

The Reading Challenge: Now it's the Ministries of Education Turn!

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The Reading Challenge initiative brought forth by H.H. Sh. Mohammad Bin Rashed Al Maktoum has had a breathtaking effect on energizing the act of reading in the Arab world. No literacy related initiative has ever been as ambitious or as successful in this region before.

Having initially set its eye on having a million Arab children read 50 books each a year, the Reading Challenge was something that went beyond imagination for several reasons including: 1) Millions of children around the Arab world do not have access to books and they do they are not good quality books; 2) Public schools in the Arab world do not engage students in authentic children's literature reading and thus, many students have not reached a level of reading fluency that would enable them to read well and comprehend; 3) Reading for fun as an indirect medium to acquire knowledge has not been a staple in the Arabic language literacy arena.

However, despite the challenges above and the difficulties, the Reading Challenge was a smashing success with 3.5 million students from 21 countries taking part in it, reading 150 million books. This unprecedented phenomenon should be closely studied by literacy researchers. In addition, ministries of education and schools all over the Arab world should pay attention to how this one formidable initiative was able to move a whole generation into reading.

The Reading Challenge initiative as wonderful, daring, generous, breathtakingly fresh and smart has been, will not be enough to awaken all the dinosauric ministries around the Arab world that have mostly been neglecting the importance of reading. Even when ministries acknowledge the importance of reading, they have not been successful in making it the focal point of all learning in public schools. Unless ministries of education make reading in all of its forms (reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading and independent reading) a significant part of the daily school routine, we will continue to produce generations of non-readers. All it takes to resolve many of the literacy issues in Arabic language is to make reading part of the

curriculum and an essential part of every day school routines. Reading fun and authentic Arabic books instead of stale and contrived snippety texts in current textbooks is what is needed and is the international best practice that thousands of studies have shown the effectiveness of.

The unprecedented success of the Reading Challenge should be enough proof and evidence to bring forth a revolution in how we teach reading in our schools. We need to teach reading by engaging kids in reading and by ensuring that the budget goes to equipping the classrooms with wonderful children's literature titles.

Ministries of Education strategic plans, 10-year policies and budgets should all be fundamentally reconfigured to spend less on technology, for example, that has not yet been proven to enhance learning in Arabic language classrooms, spend less funds on outdated textbooks and ineffective consulting companies, and spend more on buying beautiful and engaging children's literature, on designing little reading nooks in every classroom and on training the teachers on how to teach using authentic Arabic literature. Children will learn about science, technology, mathematics, humanities, social studies and citizenship when they read great and interesting books on those topics. We need now to choose the drivers that best serve the needs of our children, our future and our countries and there is no best driver to choose that to become a nation of readers. The Reading Challenge proved that there is a great interest in becoming a nation of readers. Shouldn't all ministries of education now and immediately follow in its steps to make that their number one priority?