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Optimization and Sustainability – An Overview of Reading Promotion by the Hong Kong Public Libraries

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Abstract:

Promotion of reading and literary arts is prescribed as a major objective of the Hong Kong Public Libraries (HKPL), with the aim to actively stimulate the public's interest and incubate reading habits in support of lifelong learning and enlightenment of the cultural life of the community, while for the public library to build an extensive patron base.

Building a lifelong reading habit and interest, as in many other parts of the world, has always been a painstaking task for librarians, teachers and parents. In achieving the objective, we also initiate or organize, in partnership with many other bodies, a wide range of extension activities.

*This paper, while introducing the diverse facets of HKPL's activities in connecting segmented reader groups and promoting community collaboration in raising readers' awareness, focally displays the efforts of the annual **Summer Reading Month**, a signature program of the HKPL system in attracting students to purposeful and leisure reading and encouraging parents to participate in their children's reading activities.*

The "Summer Reading Month" program started in 2002 as a 7-day event offering a display of photogenic story scenes for children. It metamorphoses to a territory-wide yearly event that lasts for a whole month with over 70 programmes, including a thematic exhibition and specially designed family and children activities of workshops, storytelling, competitions, performances and interactive games, attracting a participation of 100,000 audience.

What qualifies the specialty of the event is the linking up of the diversified programmes by means of a specially researched theme, so as to create a festive and pleasant reading

atmosphere that appeals to children and draws parents to impart knowledge from what they have learned from the reading materials to their children. Past themes include the 'Story Kingdom', 'Children Rhymes and Songs', 'A Journey to the Whimsy Kingdom', 'The Bugs' Community' and 'Little Dragon Town'. The process from conceptualization, synthesis to realization has always been challenging, to start only from a broad phrase of a particular subject, then extend to researching in the vast knowledge area, and skimming and picking out interesting, useful and feasible ideas for further development. This I would say is a bitter-sweet experience for our team

We hope to bring and share with you our experience learnt from the process of promoting reading in face of challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The Hong Kong Public Libraries of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department aims to provide free public library services to meet the community's needs for information, lifelong learning, research and the profitable use of leisure, and to promote reading and literary arts in Hong Kong, as well as offering books registration service for local publications.

Promotion of reading and literary arts is prescribed as a major objective of the Hong Kong Public Libraries (HKPL), with the aim to actively stimulate the public's interest and incubate reading habits in support of lifelong learning and for the enlightenment of the cultural life of the community, while for the public library to build an extensive patron base.

In achieving the objective, the HKPL has not only provided a rich and well-balanced collection for people of all walks of life, but also organized extension activities for the public from the 1980's. As its scope and scale expand and in face of the growing awareness to transform the city into an information-based metropolis and facilitating its people to be self-learning advocates, the HKPL progresses to initiate or organize, in partnership with many other bodies, a wide range of extension activities, moving on to promote reading and literary arts extensively.¹

PROMOTION OF READING AND LITERARY ARTS

Extension activities are an integral part of library services and the HKPL continues to organize a balanced mix of activities. Reading programmes are held to cultivate reading habits for children and youths. Regular activities including thematic Book Displays and Exhibitions, Storytelling for Children and subject talks are organized in branch libraries. Territory-wide activities to promote extensive reading, creative writing and appreciation of literary arts in Hong Kong are planned centrally.

These territory-wide programmes are aimed to reaching out targeted segments. To name

some, they are the Reading Programme for Children and Youth, Reading Clubs for Teens and Families, Summer Reading Month, Recommended Good Books Schemes, thematic storytelling programme and performances, Meet-the-Author sessions, reading and creative writing talks and workshops targeted to different reader groups, Monthly Literary Talks and the Hong Kong Literature Festival. Competitions and awards are held to arouse public's awareness and develop young writers, including the Story Writing in Chinese for Students, Awards for Creative Writing in Chinese, Hong Kong Biennial Awards for Chinese Literature and Chinese Poetry Writing Competition. Programmes are also held to tie in with the international World Book Day. Since 2004, creative competitions in various forms such as collage making, bookmark creation, postcard and letter making, book reports, and creative writing based on articles and photos have been introduced and invited active participation from children from five to 18.

Various forms of reading activities are arranged to attract children, students, young people and the public to approach reading in diverse perspectives. During the year 2006-07, a total of 10,648 library activities on reading and literary arts were offered, attracting an attendance of 16.39 million.

PARTNERSHIP

Networking and partnership with the community is an unfailing element to raise community awareness and solicit expert support. Our long and close relationship with cultural and educational organizations, schools, government bodies and media draws their participation and help initiate collaborative spirits in the community for the promotion of reading.

Close liaison with schools and local organisations in the territory's respective districts are maintained through our network of branch libraries. Lending service of library materials to schools and non-profit-making organisations including voluntary agencies serving the disabled, is made available accessibly. Branch libraries also build up a library collection that supports the needs of local communities and schools for the purpose of providing community-based library and block loan services. Apart from these, branch libraries also seek collaboration with other organizations in organizing activities suitable for the youth, elderly, and ethnic minorities in libraries or local organizations so as to introduce a wider range of services to the communities they are serving as well as to help promote the habit of reading.

To further develop the district libraries as community learning and reading centres for their respective districts and to extend library services to various sectors of the local communities, the HKPL introduced the "Libraries@neighbourhood – Community Libraries Partnership Scheme" in December 2005. Under the scheme, community libraries are set up through enhanced collaboration of public libraries and local organizations to provide reading materials to their user groups, through which to promote reading by bringing library services within easy reach of readers from every corner of the local communities. Public librarians give professional advice, if necessary, to the partnering organizations for operation and maintenance of the library stock in the Community Libraries set up in this manner. As at

March 2008, 55 community libraries have been set up serving residents in various districts.

On the territory-wide level, the Education Bureau assists to draw the attention and participation of schools and subject teachers to our dedicated library programmes for students and to promote the 'Library Cards for all School Children' scheme to encourage primary school students to use library services. Regular meetings are held with school librarians to foster mutual understanding and support in maximising library resources on teaching and learning as well as organising reading activities. The HK Teacher-Librarian Association gives feedbacks and advice on the HKPL's provision of services to curriculum support. The HKPL, Radio Television Hong Kong and HK Publishing Federation join hands in the massive call among different public segments to the Hong Kong Book Prize and Hong Kong Reading Month. The HK Arts Development Council joins in the HKPL's writing competitions/awards to encourage creative writing in Chinese and to help groom young writers. It also solicits different art groups in support of the Hong Kong Literature Festival programme. Besides, various reading/literary arts associations and art faculty of tertiary institutions and universities are invited to jointly present with the HKPL in related activities. The HKPL also enriches its reading literary programmes through soliciting the views of its Advisory Panel on Literary Arts.

Directing towards the common goal, various bodies in the community work collaboratively in recent years to extensively raise the reading level and quality of the people in Hong Kong.

THE SUMMER READING MONTH

While reading has been widely promoted as a recreational or educational activity to current readers, guiding users and readers on the choice of reading materials and non-users and non-readers to enjoy books is also an important task. The "Survey on the Reading Habits of Students in Hong Kong" ² conducted by the Education Department among Primary One to Secondary Five students (children aged from 6 to 18 approximately) in December 2001 evidenced three key factors in cultivating the reading interests and habits of school children, namely parents' active participation, easy access to reading materials and creation of a reading atmosphere. The reading habits of children users were also surveyed in the "Public Opinion Survey on Hong Kong Public Libraries", done by the Leisure & Cultural Services Department in 2004.³ Findings showed that children users of libraries read picture books and novels most, though there was still a substantial percentage on reading books of other subjects such as pure science, history, art, language and literature. These findings affirm our continual endeavours to promote purposeful reading among the community.

The annual "**Summer Reading Month**" was initially planned as a one-off programme in the summer of 2002 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the HKPL. A choice of favourite stories of children blended in colourful enlarged props were fabricated to offer a display of photogenic spots for children. Together with a few shows of musical play and cartoon, it was inviting and entertaining for children. Families flocked to the exhibition venue. Feedback collected aftermath was in favour of a longer exhibition period and expansion of programmes. But of greater importance, the call for a wider promotion to appeal to the territory in anticipation of

the perceived impact was prominent.

The Programme

In 2007, the "Summer Reading Month" Programme evolves to a territory-wide annual event that lasts for a whole month, featuring over 70 events that covers an exhibition and children activities of dramas, musical performances, puppet shows, film shows, workshops, storytelling sessions, creative competitions and interactive games to stimulate children's interest in reading.

The programme runs from July to August for about 30 days mainly at the Hong Kong Central Library, with a themed exhibition set up at the Exhibition Gallery and children activities held at the centre stage. Our branch libraries, of course, are not left out. As the programme expands in scale, creative hands-on workshops and interactive storytelling sessions are arranged in branch libraries for children and families to participate. Book exhibitions to coincide with the theme of the year are also put up in libraries. Admission is free for all activities and the programmes attracted a participation of 100,000 in 2007. Media attention has been received not only locally, but also from the Mainland. It is now one of the signature programmes of the HKPL system in attracting children and students to purposeful and leisure reading and encouraging parents to participate in their children's reading activities.

The Theme

The importance of bringing reading to children and arousing the awareness of parents in reading with their children is unmistakable. As a start, we plan the exhibition as a focus of the Summer Reading Month programme that is able to draw the presence of families. To our advantage, the Hong Kong Central Library is physically accessible and 'loaded' with attractive children reading materials.

Stories and songs are evergreens for young children and we started with the 'Story Kingdom' in 2002 and 'Poetry & Rhyme' in 2003. While younger kids are entertained, children receiving primary education are to be taken care. Before we headed on a new direction, we curated the 'Classic Children Stories' in 2004 and the 'Whimsy Kingdom' in 2005. The former brings in a story treasure of classical children literature, legends, mythologies and masterpieces while the latter features selected stories on adventure and fantasy, science fiction and detective stories, fictional characters and introduces the story writers.

To capture the immediate eyesight of children, special settings are designed to shelter the stories under different genres. Like for the "Whimsy Kingdom" in 2005, the *Magical Immigration Point* invites participants to become one of the role-playing citizens in the Kingdom. The *Savage Rainforest* enables children to meet adventurous characters like Tin Tin, Dorothy and Pinocchio. The *Enchanted Castle* brings children to the story world of fantasy. The *Outerspace Mirage* displays works of well-known science fiction writers. The *Weird Wizard's House* is a 'topsy-turvy' house where great detectives reside, and the *Fringe Bazaar* features live performances of children's dramas, puppet show, storytelling and song sessions.

The basics of the exhibition are through researching the vast scope of materials, to introduce children and parents to renowned literature works and recommended quality readings that they are unaware of by presenting interesting parts of the stories, props, games and educational worksheets where they can learn while enjoying the events.

As the programme progresses, we look for an advancement of bringing our readers to a wider range of reading subjects. Presenting non-story elements in an interesting manner poses a difficult task to us. Again, we looked for topics of interest to parents who are the ones bringing in children to the library. In 2006, the topic “Children Growth and Development—The Bugs’ Community” was conceived to demonstrate the important elements in a child’s growth. Aspects in the field of child development such as physical, social and cognitive development under the western field of study and the Chinese understanding of the five pillars of virtues in morals, intellectuals, physique, social abilities and aesthetics are researched, compared, and synthesized in a way to be presented to the eyes of the general public in Hong Kong.

Characters of hardworking bees, chubby little beetles, beauty-loving butterflies and the family of ants are set in the Bugs’ Community Exhibition. The *Busy Bees’ Kindergarten* features picture books on virtues such as patience, confidence, respect, generosity and forgiveness. The *Ladybugs’ Playground* shows information on the importance of exercise and a balanced diet for children. The *Ants’ Sweet Home* gives children a grasp of social skills such as on how to get along with people, proper table manners and greetings. Children also explore the meaning of colours at the *Butterflies’ Studio*, game-play in the area to experience the sense of aesthetics and creativity through picture books and poetry lines introduced. Variety shows are staged at the *Performance Stage*, putting on show harp performances, children musicals, magic and puppet shows. Competitions on dramatization of stories by families basing on the same theme and creative drawing are organized every Wednesday afternoon. The pleasurable *Reading Boat* is a dedicated reading corner we have incorporated since the year to offer a sumptuous collection of library materials on the topic for families and visitors to share the joy of reading at the site.

The planning stage of 2007 programme is a mix of easiness and hardship. In celebration of the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), the theme for the annual Summer Reading Month has been firmed up long ago on Chinese culture that offers a rich and wide source of information. Yet one could imagine the massive workload and difficulty in reading and selecting suitable materials among the diverse facets of this long culture for an exhibition. The exhibition turned out to be information-filled, attractive, with interesting but less-known knowledge, just at a glimpse of the design and zonings. At large, the thematic exhibition “Little Dragon Town – A Chinese Cultural Tour” is designed into an ancient Chinese town for children to probe the rich Chinese culture in a relaxing environment, then further divided into nine different zones to introduce the cultural traditions of Chinese characters, cuisine, costume, architecture, arts and inventions.

Children can find a variety of familiar paraphernalia in the *Market* and *Fabric Store*. From the four great inventions of ancient China to appetizing Tofu, powder for make-up, wooden thongs, straw hat, chopsticks, soy sauce, noodles, decorative hairpins, clasps and objects

that may seem mundane but in fact full of rich Chinese cultural heritage in everyday living. Apart from the innumerable familiar objects, legendary figures including the military strategist, sage of tea, eminent calligrapher, literary master, forefather of medicine and the first emperor from Chinese history are gathered inside the *Tea Shop*, inviting children to sip a cup of tea alongside those historical tales. After enjoying a cup of vintage tea, visitors are welcome to navigate through the river of history to the *Surname Palace* to find out the origin of popular Chinese family names. Taking a break, variety shows with distinctive Chinese cultural elements wait at the *Main Stage*. In another corner, the treasure-trove in the *Pavilion*, which is set in evocatively appointed garden landscaped grounds constructed in traditional style, put audio-visual programmes on Chinese customs and ancient Chinese invention and technologies on show. The *Dragon Gate Chess Plan* waits for interested players to challenge out their skills in commanding generals and soldiers, to see if they can solve the three most famous endgames in the history of Chinese chess. Lastly, a mound of ancient Chinese characters from three thousand years ago hidden inside the *Dragon Cave* waits to be re-discovered. Not to be missed is the *Little Dragon House of Books – Traditional Chinese Study* built in the distinctive Chinese architectural style of a quadrangle residence, where parents and children can enjoy a pleasurable reading experience through the selections of our librarians.

The Activities

Variety shows and creative competitions are planned and organized every year to go along with, in attracting people to the exhibition. While there may be variations in the form of performances, the contents and theme of these shows are framed within the thematic exhibition. For instance, stories on virtues are adopted in puppet shows, plays and storytelling sessions. Workshops on speech delivery, multi-intelligence workshops for families are arranged in the Programme themed on children growth and development. Activities on Chinese culture such as mask-changing, er-hu musical shows are planned in 2007. ⁴ Educational worksheets are prepared in supplement, to heighten the interest of students in looking up for information from the exhibition panels and books. Guided group visits from schools are also arranged for illustration.

The purpose of these activities is to arouse the interest of children and parents for a further urge of looking up for related information from the library materials. Library staff on site are frequented with enquiries from parents on further readings.

Reading is closely related to a child's development, thinking and creativity, and essential to literacy and information seeking. Subject talks on reading are musts in recent years, for parents, workers, teachers, child and education workers. Experts in the field are invited to speak on reading strategies and skills, reading and learning, paired reading with children, and children literature, with demonstration on skills in particular.

The Promotion

The Summer Reading Month is promoted through various channels, at a minimal cost due to

budget limitation. Print and electronic means are employed to include posters, leaflets and programme booklets for distribution in branch libraries, schools, bookshops, cultural and leisure venues of the Department, cultural organizations and District Council Offices. Promotion is also made via the HKPL homepage, HKPL newsletter, monthly program sheets, e-news, e-magazine, and dissemination of message through branch librarians to schools and teachers and composite advertisements of the HKPL. Other free electronic means in the territory are sourced as far as possible, such as the HKSAR e-channels and portals of relevant outside community bodies. Where budget permits in the year, paid advertorials on newspapers and MTR are arranged.

The Effect

Evaluation is done throughout the programme period and after the events, to monitor the response of the public and the performance of individual programme as well as the effectiveness on the whole. This is done qualitatively through feedback collected from questionnaires, participants of events, colleagues from branch libraries and the team, seniors etc., media responses and review meetings, as well as quantitatively, assessing the attendance rate and cost benefits of the programmes.

To encourage parents' participation of their children activities and further pursue the subject with their children, suggested resource guides including booklist and non-print collection as well as databases and sources online, targeted separately for children and adults are produced for distribution. Related book exhibitions on the subject are also organised for the public. The popularity and user-friendliness of web tools allow us upload the researched exhibition in an attractive format onto the HKPL homepage for public reference when it ends.
⁵⁻⁷ Suggested readings and sources of information referred are also incorporated for further browsing.

The designed setting and activities of the Summer Reading are book related, aiming to offer an attractive and stimulating context where the participants can experience the flow of information on the subject while the knowledge is being 'fed'. To a certain extent, the Summer Reading Month has succeeded in attracting a large group of audience each year. It has also provided us a novel perspective in steering the reading interest of our readers and bringing in new readership. However, I would see that there are still areas that we should ponder on for further improvement, much as we do in the presentation of current extension activities in promotion of reading and literary arts.

SUSTAINABILITY

While we fully support reading promotion to start from children and youths as a cornerstone of the HKPL, we are aware of the hurdles that lie in the way.

In the experience of Hong Kong, children and young people are richly informed from various media. Schools also take part in many types of reading activities for curricular and

extra-curricular needs. Children and students are therefore mostly occupied in numerous activities other than reading, not to say reading serious literature. Besides, there are both external and internal competitions from other media forms like the Internet, TV and other art forms, which are also targeting the same student group for focal promotion, picking up hard and fast. Another competition comes from bookshops which promote bestselling items timely.

How far can the attractions brought by programmes like the Summer Reading Month linger? Where are we to identify new user groups and find new readers? What should we do to attract non-reader groups to libraries? How are we to sustain the use of public libraries and its resources?

These questions are universal. Though there may not be final solutions, there are still many opportunities open up to us in the profession of organizing extension activities. For the programmes of HKPL specially designed for children, students and youths, efforts is now in hand to solidify the work of promoting purposeful reading and appreciation of local literature. Reading clubs and storytelling programmes are now held in smaller groups and refined in contents, asking for more interaction, discussion and thoughts. Meet-the-author sessions are put up thematically to attract audience groups not only of students, but also working youths and adults. Special programmes for the elderly group are held with NGOs and suitable library materials are introduced. An English element in the promotion of literary arts is brought into our programming of the year to promote literary arts in English, apart from standing out the establishment and significance of Hong Kong's international literary credentials, and also on the look for new reader groups. As we see, contents and suitable promotion of programmes are crucial. Where interesting and up-to-date topics should be identified, it is a must that the activities are channeled to the right targets.

THE WAY FORWARD

In looking ahead, the HKPL will continue initiating more community involvement, extending partnership with outside bodies and opening up more channels for exchange of ideas in promoting both extensive and purposeful reading and appreciation of literature by bringing library services to the community. Continual collaboration with community organisations to attract wide awareness of the community will render our library services more responsive to community needs, achieve a greater degree of cost-effectiveness with a larger pool of resources, and help build a broader reader spectrum.

Through the scheme of involving District Councils (DCs) in the management of libraries from January 2008, branch libraries can introduce a wider range of services to the communities they serve that helps promote the habit of reading. A 'Public Libraries Advisory Committee' has also been set up in May 2008, specifically tasked on how best the HKPL can fulfill the broad "cultural" dimension (as opposed to the "local community services" dimension being met with DCs' participation in public libraries) of its mission through the Hong Kong Central Library.

Whilst we are committed extensively to the promotion of reading and literary arts, we consider

it important to further enhance its efforts in this respect. As community involvement is essential for the development of the library system, we shall pursue community partnership in a more proactive manner.

Notes

1. In 2007 on the organization of extension activities, the HKPL records a total of 18,522 no. of events held, attracting a total attendance of 17.0 million.
2. Education Department, HKSAR. *Survey on the Reading Habits of Students in Hong Kong*. Dec 2001. http://www.edb.gov.hk/filemanager/en/content_691/p0102e.PDF
3. Leisure & Cultural Services Department, HKSAR. *Public Opinion Survey on Hong Kong Public Libraries*. 2004.
4. An example of programmes in the Summer Reading Month, in 2007.

Exhibition : Thematic Exhibition for Children: Little Dragon Town – A Chinese Cultural Tour
小龍鎮 - 中國文化遊

Contest : Contest on Dramatization of Chinese Stories for Family 親子中國故事演繹比賽
Contest on Talents of Chinese Culture 中華才藝表演比賽

Storytelling : Chinese Puppet & Shadow Art Story Show 中國戲偶劇場小木偶說故事
Language Learning through Storytelling: Amazing China 講故事學語言：妙趣中華停看聽
The Modern Tea House Story Show 《摩登茶樓》故事劇場
Disney Reading Together 迪士尼故事分享時間

Variety Shows : Finale Performance of Chinese Lion & Lion Dancing Youth Workshop 第六屆 IDEA 世界會議 2007
《吉祥醒獅》總結演出
Chinese Magic Show 中國幻術
Fun with the Percussion Music 鼓舞飛揚樂繽紛
Sing to the World 得把聲唱好環保
Children Cantonese Opera 兒童粵劇 ABC
New Vision on ErHu Arts 二胡音樂新視野
Chinese Dance Performance 夏日跳躍的音符
Mask Changing Arts of Sichuan 川劇變臉
Chinese Vaudeville Show 中國孖寶小丑雜耍

Workshops : Fun with Origami 齊來學摺紙
Origami Workshop for Children & Parents 中國摺紙工作坊
Paper Cutting Workshop for Children & Parents 中國剪紙工作坊
Chinese Knots Tying Workshop for Children & Parents 親子中國繩結工作坊
Chinese Shadow Puppet Workshop for Children & Parents 親子中國皮影偶創作坊

Reading Talks : Paired Reading Talk: Warm Family Built in Paired Reading 親子閱讀講座：溫馨家庭在共讀. Hosted by Auntie Choi (an enthusiastic promoter of paired reading) 葉姨姨 (親子閱讀工作者). Target: Parents & teachers
Meet-the-Author Session 與作家會面：寫在生活邊上. Hosted by Ms Ho How-sim (Author of Children's Literature) 何巧嫻女士 (兒童文學作家). Target: Students

Book Book Exhibition for Adults: Chinese Culture of 5000 Years 「中華文化五千年」書籍介紹

Exhibition : Book Exhibition for Children: Know More about Chinese Culture 兒童書籍介紹：「中華文化知多少」

AV [Wonders & Wonders] 中國發明多面體： Cartoon to bring in stories on ancient Chinese inventions and technologies in the past – gunpowder, earthquake, printing, papermaking, compass, astrology, time and calendar, communications, computing equipment, ceramics, architecture, medicine, food.
Programmes
Express : [A hundred years under the Peak] 百載鑪峰： A reproduction of a new series from the old one and updates to catch glimpses of the history and development of Hong Kong – the boat people, postal service, the years of comic books, martial arts, food and cuisines, archeological sites, matrimonial stuff, etc.
[Cultural Moments] 吉光片羽： a production in 1981-85 on the traditional customs and business occupations of the old HK – Chinese characters and calligraphy, cloth puppets, shadow puppet making, drawings for children, prosperous scrolls, the story of Nin, the making of lion heads, Chinese tea, etc.

5. *A Journey to the Whimsy Kingdom.* <http://www.hkpl.gov.hk/misc/castle/index.html>
6. *Children Growth and Development – The Bugs' Community.* <http://www.hkpl.gov.hk/misc/bugs/>
7. *Little Dragon Town – A Chinese Cultural Tour.* <http://www.hkpl.gov.hk/EA/dragon/index.html>