

## Empowering Young Readers

By Junie del Mundo



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Reading -- the foundation of all learning -- is a basic skill that many Filipino children are not grasping. Interventions meant to address declining literacy have failed to make an impact for various reasons. Sadly, a child who is unable to read will be challenged in learning new concepts and acquiring skills that he will need to become a productive citizen.

As a businessman, this thought terrifies me. For the Philippines, a generation of non-readers means a generation of lost opportunities. It foretells the deterioration of Philippine education; the inability to keep pace with the knowledge-based global economy; and inevitably, families failing to break free from the cycle of poverty.

Filipino companies have long realized the need to continually invest in our educational system to make our students competitive in the workplace, as evidenced by the assistance they continue to extend to educational programs. Most of this assistance has gone into augmenting government's limited resources by providing buildings, books, school supplies, and even allowances for teachers--great help, any way you look at it. Still, the need for targeted interventions persists, especially those that will help Filipino students catch up with reading milestones.

It was thus a great delight (and relief) for me to learn about the Sa Aklat Sisikat (SAS) reading program, a locally designed program that has proven to be effective in improving the reading skills of children, especially those in disadvantaged communities. No less than the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab proved the effectiveness of the program, with the student's reading scores showing real improvements.

"The SAS Reading Program significantly increases the propensity of children to read, causing 20 percent more children to have read a book in the last week at school and increases the number of books read by 2.3 in the last week and 7.2 in the last month. These increases persist both after the end of the program and outside of school, although at lower rates. The program also increased students' scores on a reading assessment. The effect persisted even after the program ended with an effect of 0.06 standard deviations three months later. Overall, the results suggest that the program is a viable strategy for improving student's reading skills," said the report.

This unprecedented validation from the MIT Poverty Action Lab is the first of its kind among the educational initiatives in the Philippines. It recognizes the efforts of the Sa Aklat Sisikat Foundation, a not-for-profit NGO that worked in collaboration with the Department of Education (DepEd) for the past 11 years to implement reading interventions in the public elementary school system, under the Adopt-A-School Program.

SAS implements the reading program, which has three major components: the teacher training workshop, the read-a-thon, and the culminating activity. In the beginning, teachers from the International School of Manila conducted these workshops. Today, a specialized team of experienced educators and staunch reading advocates, the SAS Master Trainers, facilitate the training.

The Read-A-Thon emphasizes rigor. Schools set aside one hour each day for 31 days for reading, and students attempt to read as many storybooks as they can. Each of the Grade 4 sections in the targeted schools get 60 to 80 storybooks by Filipino authors; a reading chart to track each student's progress; and individual reading passports for each child to enhance and monitor their personal reading comprehension. Each school also receives an Ibong Adarna wall mural, which students adorn with feathers with their name and the title of the book they read -- a fun way to motivate the children to keep the reading habit. Students and teachers who successfully complete the Read-A-Thon are recognized in a "Celebrate Reading" Culminating Activity.

The program has grown phenomenally since 1999: 868 public schools, 24,619 teachers, and one million Filipino students nationwide. SAS has also distributed almost 181,000 children's books. For school year 2011-2012, SAS will be expanding its reach to include an additional 57 schools, 467 teachers, and 20,670 students.

Enhancements have also been introduced. There are post-SAS programs for teachers; support for school principals; planned programs for public pre-school teachers; and soon, an online teacher training program.

SAS teaches us a lot about what sustainability means in the Philippine context -- interventions made effective by the commitment of the people that design and implement these. SAS made a real difference in the lives of many Filipino children who will now be able to open the doors of opportunity, using reading comprehension as their key.

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