Building a Reading Culture

A Nationwide Study of Reading and School Libraries in Six Secondary Schools

Loh Chin Ee

KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Adolescents require both print and digital resources to support their reading and learning to read throughout their secondary schooling.
- Disadvantaged students require more support for reading in terms of access to books and role models for reading.
- School libraries that are well-stocked, designed and managed can support students' engaged reading and learning.

BACKGROUND

Much research has documented correlation between independent reading and academic achievement. Importantly, engaged readers are more likely to read more, enjoy reading, and learn independently. Students from disadvantaged homes (defined as Financial Assistance Scheme [FAS] students) are more likely to lack rich home literacy environments that support their access to resources to develop reading skills and engagement. Within Singapore, the gap between low- and high-achieving students suggests that more help needs to be provided to disadvantaged students for equitable access to reading.

FOCUS OF STUDY

This mixed methods study provides the first baseline study of adolescent reading habits and practices, and school library usage in Singapore.

KEY FINDINGS

Reading Habits and Practices of Adolescent Students

Adolescents still enjoy reading though their reading enjoyment decline from 15 years old onwards. Most prefer to read on print, though more read more online as they get older. Adolescents readers tend to read across devices whereas non-readers are less likely to read both in print and digitally.

Disadvantaged students tend to enjoy reading less, have fewer books and reading role models at home. Although similar proportions of non-FAS and FAS students report reading almost daily, nearly one-fifth of FAS students report that they do not read at all and have lesser reading duration and stamina (Loh & Sun, 2018a, 2018b).

Patterns of Reading and Library Usage

School libraries which are thoughtfully designed to integrate their library collection, programming and space can encourage students' reading engagement. Conversely, schools without strong library collections and programming, compounded with a lack of focus on reading for pleasure may see a decrease in engaged reading behaviours.

Integration of School Libraries into Reading and Learning Culture

Singapore secondary school libraries support studying and to a lesser degree, reading. Future-ready functions of collaboration, research and doing are not present in most Singapore secondary school libraries. The design and organisation of space can influence teacher and student behaviour. School libraries' top uses correlate with their principals' priorities for the library, suggesting school administration support is key for reading and library revitalisation.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

Implications for policy and practice

The study identified how a focus on reading engagement and school libraries supports a school's efforts at encouraging student engaged reading, making up for lack of home resources and support, especially for disadvantaged students. A regularly revitalized book collection, strong programming and interesting space attract students to the library to read and learn. Deliberate design of learning environments and trained manpower will help improve and integrate the school library to more effectively support 21st century reading and learning. The 21st Century School Libraries framework (Loh, 2018) can guide school library programming and design. Design guidelines created as part of the study (Loh, 2020) can be consulted to improve library collections, programming and space.

Implications for research

A follow-up grant has been awarded to study three school libraries of the future (LOTF study), with increased focus on the role of technology. It would be useful to follow up with another survey or a longitudinal study to track the changes in reading and learning behaviours of adolescents in Singapore, in context of rapid changes in technology and learning aims. Co-PI Sun Baoqi has extended the study in her follow-up grant to address leisure reading in different languages in Singapore's multilingual context. Finally, the socio-spatial framework and visual methods used in the study allow for insightful analysis of educational needs.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study are from six Singapore secondary schools. In total, 6,005 Secondary One to Five students completed the reading survey. Focus groups were conducted with 96 Secondary Two students from different streams. Interviews were also conducted with 6 Principals or Vice-Principals, 6 English Heads of Departments and 17 library coordinators/subject teachers.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopted an ethnographically-oriented mix methods approach that used the following data collection methods: survey, interviews and focus groups, observational data including time freezes and field notes, documentary photography, time-lapse photography, geographic infographic systems (GIS) and documentary data.

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