

The Reading Preferences of Primary School Children in Lahore

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The scope of this study aims at investigating reading preferences of children of Lahore city, which is the capital of Punjab province-Pakistan. It was assumed that proper attention towards providing reading opportunities to primary school students (First -Fifth grade) in Pakistan is vital while inculcating reading habits at that tender age. The study was conducted on 300 primary school students. A target group of 300 primary school students was selected for this study. Mainly survey method based on administered questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from young students. The findings suggested that the children prefer to read locally published printed material in English. Respondents were found interested in reading short stories. (Fiction books, narrating adventure stories remained their favorite. On basis of the findings, the study furnishes suggestions for parents, teachers and school librarians, along with the local publishers for playing their effective role in developing reading habits and addresses the barriers in this regard.

Keywords: Reading habit; Leisure reading; Children preferences; Reading choices

Introduction

Pakistan is a developing country with poor literacy rate. The primary objective of the Government's education plan 2011-2012 was to improve the quality of education. It appears that the reading capability in Pakistan is quite low as compared to other countries. Ministry of Finance (2012) provided information in Pakistan Economic Survey:

Urdu reading levels (ability to read text) are estimated to have declined slightly: The proportion of children in class five able to read a class two level Urdu story text has dropped from 51.6 percent in 2010 to 47.4 per cent in 2011 in Punjab Baluchistan, however, has shown a visible improvement. The proportion of children in class five able to read a class two level Urdu story text has increased from 26.1 percent to 41.7 percent

However, according to the Annual Survey of Education Research conducted in 2010 "English reading level has been improved slightly as compared to the previous year" (Annual Survey of Education Research as cited by Ministry of Finance, 2012, p.148). The Pakistan Economic Review establishes that the country is far behind the world in reading skill rate. Children's general reading and comprehension level is below their grade level. It is deemed as a barrier to the future generation's academic growth. It is a serious problem which needs to be addressed at all levels.

It is a fact that for a better future of a country, children need to be raised properly. The role of reading habit in one's personality growth is well established and needs no debate. Lust for reading is regarded as a psychological attribute of one's personality (Sharma & Singh, 2005, p.120). Reading habit (RH) develops good comprehension and communication skills. Pfau (1967) stated "The psychology of habit formation suggests that interest in reading must stem in formative years" (p.36). Children get multi-dimensional benefits out of RH. It may transform an average student into a bright one. Sometimes, a void is created by disinterest in the learning at school. This void may best be filled by concentrated reading on a certain area of child's interest.

Two parameters are directly concerned with the development of RH among children: the reading material itself and the people dealing with children i.e., parents, teachers, publishers and government (it is recommended that use (and) after two consecutive commas). Children must (should show a certain degree of ambivalence) have interesting reading material for utilizing their free time productively. It nurtures their reading habit. The interest in a particular topic or subject can motivate them to start "reading". To build the RH, it is necessary to give due attention to their choices. There is a need to identify children reading choices, to make those materials produced and accessible to them, in order to stimulate their RH in the present era, when they have a lot of access to other fun activities.

A child is mostly attached with parents, Starke (1931) stated "parents should be made aware that theirs is the chief responsibility for stimulating an interest in good reading and for making books available in the home"

(p.177). Parents and teachers bring the children reading material. Publishers and writers/artists are primarily responsible for producing reading material for children. Further, Starke (1931) recommended for the publishers “They should be encouraged to extend their publishing programs to include suitable books of various sorts needed, as indicated by scientific investigations and recommended by competent observers” (p.176).

Under this background, it seems imperative to conduct a baseline study to find out the reading attitude and preferences of urban children in Pakistan. It needs to explore interests of children in order to improve their reading capability. It will also be helpful for all stakeholders, writers, publishers, parents and school libraries, so that they may be in a better position to provide suitable books and reading material to the children.

Literature Review

The overview of literature presents the complexity of the phenomenon and reveals that it has fragmented theoretical background. To study RH development among children has a multi-disciplinary approach. Researches have been conducted in disciplines like psychology, sociology and education to address this phenomenon by analyzing its different parameters. These endeavors are also important as they add to the understanding of the RH phenomena.

According to Sanacore (1992):

Independent reading, which is one way of supporting lifetime literacy, is not a frill. It can help students to refine skills and strategies by applying them to meaningful text (expository, descriptive, and narrative). It also can improve their reading achievement through the natural process of reading. As important, independent reading motivates a love of reading as it supports the habit of reading” (p476).

Some researchers have concluded that parents should try to motivate their children for reading right from their early ages. Continuance of this scenario over a reasonable period - the love for book-reading takes over the child and the habit grows to become a fond (Vinay, 2009, p.33; Majid & Tan, 2007, p.197). Some studies show a declining trend towards reading. Pfau (1967) commented that children consistently rank reading below other choices as a desirable pastime (p.35). This declining trend has been going on and Kush and Watkin (1996) reported it as “attitudes about reading exhibited a consistent decline across the elementary school years. This is somewhat alarming, but not unexpected, trend occurred for attitudes expressed about both academic and recreational reading” (p.316).

The National Literacy Trust (2005) conducted a survey in over 8,000 primary and secondary schools in England to explore children’s and youth’s reading habits and preferences. The premise of the survey was that

recreational reading habits in children might have declined. The Survey contemplated the hypothesis. Experts mention some factors like encouragement from parents and teachers, influence of peers, book fair and exhibition etc. that motivate children in building RH. This habit reflects upon the positive attitude of the students. They must be motivated by parents and the teachers so that they become more and more enlightened in their field of interest. Vinay (2009) stated “Parents and teachers are prime source of inculcating good reading habits among children and making them avid, willing and responsive readers (p.30). For the teacher as a motivational element, Lind (1936) highlighted “Schools also could stimulate interest in a particular subject or can encourage reading activity” (p.455).

Anthropologically, a child is directly influenced by the activities going on in the family, and the society at large. At the family level, a number of studies have reported a relationship between socio-economic status and leisure book reading. Vinay (2009) reported “Reading habit, like other habits, has a direct link with the kind of exposure and experience the children get in the early years. If a child is brought up in an environment of books, it is likely to develop love for reading books” (p.31). A child tries to imitate whatever he/she watches. McCullough (1957) stated “Environment plays a crucial role in developing reading habit” (p.163). Qualitatively Research by Palmer, Codling, and Gambrell (as cited by Kush & Watkins, 1996) suggests “students’ motivation to read can be influenced by four variables: prior experiences with books, social interactions about books, book access and book choice” (p.319). Vinay (2009) narrated:

Lack of good children’s literature is another significant reason for the lack of reading habits among the children. This scarcity is attributed to the lack of interest on the part of authors and publishers since writing for children is often considered as a less important form of writing and less lucrative (p.29)

All the siblings have intrinsically diversified mental approach and physical capabilities. Therefore, a uniform exposure should not be expected from them in a given scenario. Vinay (2009) reported “Thrusting upon a child a book which is of little or no interest to is a sure way of killing his appetite rather whetting it” (p.32).

It is a general observation that interests and choices of young boys and girls likely to vary from individual-to-individual. So is the case with their topics of interest. It may be on the basis of gender, age, their social environmental background etc. Whereas a large number of students in a class must be having a theoretically positive approach towards pedagogy, there is likelihood of disinterest maintained by a few. Such disinterested elements may be identified and persuaded to follow the right path adhering to the course contents. Some of them might be interested into reading romantic stories, other in historic events and geographic places including wonders of the world. Similarly some might be eager to acquaint themselves of scientific truth of nature, and some might be feeling attracted to religious principles. Norvell (1946)

stated that solution of this problem is to make the reading more attractive. It is necessary to choose only those selections which are commonly liked by the students and teachers (p.536). Norvell, (1946) further added:

Both sexes react favorably to adventure; humorous poems, stories, and essays (except where the humor is of the subtle type); poems and stories of patriotism; stories of mystery, of games, and of animals. Boys are more favorably inclined than are girls to strenuous adventure, including war, to stories of wild animals, to science, and to speeches. Girls react very favorably to romantic love, to sentiment in general, and to poems and stories of home and family life. Neither boys nor girls like subtle humor; descriptive prose and verse; letters; reflective, didactic, philosophical, or nature poems (though girls are more tolerant of them than boys). Of course, there are exceptions to these rules, but as general guides they can be very helpful. (p.536)

LIS professionals and researchers reported few studies. Dr. Anis Khurshid reported the first survey after partition "What children read" in 1975. It was conducted on the direction of UNESCO. It aimed at ascertaining the reading habits and interests of school going children and young people of both sexes, between the ages of five to fifteen. The purpose of this survey was to guide the author, publishers and librarians in the preparation, production, and dissemination of suitable Urdu books for children. Survey sample consisted of 20% primary school, 54% middle and 25% high school students' of Karachi. It reported that children of age 6-10 mostly read at night. Majority of this age group preferred to read short length books. Adventure stories were ranked first in an order of preference. Younger children liked to read bold typed books. They gave first preference to watch T.V as leisure time activity and second to read the magazines. The largest number of readers borrowed books from Anna libraries in the localities in which they reside. Anna libraries were those private libraries that lend the reading material on very nominal rent to the readers. Average, charges for one day rent for reading material was .1 paisa (1Rupee contained 100 Anna) for a day or it depended on the policy of that particular library. Purchase was at second and friends as a source of books were at the third rank.

A study on reading preferences of secondary school children of Bahawalpur District of Pakistan was conducted in 2011 by Irshad Hussain and Parveen Munshi. They concluded secondary school children like to read for pleasure and entrainment during holidays and week end. Respondent of study preferred to read books of religion, literature, novels, magazines and romantic books. The children of respected study were found more interested in reading newspapers, traveling stories and scientific books. Along with autobiographies, literature, poetry and drama (Hussain & Munshi, 2011, p.432).

It is clear from review of literature that first study based on Karachi, and the second one on Bahawalpur region, to watch out the RH and interests of children in respective

areas. After these studies, no research has been conducted locally in Lahore by a LIS professional. As Lahore is provincial capital of Punjab, so it will be better to explore RH and choices of children of this city. The present study was a part of researcher's M.Phil. thesis.

Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to:

- Identify the reading preferences of young children
- Furnish suggestions for the parents' teacher/librarian and publishers

Research Design

Survey method of descriptive research was used for data collection. The population of the study consisted of primary school students (male/female) of Lahore. At the first stage purposive sampling technique was used for the selection of schools. Six schools where a majority of children of middle socio economic class were expected were selected. The sample of schools was obtained from the directory/list of schools affiliated with Board of Intermediate & Secondary Education, Lahore. Out of six chosen schools, two were Government, three were semi government and one was private school- located in different area of Lahore region. In Government school medium of instruction was Urdu, in semi government and private school mix medium i.e. both English & Urdu was being adopted. At the second stage, proportional stratified random sampling technique was used for selecting respondents from the schools. Following this technique, groups were made on the basis of respondents' classes (from grade one-five), so five groups were made and fifty children from each school were randomly selected from the attendance register; counting of six was used for picking the sample. Total collected sample of six schools consisted of three hundred children.

A structured questionnaire was adapted to collect the data from the children following a similar kind of study conducted by Majid and Tan (2007) in Singapore. However, it was adapted with some modifications, considering the change in the sample and country. To collect the data from children, pilot testing of questionnaire was done. No major change was found necessary in the questionnaire. However, guided administration of questionnaire was found necessary to make children understand how to respond to Likert- scale based and other questions.

The questionnaires were personally administered in six schools during February 2011. The researcher met each group of a class/grade at same time. Each question of the questionnaire was being read out before the respondent, so that they may pick right option/answer respectively for each question. Necessary explanation of question was verbally delivered, wherever the child required for a clarification. The students marked their likings and responses accordingly.

The quantitative responses/data were analyzed by using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences and percentages were taken out to reach at conclusions.

Table 1.

List of Targeted Schools (N=6)

School Name	G-I	G-II	G-III	G-IV	G-V	Total
1. Crescent Model School Shadman, Lahore	10	10	10	10	10	50
2. Divisional Public School Model Town, Lahore	10	10	10	10	10	50
3. M.Q Foundation School, Shadman, Lahore.	10	10	10	10	10	50
4. Lady Maclagon School, Anarkali, Lahore	10	10	10	10	10	50
5. Government Girls High School, Model Town, Lahore	10	10	10	10	10	50
6. St. Anthony School for Boys, Lawrence Road, Lahore	10	10	10	10	10	50

Note: G-I=grade/ class one, G-II = grade/ class two, G-III= grade/ class three, G-IV=grade/class four, G-V=grade/ class five.

Finding and Discussion**Reading Activities**

Extracurricular reading was expected to be done in leisure time. Therefore, first of all the respondents were asked, whether they liked to read or not in their leisure time. The response is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Children Reading Pattern

Children	Freq.	Percent
Read	246	82%
No reading	54	18%
Total	300	100%

It shows that an overwhelming majority of children (82%) prefer to read material other than textbooks in their leisure time. Only 18% of students expressed that they do not like to read in their leisure time. It shows that majority of the primary school respondents are inclined towards reading. The findings of studies support the research of Alexander & Filler et.al. (As cited in Kush & Watkins, 1996, p.316) who reported that, "younger children read more than the older children. Trend towards reading is positive in younger age and decline with the passage of time".

Table 4

Frequency Distribution & Percentage for Types of Preferred Reading Material (N=300)

Rank	Type of reading Material	Most of the time	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Mean
1	Storybooks	148(49%)	100(33%)	34(11%)	18(6%)	3.26
2	Informative books	108(36%)	122(41%)	44(15%)	26(9%)	3.04
3	Magazines (children periodicals)	36(32 %)	110(36%)	96(12%)	58(19%)	2.61
4	Comics	62(20%)	114(38%)	70(23%)	54(18%)	2.41
5	Newspapers (including weekly children page)	48(16%)	114(38%)	68(22%)	70(23%)	2.40

Note: 4= Most of the time, 3=Sometimes, 2= Rarely, 1=Never

Language Used for Reading

Respondents were being asked for the preferred language. Usually the reading material available in market and libraries is in English and Urdu (the national language of Pakistan). The other language option was also given in the questionnaire to cover their local or mother language. None of the respondents gave answer to that option. Hence, comparison was only possible to make between English and Urdu languages. Table 3 shows the findings.

Table 3

Preferred Reading Language

Language	Frequency (Respondents)	Percentage
Urdu	138	46%
English	162	54%
	300	100%

The results shows that 138 respondents (46%), prefer reading material in Urdu language and 162 respondents (54%) reading the material in English language. hence the respondents preferred to read material in English rather than Urdu.

Researcher personally visited the libraries of school and also met with the librarian/in charge. It appeared that literature in Urdu was in a less quantity than the English. Further there is a general trend to improve the English language skills in our country. So it can be assumed that the abundance of English reading material and pressure from the parents and teachers to improve the English language, inclines children towards English reading material.

Preferred Type of Material

The children were asked about the type (content) of reading material they would prefer. The categories of reading material have been arranged according to the order of their preferences in Table 3.

It shows that 'Story books' were the most preferred type of reading material followed by the information on various things, places and persons etc. Comics and newspaper reading was the least preferred type for them. The same findings were reported by Majid and Tan (2007) in their study, "Understanding the reading habits of children in Singapore".

National Book Council of Pakistan (1975) study reported that, "Naunehal was ranked first in a list of magazines". These magazines are decades old and children like to read them. Data analysis shows mean value of 2.61 for magazine reading. It was found that the respondents were least interested in reading newspapers and comics. It could be due to the reason that newspapers do not contain interesting elements for young readers. However, regarding comics, the findings were unexpected.

Preferred Types for Fiction

There are mainly two types of reading material: fiction and non-fiction. Question was asked about the preferred type of fiction. Ten possible types of fiction reading were given as options to enquire about their responses.

Figure 1 shows that adventure stories remained the most preferred type of fiction books ($\mu=3.06$), while stories about animals ranked second. Fantasy and horror type fiction was the least preferred type for the respondents. The results are similar to the findings of the study conducted by Majid and Tan (2007) highlighted strong preference for adventure stories among different categories of fiction and topics about animals ranked second among other types. Fantasy and horror type fiction was the least preferred type for the respondents of the present study. 'Folktales' and 'Horror/ Ghost' fiction was also at low rank. Whereas a market survey revealed that some publishers have recently started producing abridged versions of quality folktales on glazed paper with colorful printing and illustrations. Hence, children might still not have access to this type of material in libraries.

While administered surveying, researcher's personal communication with the in charge/ librarian a series "Harry Potter" appeared as phenomenal in face of the otherwise neglected genre of horror and fantasy stories (personal communication, February 05, 2010).

Preferred Types of Non-Fiction Reading Material

Next, preference for non-fiction or informative books was asked from the respondents. Eight options were given to them to rank their liking accordingly.

Figure 1. Mean Distribution for Preferred Topics of Fiction

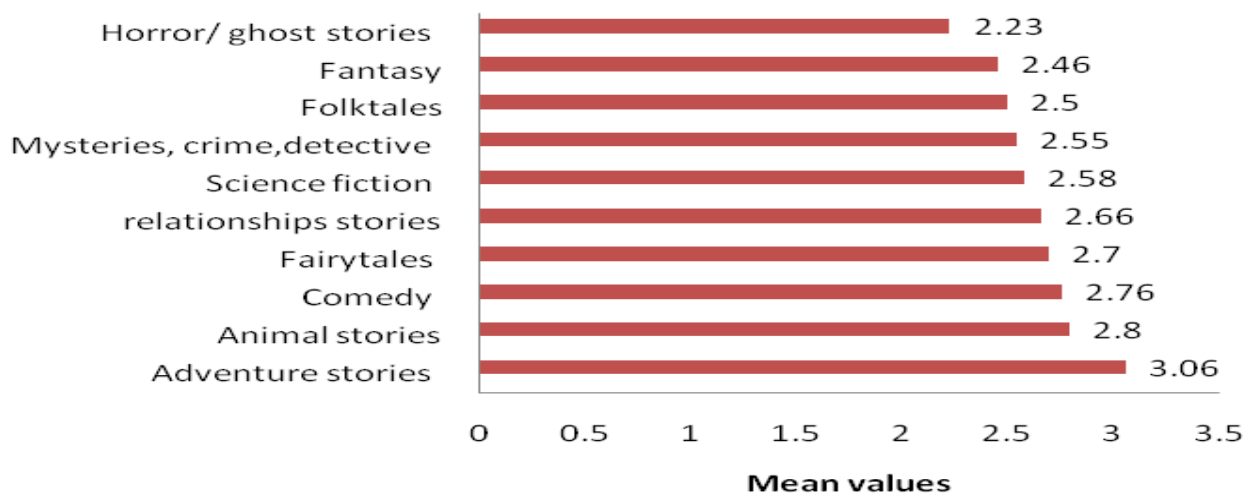


Table 5

Order of Preference for Non-Fiction (Informative material)

Rank	Subjects	4	3	2	1	Mean
1	Animals	74(25%)	164(55%)	44(15%)	18(6%)	2.98
2	Science (inventions, experiments, electricity, etc.)	100(33%)	110(37%)	58(19%)	32(11%)	2.92
3	Plants	92(31%)	104(35%)	72(24%)	32(11%)	2.85
4	Sports (football, basketball, car racing, etc.)	78(26%)	80(26%)	88(30%)	54(18%)	2.60
5	Hobbies (dolls, cars, handicraft, cooking, magic tricks etc.)	58(19%)	108(36%)	78(26%)	56(19%)	2.56
6	Life & people in other countries (customs, etc.)	24(8%)	162(54%)	64(21%)	50(17%)	2.53
7	Universe and Aliens	42(14%)	98(32%)	100(33%)	60(20%)	2.40
8	History & geography	21(14%)	38(25%)	45(30%)	46(31%)	2.22

Note. 4= Most of the time, 3=Sometime, 2=Rarely, 1=Never

Most of the children like to gain information about animals ($\mu=2.98$). Books on scientific inventions, experiments and electricity etc. are at the second number in popularity and information material about plants ranked third. Finally history and Geography ranked as the least preferred.

Comparatively, it appeared that respondents prefer reading information about animals. Children were generally curious for knowing more about animals. Books on scientific inventions, experiments, electricity etc. were at the second number in popularity among informative material. History and Geography books were read by the least number of children. Majid and Tan (2007) study also concurs in this aspect that children remain least interested in History and Geography.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Findings of the study indicate that primary school children in Lahore like more locally published reading material. Slightly more children like to read English books. The main purpose of primary level children for doing leisure time reading is to improve language skills and to enhance knowledge about animals and informative topics like scientific inventions, experiments, etc.

Nevertheless, younger children like to read short stories. It is suggested that parents should be sensitized to respect the reading interests of their children and provide them with the reading material of their taste. Writers should write more on the topics which children like the most and must take the responsibility of creating works which children of this age would like to read for pleasure, education and self-development.

Publishers should prepare more reading material with better illustrations and should care for the use of colors, type size, font, paper, vocabulary, bindings, and length. It must be enticing and corresponding to the age of the potential reader. Schools librarians/teachers must play their role in developing reading habit by helping students in selecting books compatible to the age of children.

The study is limited to the middle socio economic class. It establishes that they have generally access to locally published material because it is comparatively cheaper than the imported reading materials. Usually libraries have more books which were written by foreign authors but their imprints have been prepared on cheap papers and binding by the local publishers. Government must subsidize children's literature production to make it freely available and should provide reading material in schools

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