

The Book and the Banknote: Reading for Leisure amongst 10th Grade Learners in South Africa

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KEYWORDS Non-Participation. Secondary School. Learners. Leisure Reading. Coloured. South Africa

ABSTRACT Central to this study are the researchers' interests in describing leisure reading tendencies amongst secondary school learners in the age range of 16 and 17 years old. The study collected data by means of a questionnaire which consisted of both closed and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was administered to a group of 120 tenth grade learners at two schools in Gauteng Province, South Africa. Of the number, only 33 eventually formed the sample of the study. Data were analysed using simple statistical methods, and the results are presented under the following headings: current engagement in leisure reading; time spent reading for leisure; sources of motivation; and access to reading materials. The learners' perceptions about leisure reading were also captured following open-ended questions. This study shed light about leisure habits amongst learners, an area which has gained little attention in South Africa. Further studies should be conducted using larger samples and consisting of learners from different racial background.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a serious problem worldwide, with an estimated 774 million young people and adults not having the basic literacy skills they require to participate fully in society (UNESCO 2008). The recent Millennium Development Goals report (2010) noted that many young people emerge from primary schools unable to read or write. Within the South African context, the crisis in the culture of reading is deepening, with reading for leisure particularly rare. Indeed, such is the unpopularity of reading that a joke has long circulated that if you wish to hide a banknote, put it inside a book. The problem is endemic, with South African children and adolescents reading very little or not engaging in that activity at all (Thraves 2010), a finding similar to Rasana's (2006) study conducted amongst adolescents in the Eastern Cape. According to Mahala (2010), reading has become an activity that most people in South Africa embark on only when they have to prepare for examinations.

Various reasons have been posited for non-participation in leisure reading, one being that reading generally has come to be associated with school (Mtshweni 2003). Manikum (2007) related the habit to youth's obsession with cell phones, digital video decoders (DVD's), computers and play stations. However, she remarked that parents also need to create an environment conducive for creative thinking by exposing their chil-

dren to good reading material. Magazines for the youth do not provide relevant or engaging information that inspires them to read. Hopper (2005) and Johnsson-Smaragdi and Johnsson (2006) concurred, arguing that the increasing number of digital gadgets, as well as other technologies used by the youth, have overshadowed an interest in leisure reading. An ethos of piracy has made films so accessible that children would rather watch one than read a book, thus suggesting that the youth find these more appealing than reading leisurely. Hopper (2005) further noted that the youth's overexposure to celebrities has led them to believe that they too can mimic their favourite celebrity.

The contribution of the previous apartheid government on the youth's non-participation in reading for leisure purposes cannot be overruled (Churches et al. 2002; Van Niekerk and Prins 2001; Stead and Watson 2006). In particular, the system fostered great imbalances and inequalities within schools in terms of resources, such as libraries and relevant materials (DoE 2001) that could have encouraged leisure reading in schools and within communities. Likewise, it did not foster the love or need for reading among the youth from previously disadvantaged communities. Hart and Zinn (2007) cited the Department of Education audit report, which estimated that in 1997, 8 million of 12 million South African learners did not have access to libraries in their schools youth.

Reading is a central element in learning and development which should be inculcated amongst all learners. According to the American Academy of Paediatrics (2008), reading plays an important role in the development of one's brain. Furthermore, they asserted that by simply turning the pages of a book work is put on the muscles of the eyes and the chemistry of the body is affected by utilizing the brain. Research undertaken on Fiji, quoted in the Gauteng Literacy Strategy Project (GLSP 2004) associated reading with higher percentages in languages and reading, as well as in general knowledge and numeracy. From the perspectives of Sainsbury and Schagen (2004), children who enjoy reading become self-motivated readers who willingly participate in the broader and deeper experiences that reading brings and their academic reading and writing skills ultimately improve. By reading a variety of books, magazines and newspapers, they gain exposure to complex vocabulary, and reading becomes a prime opportunity for learning new words (Nippold et al. 2005).

However, low reading levels amongst learners are disturbing, particularly in South Africa, where the overall 2010 national matriculation pass rate was 67.8%, with many learners dropping out of the education system well before Grade 12 (Eyewitness, 06 January 2011). The failures may find it difficult to survive in an increasingly technologically advanced world. They may live in poverty because limited reading skills do not offer a wide variety of career and personal growth opportunities (Mahala 2010). Due to that, they may find negative peer influence very difficult to resist; they may become frustrated, intolerant and ultimately drop out from school (American Academy of Paediatrics 2008).

Thus reading is a serious problem which must be addressed as a matter of urgency if teachers are indeed committed to promoting educational success for all learners. This goal of universal education has been set by the country's educational policies, such as South African Schools' Act (RSA 1996) and White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education (DoE 2001), as well as in international commitments, such as the Dakar Education for All Framework of Action (UNESCO 2000), which clearly calls for a 50% reduction in adult illiteracy by 2015. Adherents of Inclusive Education, in particular, advocate that learners should learn optimally within their learning environments so that any factor that undermines their chances

for reaching academic success will be addressed. As low levels of reading, especially for leisure purposes, prove to be a barrier, it becomes imperative for it to be the target of research. In addition, the Right to Education Project (n/d) noted that the right to literacy is a component of the wider right to education, and also a full enjoyment of other human rights connected to the participation in society. Furthermore, they noted that a life of dignity and freedom from poverty is for most people only possible through the attainment of literacy. It is in this light that this study focuses on investigating learners' participation in leisure reading, a term defined as reading of any kind which exclude school textbooks and other materials assigned by schools (Browski 2009).

This study is guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1992, 2005) ecosystemic theory. The theory views development as an on-going process, influenced by various factors which constantly and dynamically interact with each other and the individual. These factors exist within and outside an individual's environment. They are recognizable as: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystems. The microsystem covers activities and relations experienced by an individual in a given face to face setting. The mesosystem comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings which interact with an individual. The exosystem encompasses the processes taking place between two or more settings, of which one does not ordinarily contain the developing person, but in which events occur that influence processes within the immediate setting that does not contain an individual. Finally, the macrosystem consists of the overarching pattern of micro, meso and the exosystem characteristic in a given culture or broader social context. For this study, the ecosystemic theory considers the learner as an individual whose affinity towards leisure reading is affected by other people and dynamics in the environment.

METHODS

This study is descriptive in nature as it was driven by an interest in describing the situation or events (Babbie and Mouton 2008), namely learners' participation in reading for leisure purposes. Although this form of approach could use different research techniques, it often engages

in quantitative statistics to organise information in a meaningful ways (Knupfer and McLellan 1996). For this study, quantitative data were collected with no attempts to establish causal relationships between phenomena. This was so because that was not the focus of the study. Moreover, there was no experimental manipulation of variables.

Research Location

The study was conducted in two English secondary schools which were located in the west of Johannesburg. The area was chosen for its convenience in terms of travelling expenses. The area was historically designated for the coloured population, as they are commonly known in South Africa. The population constitutes 3.6 million of South Africa's approximately 50 million (Statistics South Africa 2011), and they are a people of mixed lineage and majority of them speak Afrikaans. The reader is thus cautioned that schools located in the areas which were specifically designated for such a group suffered problems similar to other disadvantaged groups. These include shortages of books, libraries and classrooms. The few community libraries that are available have kept old and outdated books.

Sampling

The sample was selected conveniently in the sense that we included only those participants who indicated interest to participate and had their parents consented to their participation. The sample was recruited from the two grade 10 classes. The schools admitted learners from various racial backgrounds in South Africa. However, due to its location, the numbers of mixed-race learners in the schools were higher than those in other racial groups.

Participants

About 33 out of 120 grade 10 learners who returned the questionnaire administered to them during Life Orientation sessions formed part of the study. The ages of these learners ranged between 16 and 17 years and they had never been identified as having reading difficulties at their schools or any of the schools they had attended in the previous years. There were 13 males and 20 females and, interestingly, these 33

learners belonged to the mixed race population of South Africa, implying that learners from other population groups were not keen to participate. So it was by chance that the sample consisted of learners belonging to a mixed race population of South Africa.

Instruments

The questionnaire was the only method used to collect data. Closed-ended questions required respondents to *strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree* on a Likert like scale, whilst some questions required them to provide *true or false* judgments. The questions covered the following issues: (a) personal information; (b) students' involvement in reading for leisure purposes; (c) amount of time spent on reading; and (d) frequency of their involvement in reading and motivation. The open-ended questions required their views on the following: (a) non-reading related activities; (b) types of books they read and how they select them; and (c) benefits of reading. This mix of both closed and open-ended questions permitted flexibility in the design of items and made the instrument interesting (Babbie and Mouton 2008).

Data Collection

The questionnaire was administered by one of the researchers during Life Orientation sessions. The process took place in the absence of the class-teachers. This was important since in South Africa teaching still tends to be autocratic and learners may find teachers intimidating. The questionnaire was handed to 120 students who were asked to return it the following day together with a parents' form granting students' permission to participate in the study. The form was only returned by 30 students and fortunately they also submitted a consent form signed by parents. The process took place following the explanation about the study and clarification of ethical matters and some concerns raised by the learners.

Data Analysis

Analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data was done separately. The data collected by means of questionnaire was analysed following a simple statistical procedure of the SPSS15

software. The process was facilitated by the statistician based at the University where this study was carried. The results were provided in the forms of histograms and tables. Data collected by means of open-ended questions was analysed manually according to themes and categories.

Research Ethics

Access to the research sites was granted by the Department of Education (DoE), following a detailed explanation of the study and ethical clearance by the research ethics committee of the Faculty of Education at the authors' university. A written parents' consent was obtained from data collection. The process involved explaining the study and clarifying some parents' concerns and questions during parents' meeting which took place at school. The study was also explained to learners during Life Orientation class and they were informed that we will only consider the questionnaires of students whose parents gave a consent for them to participate. Issues of anonymity were clarified as well as their rights to withdraw at any time without negative consequences. We also clarified that there would be no payment for participation in the study.

RESULTS

The results of the study are presented under the following main headings: (a) current engagement in leisure reading; (b) love and attitude toward leisure reading; (c) sources of encouragement; and (d) access to reading materials. Both qualitative and quantitative data are presented together. The findings of both qualitative and quantitative data are presented together.

Current Engagement in Leisure Reading

Of the 33 learners, 26 responded that they were currently reading a book for leisure, and of those, 14 strongly agreed with the statement, whilst 12 agreed with the statement and 7 respondents opted for the *neutral* option. More than 50% (19/33 learners) highlighted they were reading for leisure on a daily basis in their spare time. However, 22% (7/33) said that they did not make time to read every day. Gender differences were noted as 8 out of 13 boys and 12 out of 20 girls indicated having been active readers.

Time Spent Reading for Leisure

From the four options (10 minutes; 10-20 minutes and 20 minutes and longer) which they were given to indicate the amount of time spent reading for leisure, the following findings were revealed. Five of the 13 boys noted they were reading for 0-20 minutes whilst eight of the 20 girls read for the same time. In addition, 61.5% (8 out of 13 boys) and 60.0% (12/20 girls) were reading for more than 20 minutes in a day during their free time. The results show that boys spent more time than girls in reading for leisure. See the Table 1 for diagrammatical representation of the results.

Table 1: Time spent on reading for leisure purposes

	rC3		
	0-20 minutes	More than 20 minutes	Total
<i>Gender</i>			
Male count	5	8	13
% within gender	38.5%	61.5%	100%
Female count	8	12	20
% within gender	40.0%	60.0%	100%
<i>Total</i>			
Count	13	20	33
% within gender	39.4%	60.6%	100%

Sources of Motivation

It was imperative to establish whether learners were or not getting some form of motivation, and if so, who were its sources. The data revealed that 47.2% (25/33) were getting the motivation from parents while 37.7% (20/33) indicated to having been receiving motivation from their teachers. Only 5.7% (3/33) said that their friends supported their leisure reading habits. Whilst it is clear that some learners could be receiving support from teachers and parents and/or friends, an important point to note is that adults played an enormous role in this regard, but that peers did not. This may be because adults are more aware of the importance and benefits of reading as opposed to the friends, who may have interests in activities other than reading.

Access to Reading Material

With regard to accessibility to reading materials, only 16 learners responded, of whom 4 received leisure reading from their parents, 2 from their teachers, 4 from friends, and 5 from librar-

ies. Only one claimed to receive readings from other sources.

Learner Perceptions Regarding Leisure Reading

In an attempt to deepen an understanding about this phenomenon, we saw fit to include the perceptions of learners about reading for leisure as that element exerts influence on one's interest in this form of activity. It transpired that 60.6% (20/33 - 7 boys and 13 girls) strongly agree that the activity is of utmost importance. Their responses to the open-ended questions revealed the following as benefits for reading leisurely: (a) Reading develops vocabulary; (b) Reading facilitates communication; (c) Reading extends general knowledge; (d) Leisure reading impacts on academic success; and (e) Leisure reading is not a waste of time.

Reading Develops Vocabulary

About 63.6% (21/33 – 5 boys and 16 girls) agreed that reading develops one's vocabulary. This suggested that more girls than boys associate reading with a well-developed vocabulary. These were also supported by the responses provided to the open-ended questions. For example, a 15 years old female, Manale noted that *I get to learn new words every day*. Maila (15 years old male) agrees as he declares that *leisure reading is intriguing, as it broadens my vocabulary whilst Nkoko (16 years old female) indicated that I am better able to express myself a written form and Chiguwi (16 years old female) mentioned that It allows me to write better essays and to do well in English as a subject.*

Certain responses revealed that learners participated in leisure reading because is allowed them to become creative, imaginative and even provided them with a channel in which they could fantasise. Sophia (15 years female) declared that *I get lost in my own world where it's only me and the characters*. Another 15 years old female learner Tiara, *you can become very imaginative when you read for leisure and I can escape and enter a world of fantasy whilst Martha (16 years old female) noted that I am able to use my imagination and allow people to look like I would like them to look and Shima (15 years old male) maintained that when I read for fun it allows me to create my own pictures in my head, which is cool.*

Reading Facilitates Communication

About 9.4% (13/33 – 4 boys and 9 girls) strongly agreed that reading facilitates communication. In the open-ended questions respondents disclosed that they read to become better readers so that fluency could be enhanced. Mavis (15 years old female) reported that *I read because I want to be fluent when I speak* and Jake (15 years old male) stated that *I feel good about myself when I speak correctly*.

Pronunciation also emerged as significant. In particular Marcia (16 years old female) highlighted that *when a person reads, one pronounces the word in his/her head and then when they say it properly in a conversation they sounds intelligent*. To John (16 years male) said it point black that *reading improves pronunciation* and Lolly (15 years female) averred that *reading helps me to be a better conversationalist*.

Reading Extends General Knowledge

About 60.6% (20/33 –7 boys and 13 girls) strongly agreed that reading extends general knowledge. Joey's (15 years old male) statement from an open-ended question clearly exemplifies this: *when I read I become aware of daily events and it improves my general knowledge*. Also, Maggie (16 years female) averred that *I read newspapers and magazines so that I can have an idea of what is happening around me*.

Leisure Reading Impacts Positively on Academic Success

The perception that leisure reading could facilitate academic success was noted in the responses of 12 learners (37.5% of 33), one of which, Zola (15 years female), to the open-ended questions, revealed the view that *leisure reading was the key to all success and is a means to improve my results at school and beyond*. Some learners believed that, apart from improving concentration, leisure reading also facilitates critical thinking. Janet (15 years old female) noted that *I read leisurely to become clever and to reason better* and Malwa (16 years old male) was of the opinion that *because of leisure reading I feel as though I can be a deep thinker and writer*.

DISCUSSION

Although some learners engage in leisure reading on a regular basis, it was heartening to

find that a reasonable number engage in leisure reading for at least 20 minutes daily during their free time. Though this might seem minimal, Naggy and Herman (1997) argue that the impact it exerts on the person's vocabulary is significant. This is so because their study suggested that children encounter between 15,000 and 30,000 unfamiliar words in a year from reading for only 25 minutes per day. Notably, a reasonable number of words could be learnt within 20 minutes.

The current study also revealed that learners engage in leisure reading despite such hindrances as lack of school libraries and limited access to books, or the problems peculiar to schools in previously disadvantaged communities. The suggestion is that a lack of resources should not necessarily be used as a scapegoat for non participation in leisure reading. Therefore Wigfield and Guthrie's (1997) suggestion that an important determinant for reading is one's attitudes toward the activity (reading) finds relevance in this study. If children hold beliefs and negative attitudes toward reading then their interest in the activity will subsequently be adversely affected. They further state that higher ability readers possess greater intrinsic motivation for reading, as well as a higher value for reading (Wigfield and Guthrie 1997). On a similar note, Sainsbury and Schagen (2004) averred that once children find interest in reading they become motivated to read more. In addition, the truly devoted reader recognizes the benefits of reading, and s/he pursues it for the pure enjoyment of the reading experience. It is indisputable that both female and male learners (not all learners who participated) hold leisure reading in high esteem. This finding stands in contrast to that of Sainsbury and Schagen (2004) that girls' reading attitudes are more positive than those of boys. However, it would appear that learners' engagement in leisure reading could be motivated by their strong association with the activity and its positive educational gains, as was apparent in the responses of the participants of this study. This is thus a solid confirmation that leisure reading is valued and holds a special place in the lives of some young learners.

Evidently, parents and teachers played an important role as sources of motivation in reading for leisure. Therefore, efforts should be put into place to increase their impact in this activity, particularly amongst secondary schools learners, because it is at this level of education where

the habit of reading leisurely is often lost due to other demands at schools. Notably, parents could positively influence their children's reading habits, particularly during the adolescent stage where children enjoy spending time with their parents and other family members (Nippold et al. 2005). For that reason, parents should take advantage of this and strive to advance leisure reading by participating in their children's reading activities. This library time spent amongst families is suitably advocated by Snow et al. (1998), wherein it is purported that reading success starts with young children enjoying library story-times. Preschoolers' earliest experiences with books and reading are important and parent/caregiver knowledge can build on those experiences. It is therefore agreeable to Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007), as they maintain that children and young people read more when they see adults reading. This will have lifelong impact on the child's learning experiences, developmental progress, and even social interaction skills later in life. For example, even during infancy children are able to pick up on things as complex and subtle as the intonation in their parents' voices.

Much can be done by teachers to instil leisure reading habits amongst learners because they spend more time with learners at school. Language teachers, in particular, could be very influential in this regard and they could be more practical in creating an atmosphere for reading within the classroom. Schools could develop a reading programme for learners. As noted by Fisher (2004), if well designed and consistently implemented over a sustained period of time such programmes could be effective with at-risk students. Key factors include professional development for teachers, access to a wide variety of appealing reading materials, follow-up activities that encourage further voluntary reading, modelling by teachers and administrators, informal accountability, and time to read (Fisher 2004; Pilgreen 2000). A well-equipped library, containing a range of books and other interesting reading materials representing a variety of reading levels, topics, genres and authors and considerable amounts of uninterrupted time during the school day could encourage learners into reading for leisure purposes. If creating interest in reading is a goal for educators, then it becomes incumbent on the school to ensure that their students are fed a steady diet of a variety of literature (Warrican 2006:205).

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on learners' non-participation in leisure reading, an area which has not gained much attention of research in South Africa. While some of the findings of this study are encouraging, other results should give teachers, parents and public librarians' cause for concern. With these connections made, we may be in a stronger position to encourage the development of a reading habit that will empower young people as learners and future citizens and that will also give them access to a leisure activity that will bring them pleasure and extend their understanding of the world.

Finally, the reader is cautioned that the limitation of the study lies with the sample size and its composition of learners from only one population group in South Africa. A larger sample could have yielded more noteworthy results. In addition, the focus was particularly on leisure reading and did not investigate time spent on academic reading. It could be that learners indicating little time spent on leisure reading were spending more time on academic reading. This study clearly demonstrates the need for a large-scale national study of teens of every race, their reading habits, and their relationship with school and public libraries.

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