks must back their inclinations with a commitment to large expenditure each year on computer time and all the other ingredients which make for efficiency. In those circumstances, the expenditure is so great that the organization concerned can also afford to buy books and journals. But where investment in information retrieval systems is either prohibitively expensive or likely to be restrictive, both in the range of information dealt with and the kind of person likely to have access to the system, it is a powerful intellectual comfort that books, however expensive as books, are cheap even in comparison with television receivers. If they happen also to be good books, they can of course be intellectual bargains."<sup>3</sup>

It may be pertinent at this juncture to point out what Singapore has done to improve the local situation with regard to library books. In late 1969 when the Advisory Committee on Curriculum Development was formed under the leadership of the Director of Research, it established a special library standing subcommittee among other standing committees for curriculum development. The work of this committee has been specifically directed to the establishment of school libraries as a supporting resource centre for the new curricula being developed. This committee has been most active, principally in promotional work. Today many schools in Singapore, through their school advisory committees are raising funds either for building a library, where space limits the proper establishment of one or for enhancing their collections of books. One library in each school has become a priority concern. The Library Committee sends out

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<sup>3</sup> Maddox, John (U.K. National Commission for UNESCO, Ed.) Books for All. "Will the Printed Word Survive?" H.M.S.O., 1972. p. 47.

Guidelines for setting up a school library. It also disseminates information on new books as well as provides lists of these immediately available in the market. It goes so far as to simplify the school's task by classifying books recommended and providing each book with an accession number and date, so that schools with no teacher-librarian have merely to collect the books from the Ministry after paying the required price.

Though we have yet far to go, we are now at least in a position to refute the statement made by Byrd in 1970. In reviewing the school library situation in Singapore, he referred to the expressed sentiments shown toward the book needs of schools, but he added, "action is postponable indefinitely."<sup>4</sup>

We are also offering a course in school librarianship as an option in the pre-service professional training course at the Teachers College. This has just been initiated and is not meant so much as a technical course as an affective one. That is to say, while the teacher is taught the fundamentals of book classification and library organization, he is particularly drawn to the methods of attracting children to booklore, of acquainting them with the know-how of knowledge retrieval and of encouraging them to react to ideas by contributing their own. It is essentially a course aimed at explaining the role of teacher as librarian, and how he may himself use books and teach his children to use them too. It is hoped thereby to promote more effective teaching and learning in our schools.

Too frequently, the teacher today is regarded as nothing more than a productive instructor. At the tertiary level he is a producer of papers; at the school levels he has to keep his children moving in the school queue to be able to cite a satisfactory percentage of passes each year. He is sometimes used as a mere group organizer—organizing his children, organizing academic and other exercises for them. Sometimes he is looked to as a prophet of the examinations—he has to prognosticate and determine what questions may he set in the external examinations, and sometimes he is the textbook writer. He writes texts, the workbooks, and

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<sup>4</sup> Byrd, C. K. Books in Singapore. Chopmen Enterprises, Singapore, 1970. P. 98.

even the questions and model answers. The true teacher, however, is not the sum total of these parts. He is a person with a consuming passion. Something in him strives for responses and deep must call to deep. It is he who will extend the intellectual horizons and conduct our children to new lands of thoughts and ideas in which they can roam at will and play. Such a one cannot be anyone less than a connoisseur of books, one who samples and tastes deep of the joys of reading, one who has himself played with thoughts and ideas.

The moot question is, can the sort of educational system such as ours is, the system in which examinations are the means and ends to education, serve to nurture such people? If not, we have to set about actively to correct the environment or improve it.

In Singapore, for the first time in the Teachers College history, we set our entrance paper in language and thought--both written and oral. Our rationale is that no inarticulate teacher can truly convey interesting ideas. We found even university graduates whom we had to reject for their paucity in realms of thought. Those who have been admitted are generally encouraged in small group sessions and tutorials to read and to respond to topics of historical as well as contemporary interest. This is one little beginning. We are also trying to help our students to spend more time in interdisciplinary exercises. Perhaps nothing has so stifled a wide interest in reading as the increasing tendency to specialization. We shall continue to explore ways and means to make our teachers and hence our school pupils more educationally literate.

To this end, too, I think, all of you who are librarians will also address yourselves.