Title: Empowering your students in the new normal: Tools to inspire a meaningful classroom experience

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Introduction

2020-2021 has been a very special year. All students were put out of their schools for some months amid the Coronavirus pandemic, with most of them resorting to online learning at home. Since many schools, including SKH St. Peter's, did not have a 'digital curriculum' in place for an unprecedented event like this - a global pandemic, they were scraping together various approaches of online learning that are still evolving as the situation changes.

"As the educational landscape shifts and changes, the tools that teachers and students use both inside and outside of the classroom must also change. Although most teachers were taught with traditional tools – books, paper and pencils – students today are embracing a new set of tools for communicating, collaborating, sharing and learning. It's crucial that educators, even those who do not consider themselves tech-savvy, build their own technology toolboxes. If teachers do not incorporate the tools students rely on outside of school into the classroom, students will find the work they do in school increasingly disconnected and irrelevant to their lives."

Tucker, Wycoff, & Green (2017). P.48

With the growing number of our primary students with devices and access to the internet, it means students have access to limitless amount of information, applications and online resources. We have to ask ourselves **what are meaningful and of value to teach our youngsters these days.**

Building on the strengths of **SKH St. Peter's** successful experiences in promoting Reading to Learn over the past ten years through cultivating a whole-school reading atmosphere and fostering students' reading interests and habits, **teachers have attached more importance to Reading across the**

Curriculum (RaC) this year. They believe a step towards RaC can help students connect their learning experiences and further improve their reading abilities. Students with these learning experiences are better equipped to meet the academic demands at the secondary level.

"RaC provides opportunities for students to broaden their knowledge base, as well as applying and consolidating reading skills developed in language lessons. English teachers can integrate RaC into their school's English Language curriculum to help students establish meaningful links between language features and concepts acquired across different KLAs. English teachers can identify suitable reading materials (e.g. information texts with topics related to non-language subjects) to connect students' learning experiences and draw students' attention to the subject-specific language features (e.g. text structures, rhetorical functions and language items in academic texts) through explicit teaching of learning strategies and supporting students' reading skills development."

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Curriculum Development Institute (2020). P.5

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Our collaboration

With an increasing awareness of the potential contribution of some online learning modes and resources to support traditional face-to-face learning, more teachers have been partaking in using online reading and writing platforms to teach their students, and SKH St. Peter's Primary School is one of them.

During the past two years, a core group has been formed with seven well-experienced teachers including the PSMCD, the English panel and the vice panel. We devised reading strategies and lesson ideas together. Co-planning meetings of different levels P.1-6 were conducted during the terms to realize the reading programme and to ensure a holistic development of all language skills in both KS1 and KS2 school-based English Language curriculum.

Challenges - Class suspension period

Like many schools, SKH St. Peter's does not have a 'Zoom programme' in place. With this sudden shift away from the classroom, we seem to be asking teachers to make big leaps; to dramatically adjust their practices; to incorporate new tools; and to reimagine what learning and teaching looks like during class suspension period. They have no specific online curriculum, so they are cobbling

together their own solutions using a myriad of platforms and apps, from PowerLessons to Google Classroom. They made use of Zoom classes and shared drives, emails, calendars, WhatsApp and WeChat to correspond and maintain their students' online school lives.

The questions that keep teachers reflecting on are: *How can we help students connect their life experiences, add values, widen their horizons and improve their reading abilities continuously through Reading across the Curriculum – to be done in an online environment? How can we make good use of our communication channel with students to promote both RaC and the effective use of technology so that students can read wherever & whenever they can?* We need to make the most of digital media, which provides students with a vast amount of information and resources, and teach students information literacy for effective learning during class suspension time.

Curriculum Development

Our aims and objectives

We hope to empower students to design and create their learning experiences with the help of teachers in setting goals, seek valuable resources and create their learning outcomes. The school has adopted some effective means to support students during class suspension, for example, assignments and learning materials are distributed to students via online platform and by emails. We hope to achieve the following aims and objectives:

- ✧ Help students make connections between learning and daily life experiences, and social and global issues
- ✧ Expose students to multimodal representations such as web pages, digital stories, interactive stories, animation, and films which are real and authentic
- ✧ Develop reading skills and strategies that could hook students' interest in reading and enhance their overall reading abilities
- ✧ Empower students through giving them VOICE – let them actively contribute their ideas in both face-to-face as well as online classes

Quality Zoom classes were conducted on various topics like **Houses and Homes Around the World (P.1), Amazing Animals (P.2), Green Christmas (P.3), and on fictional readers like Matilda (P.4) and Narnia (P.6)** for enhancing students' English literacy. Apart from expanding students'

knowledge and horizons, the more important objective teachers wish to achieve is to add values to students' lives.

Values and Attitudes

"Values are explicit or implicit belief systems that students develop, which guide their conduct and decision making, while attitudes are personal dispositions towards particular issues. They are qualities that an individual or society considers important as principles for conduct and are intrinsically worthwhile."

The Curriculum Development Council. (2017) P.25

To help SKH St. Peter's students become informed and responsible citizens, the school wishes to promote values and attitudes such as **family love, respect for nature, environmental protection, global responsibility, personal integrity and care for others,** and infuse them into the school-based English Language curriculum. This is manifested in the themes: Houses and Homes Around the World, Amazing Animals, Green Christmas, and on fictional readers like Matilda and Narnia students learned this year.

Connecting RaC to the World, Life & Moral issues

Through reading across the curriculum, students can enrich their knowledge and broaden their perspectives. With the help of technology, students can access information from around the world conveniently. They can read both printed and electronic reading materials to widen their horizons and know more about global issues. Connecting students' reading experiences to the world stimulates their thinking and helps them gain insights into the dynamics of the world, life and moral issues.

Level. P.1
Topic. Houses and Homes Around the World

The learning tasks are related to a unit in the textbook named ***Home sweet home*** - a page in the book mentioned the houseboats where some of the Dutch live in. This has triggered teachers' thought for

designing the series of learning tasks related to houses and homes. Teachers wish to broaden students' horizons - let students know how some houses around the world are like and expose them to different multimodal texts as well. And, most importantly, **values education** – it is not about how big the house is, it is about how loving and happy the home is. See figure 1. During the Zoom class on 'Houses and Homes', P.1 students were encouraged to talk about what houses they liked. They gave some interesting ideas.

Figure 1: Students read some e-readers and discussed with the teacher in the Zoom class.

Main teaching activities:

P.1 teachers make use of two nonfiction e-books from an online reading platform. They are informational texts. The vocabulary, sentence patterns and sentence length suit the P.1 students' reading level.

Large-size photos of the e-books support students' learning especially the lower ability students' understanding of the text. During the course of teaching, students learned about different types of houses. Teachers encouraged students to give responses in Zoom classes - to express themselves

freely, to be active learners, and to learn not just from teachers, but from their peers. In Zoom environment, students were asked to unmute themselves during the lessons and try their best to speak up. The different voices in the lessons kept stimulating students' little brains.

The second task for the students to do is a mini book report about the kind of house they wish to live in. They need to write about their choice, the reason and what they would do if they were to live in the house.

All teachers wanted was to let students enjoy and have fun doing the task. The fun parts came from the choices of students where they could express their creativity by drawing and imagining about the situation where they could do what they liked doing in there.

After finishing the book report, students were to post their work on an online platform where they could read and comment on the work of their peers there. See figure 2. A student wrote, *"If I live in this house, I will eat a lot of seafood."* See how he drew the sea animals and his houseboat in detail!
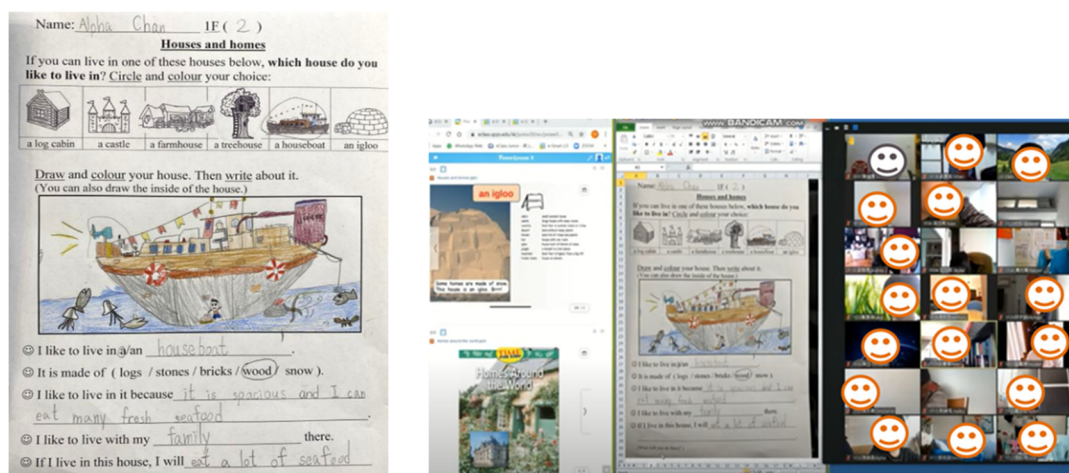
Figure 2: Sample student work discussed in the Zoom class.

One of the teachers did a simple survey (See figure 3) using Excel about the choices of houses the class had made. Half of the students chose to live in a castle but none of them chose to live in a farmhouse. The teacher discussed with her students why farmhouse was not their choice. The children had different ideas – some said the animals were noisy and others said the place was not clean enough. The Excel file shows most P.1 students like to live in castles while no one likes to live in farmhouses. Teachers let them express their views in a Zoom class.
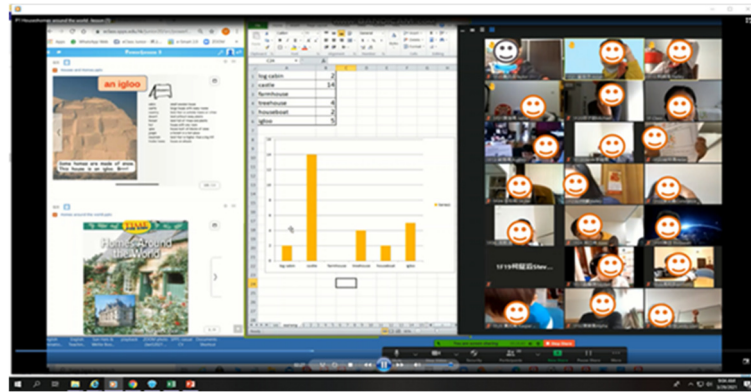
Figure 3: Teacher used a survey tool to arouse interests in the Zoom class.

Teachers shared students' writing work in the Zoom classes and taught them to appreciate one another's work and to learn from their peers. Teachers really appreciated their efforts in preparing the reports and illustrating their designs. The work showed their positive learning attitudes. Many of the students were eager to show their work to the class. Students of different abilities were invited to read aloud their work.
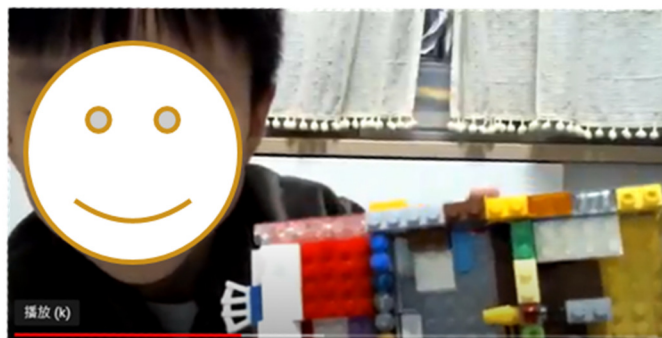

Figure 4: A boy brought us a surprise -
He actually made a model for his design of a useful houseboat using Lego!

The boy shown above is normally quiet in the classroom (see figure 4). But during the Zoom lesson, he wanted to show his work to the class! Teachers were glad that he tried his best to engage in the task. Teachers reflected that they really needed to give more chances and encouragement to the quieter ones. They have equal chances to shine.

After the presentation, teachers brought up a discussion with the students - whether living in a castle was a very good choice. It is all about values education. Teachers let them think deeper what was

good and not good about living in a castle. P.1 students came up with ideas like, "it would not be easy to find parents in a castle / it took a long time to clean up / it might be scary at night…". At the end of the lesson, they made a conclusion that the size of the house does not necessarily mean happiness, it is the love among family members that makes the house the best one! The children were reminded to love their home and family always.

Towards the end of the lesson, more choices of houses were introduced to the class. They browsed through websites and watched video clips about the ten most amazing tree houses, and how some people lived out their dreams by making a plane house or a bus house etc.. By doing so, teachers further broadened students' horizons.

Level. P.2
Topic. Amazing Animals

The daily conversation with students, teacher counterparts and the school librarian has informed teachers that the majority of younger students would naturally opt for fiction over non-fiction as they find the language easier to understand and pictures are more appealing. Students need emotional attachment to feel connected with the story.

However, apart from stories, nonfiction readers could help students develop knowledge of their environment and society, and possibly widen their horizons, which are crucial in later growth and language development. It is also important to equip young students nowadays with simple researching skills. A mini task is thus designed for P.2 students to research an animal in this module. Students read non-fiction texts about their chosen animal and produce riddles using the facts from the texts. Teachers start off with the following objectives:
   ✧ To let students learn to explore different areas and apply their reading skills to acquire different types of content knowledge
   ✧ To help students expand their vocabulary and understanding, build up their knowledge, enhance their creativity and develop positive values

Main teaching activities

Students approached the topic with so much interest, a sense of wonder, and a strong drive to learn more. Teachers never expected P.2 students to be so motivated to find facts from nonfiction texts.

Reading digital books helped to open up their minds. They felt like animal experts when they learned various facts like sharks can swim at the speed of 8 to 19 kilometres per hour! See figure 5.
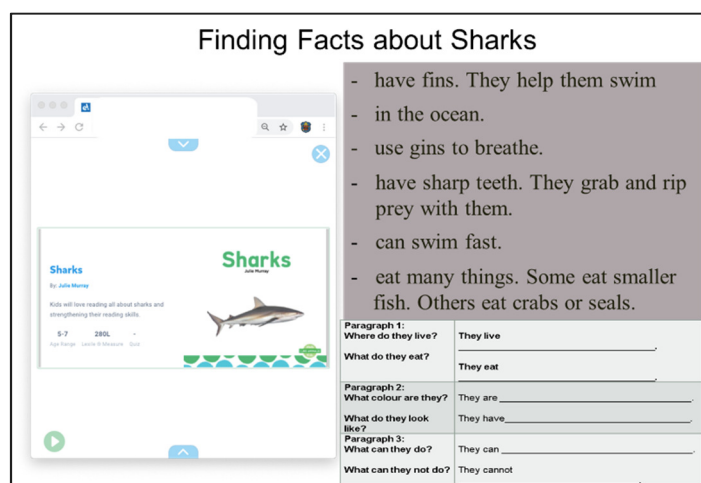
Figure 5: P.2 students learn to find facts about sharks from the e-books.

They then wrote riddles about their favourite animals. Teachers know that kids love hearing riddles and trying to figure out the answers to the riddles. Riddles can be thought-provoking and funny brain busters. It is like a puzzle that one is trying to solve. Some of the best riddles get students' mind thinking. See figure 6. P.2 students wrote riddles about their favourite animals. They could write from the smallest hint to the biggest hint with teachers' scaffolding.
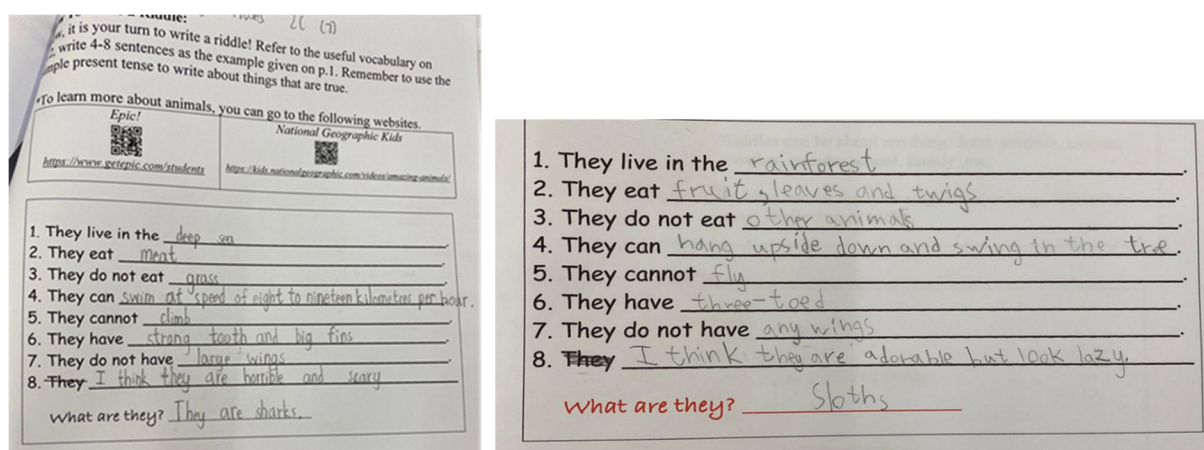
Figure 6: Two sample student riddles.

In order to guide students to research, the first thing is to equip them with the best tool. Teachers carefully select an online reading platform which contains high-quality books, learning videos, reading quizzes and read-along books.

To ensure students are equipped with research skills, a class demonstration is essential. Teachers design a handout with a step-by-step method to walk students through each step. There is a special function called 'Read to me" which allows less-able students to listen while they read. Students learn to search for books which are appropriate to their age level. They can adjust the level of difficulty to suit their needs.

Other scaffolding strategies teachers find useful are providing a list of vocabulary, guiding questions and a sample passage. See figure 7.

Figure 7: A list of vocabulary and guiding questions provided for students.

Students then move onto starting their own information report. Demonstration and modelling for students is a cornerstone for each stage. Teachers always show an example with guiding questions from the criteria chart before students begin the task. See figure 8.

Figure 8: Sample information report provided to students about ostriches.

Upon students finishing their reports, they were required to present their work (See figure 9). With all the diverse learners in the classroom, there is a strong need for teachers to differentiate the task requirement. Some students read it to their parents. Others recorded a video for their teachers. No one student needs to be the same, therefore, it is important to have different expectations within the class and across the classes.

Figure 9: Sample students' work about their favourite animals with interesting details. .

One of the video recordings of a student's presentation about an animal- **the Wolf Eel** really surprises teachers. Every class has a few shy students and the student in the video is definitely one of them. He lacks confidence to speak in class but he is a different person when presenting in front of the camera. Teachers observed that this little boy was able to overcome the anxiety which he had in front of his classmates. He told the teachers once that he had practiced multiple times and insisted on shooting the same scene until he felt satisfied with his work. See figure 10.

Figure 10: A little boy's work about Wolf Eel surprises teachers!

Through promoting Reading across the Curriculum, P.2 students' horizons have been widened and their potentials have been unlocked. We need creative and critical thinkers in the 21st century. Let us unlock our students' precious stories from the closet!

While reading fiction is a great way to develop children's imagination and creativity, it is nonfiction that sparks that curiosity and opens up their minds to the world!

Level. P.3
Topic. Green Christmas

If you are looking for some inspiration on how to make this Christmas eco-friendly, this session may be useful to you.

It is that time of year again. The shops are filled with decorations and window displays while families are planning to get together for their annual feast on Christmas Day. But it is not all presents and

Christmas puddings. The flip side to the festive season is way too much waste, which of course is detrimental to the environment. From limiting packaging and picking sustainable Christmas gifts to making a Christmas tree using recyclable materials, there are so many ways to have a green Christmas.

Main teaching activities

P.3 teachers motivated students by asking this question, "*Do you think wrapping paper can be recycled?*" For empowerment to emerge, one needs to think critically. Students had learnt from their textbook that wrapping paper could be recycled. Teachers challenged the textbook knowledge and their taken-for-granted assumption by asking *'Can you really recycle wrapping paper?' 'Is that really true?'* Teachers posed these questions in an attempt to pique their curiosity and prompt them to think from a new angle.

Teachers also think empowerment is about **'connecting with the community'**. It is important to situate lesson discussion in a real and authentic context. This is to give students a concrete base for discussion. During the course of Zoom lesson, teachers showed students a news clip. In the video, there were figures and examples about waste produced in Christmas in the US. Students were surprised by the numbers and started suggesting possible causes. Teachers set the scene of the lesson by showing this news clip and proposing an issue: large amount of waste is often produced around Christmas.

Here by showing multimodal texts, such as pictures and videos, teachers introduced new English words that were tied with their knowledge about the festival.

According to teachers, being creative is also a key to facilitating student empowerment. It is not just students have to be creative, teachers have to be creative as well when it comes to learning and assessment. After showing the video, teachers then asked students a reflective question, 'What can we do to have a 'green' Christmas?' Before showing them real world examples, teachers elicited some ideas from them to activate their schemata. They gave examples like giving away toys they do not play anymore to others or avoiding buying gifts online. This was to set up creative tasks that they needed to work on after the lesson.

This was where the student side of 'empowerment' came in place. For the post-lesson assessment, teachers asked students to work on one of the two creative tasks: making a **green Christmas tree** or making a **green advent calendar**. They would use recyclable materials to make them.

Teachers took the concept of advent calendar and asked them to create a green advent calendar by writing what green activities they 'plan to' do before Christmas. They were actually excited when they knew they would not need to write an essay or do a reading task on the theme.

This is the task sheet (see figure 11) teachers gave students to work on:

My·Green·Advent·Calendar

Name: 3D·(· · ·)

In·each·box,·use·one·sentence·('I·plan·to...')·to·describe·what·you·plan·to·do·that·day·
to·celebrate·a·green·Christmas.·Feel·free·to·add·photos·and·colours!
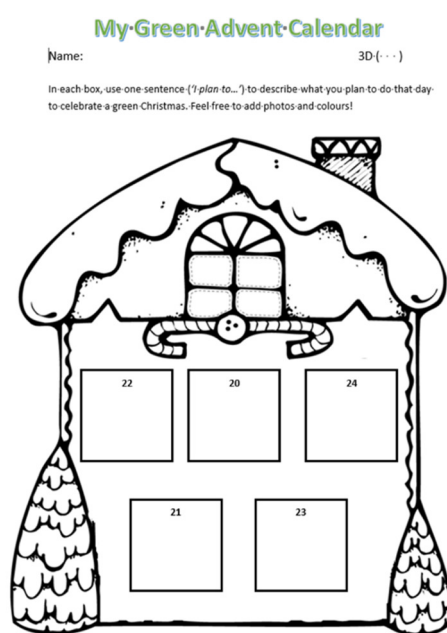
Figure 11: A green e-advent calendar

Empowerment is closely related to personal experiences. After watching the news clip, the students were asked to evaluate their practice, whether they would still use wrapping paper at Christmas anymore.

Here is a snippet of the lesson where one of the students responded to this question. See figure 12. Students gave their views on why they would not use wrapping paper.
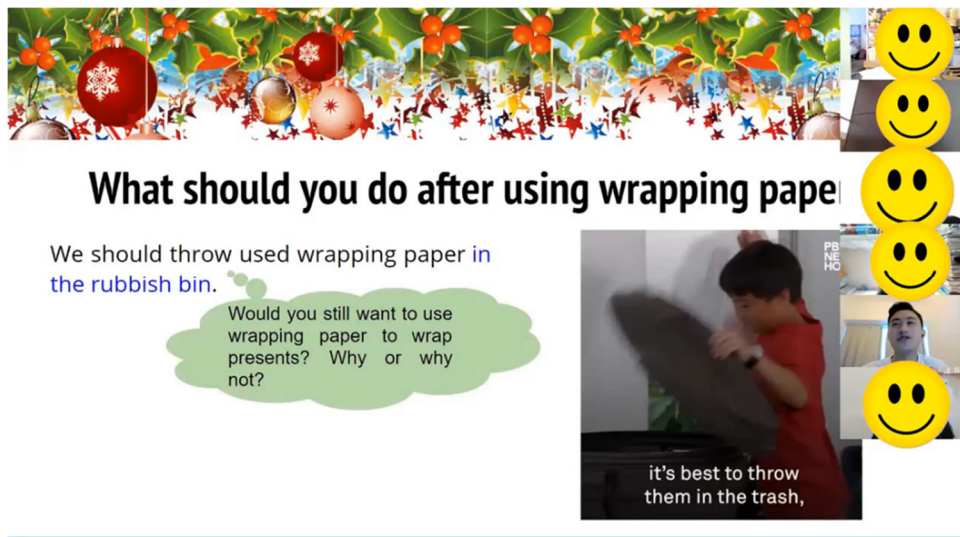
Figure 12: Teacher and students' discussion why they would not use wrapping paper over Zoom.

Teachers guided them to brainstorm the pros and cons of using wrapping paper. Evaluation is a critical lens which learners use to assess taken-for-granted assumptions, which is arguably a starting point for making changes to their practices, according to teachers.

Teachers shared a presentation made by a student who made a Christmas tree at home using recyclable materials. See figure 13.

Figure 13: A presentation made by a student who made a Christmas tree at home using recyclable materials

This P.3 student drew upon what he learnt from the lesson, described the materials and steps to make his own green Christmas tree. He was proud of making this and placing this at home last Christmas and showing it to his relatives.

Another student opted for the second task and created a green advent calendar. See figure 14. He was very smart as he used the word processing skills from IT lessons to create this stunning artwork. More importantly, it is paperless!
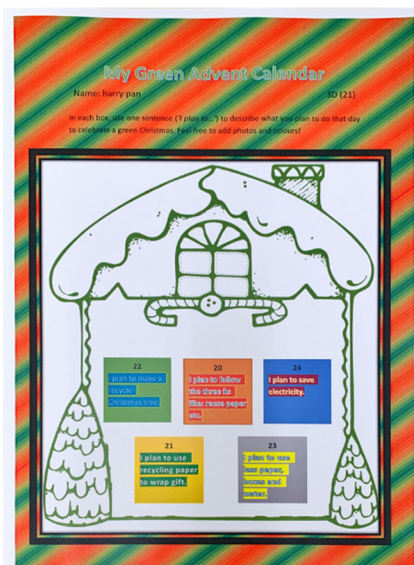
Figure 14: A green e-advent calendar was emailed to his teacher.

Teachers provided students with a platform and guided them to think critically about an issue that was related to their personal experiences. They explored the issue and reflected on their practices. They then showcased their reflections in a creative way.

Creative tasks give students opportunities to think outside the box and use their imagination to present their thoughts on the issue. Every student has their own way to make their voice heard, to express their thoughts on the issue and, their actions at their own will, such as drawing a poster, creating a comic strip and making a short video. This is to meet the needs of diverse learners in the classroom.

Through reflecting on their values and practices, students make positive changes to themselves and to the community. In terms of the subject, we aim to equip our students with English language and critical thinking, one of the 21st century skills, so that they have the capacity to engage in different learning opportunities, be they cross-subject projects with General Studies or Reading across the Curriculum. Ultimately, we want to nurture our students to become informed and responsible citizens in the increasingly globalized world.

Level. P.4, 6

Topic. Matilda & Narnia

A novel is worth reading and teaching if it is a classic which continues to be relevant to   students nowadays. Two classic stories were chosen by the English Panel:

P.4: Matilda by Roald Dahl

P.6: The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis

The story plot, setting, dialogue and conflicts inside the stories are interesting. Not only do they speak to students' interests, concerns and social issues, but also contain some universal themes like **Parenting, Friendship, Integrity, Good vs Evil** etc., which can be integrated into everyday school-based curriculum especially when we wish to impart more values and moral education to our youngsters.

The primary school years mark a time of tremendous growth in literacy skills, making reading activities a crucial part of the school day. Through engaging in purposeful and meaningful reading, the supporter encouraged teachers to extend ideas beyond texts to discuss life and moral issues when they taught the stories to students.

Learning and enhancing language across different disciplines and improving reading abilities and personal qualities have always been important for primary students.

Two Reader Booklets together with reading skills as learning outcomes, lesson plans, e-resources and other teaching materials were developed by the core team.

Main teaching activities

P4: Matilda by Roald Dahl

The main theme of Matilda is: **kindness, and thoughtfulness are far superior forms of power to cruelty, bullying and self-centeredness.** The book has an ending of good triumphing over evil. Matilda is about an extraordinary young girl. Despite having a family who doesn't care about her, Matilda's brilliance, charm, and special powers keep readers supporting her from beginning to end.

This is a good opportunity for primary students to think and to analyze the family characters in the story and the theme on **parenting.**

Parenting

Teacher asked students' views on *'Ideal family'* during the course on teaching. Questions were explored: *Is family important? Why or why not? What's your ideal parent like? Is revenge necessary? Why or why not? Is it possible for a child to make a big difference?* Students brainstormed the ideas in groups and presented them in class. Videos captured that they did have a view of their own about **ideal parents**. For instance, *a student expressed that he would like to have a careful mother. This was because she could remind him when there was danger around. And, she would be open-minded so that when he asked her for something, she always gave permission.* See figure 15. Students brainstormed the ideas on parenting in groups and presented them in class. Students had interesting ideas about what they thought were 'good parents'.

Figure 15: Students discussed in class about their ideal parents.

Being a Child Genius

Matilda herself was a genius and she could read every book in the library, and could do complicated Math at a very young age. This is a good opportunity for students to discuss about the **merits and demerits of becoming a child genius.**
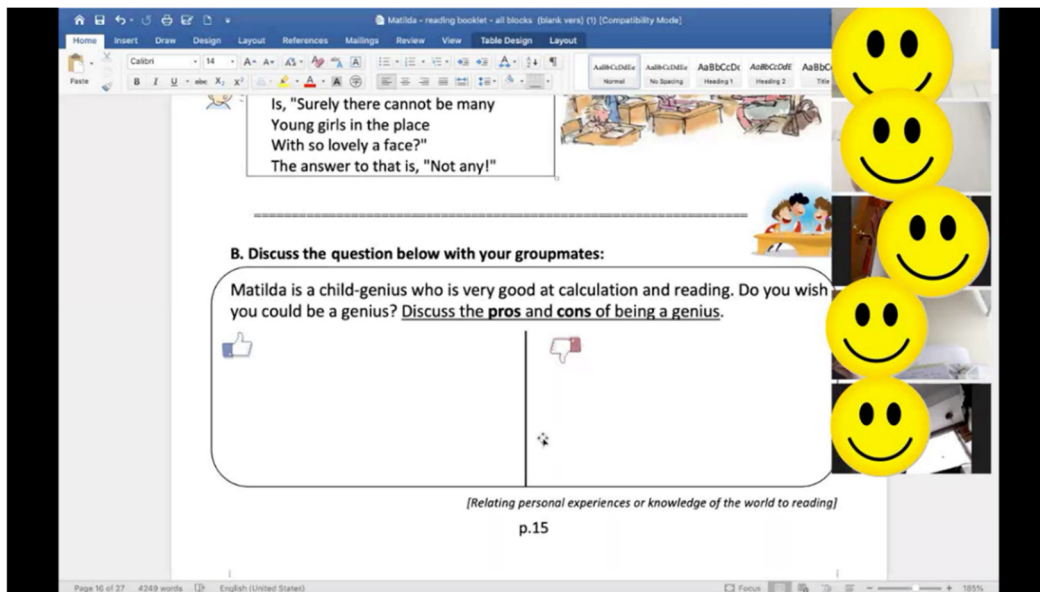
Figure 16: Sample student discussion on the pros and cons of being a genius.

See figure 16. P.4 students were led by the teacher to discuss the merits and demerits of becoming a child genius in a Zoom class. A student expressed that being a child genius, one could help people with a lot of things and he even quoted the phrase 'Great power comes with great responsibility' – by Peter Parker - Spiderman. Teacher appreciated the student's active responses.

These questions are especially meaningful when we try to impart values and moral education to our students, and one would be surprised by their level of interest to answer these tricky questions. Their grammar and fluency do not have to be perfect. Teachers treasure students' genuine feedback and they really want to give them the opportunity to freely express their views on these moral issues.

Figurative language like similes, metaphors, onomatopoeia could be quite challenging to primary students, but teachers think readers are the perfect tools for students to be exposed to these complex features used in some authentic language materials.

*P6***:** *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

The author C.S. Lewis discusses the themes of **good vs. evil, betrayal and forgiveness, courage, transformation, natural world, and magic** in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.

These are social and moral issues which happen every day in students' lives. Moral principles such as **honesty and integrity, forgiveness, courage, and self-sacrifice** are represented by various

characters, human and animal, in the story. This has given teachers a wonderful opportunity to make use of the book to address these human qualities. See figure 17. Students were led to think about some life decisions in the story.
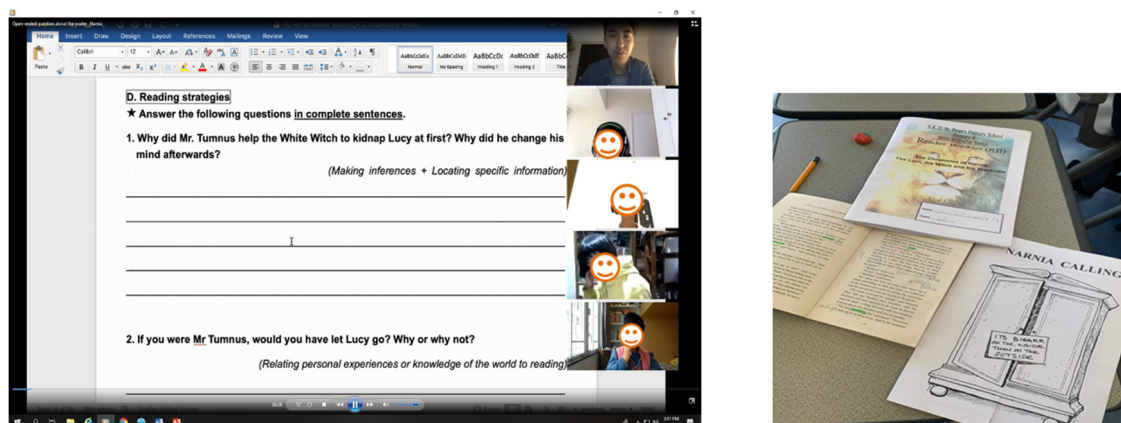

Figure 17: Sample student discussion on some life decisions.

In one particular lesson when a teacher talked about Mr. Tumnus, who was a Faun, tried to kidnap the youngest sister for the White Witch, the teacher asked students why he would want to do that and what made him change his mind after. And then, the teacher asked students if they were the Faun, would they have done the same and let Lucy go? Students said things like 'I would let her go because it is cruel to do that to a little girl or I would not have let her go because my life would be at risk and the White Witch would hunt me down.'

These dilemmatic questions could stimulate students' thinking and widen their perspectives. And instead of giving generic feedback, teachers provided them with detailed and constructive comments and feedback, and assisted them to further elaborate on their answers and further enrich their expression of English language.

Conclusion

Empowering students in an online learning environment

During the year 2019-2020, different themes were organised within and across levels to help SKH St. Peter's students develop their "online school lives" with reading as the priority.

We hope to empower students so that they could handle the multimodal texts around them, take some time off their textbooks, and gradually learn deeper with reading. To cater for learners' diversity, students' needs and interests, teachers should continue to ask a variety of questions and elicit responses from students to engage them in both face-to-face as well as online classes. Moral values are an extremely important part of teaching even when we are not necessarily aware that we are acting on them. All language teaching involves an interplay of deeply held values, but in each teaching situation these values are played out in different ways (Johnston, 2003) Teachers have reflected that more values education could be infused into the modules within and across primary levels. More online activities could be explored in an online environment: Collaborative small group work / virtual fieldtrips / role-playing / oral presentation etc. It is also important to have a consistent school policy towards the quality and quantity of online learning and teaching. All in all, a willingness to take risks and educate students differently may help turn the conservative learners to active learners.

Every crisis is an opportunity.

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