

A STUDY OF THE READING HABITS OF THE STUDENTS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Reading habit is essential for the language development of children. It is very important for the academic achievement of students. This study has been conducted on fifty students of primary classes in private English medium schools of Gulshan-e-Iqbal, Karachi. The main purpose of this study is to understand the reading habits of children, the reason behind reading, their favorite topics of reading and their attitudes towards reading. A pre-constructed comprehensive questionnaire was used for the collection of data. The collected data was scientifically processed and then its analysis was made through simple frequency and percentage distribution tables. The finding suggests that the majority of students read due to the motivation of achieving good grades in their examinations. Leisure reading or reading for fun is done by majority of the students during school holidays. Playing on computer or internet and watching television is their first and second choice respectively. Disappointingly, reading comes as their third choice. This study offers suggestions to the concerned schools and parents for developing reading habits among children.

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Introduction

Reading

Reading is a complex and multifaceted process which involves learning more and more vocabulary and sentence structure, comprehension and also with practice of many text to achieve fluency. Children start learning to read at very early age. The first five years of a child's life are very crucial. During this period he learns basic social and practical skills. Reading habit should be developed in the early ages to prevent future learning difficulties. Developing reading habit is a lifelong gift for the child. Child's first school is his home. Many educators believe that a child is familiar with a lot of concepts before taking admission in school. In this case parent's responsibility towards the development of their children's reading habit is increased.¹

During the first months and years of life, children's experience with language and literacy can begin to form a basis for their later reading success. Parents start reading to their children when they are 6 months old because of acquisition of language take place in the early years of child life. Therefore the ideal time of sharing books with children is during babyhood. Research consistently demonstrates that the more children know about language and literacy before they arrive at school, the better equipped they are to succeed in reading.²

Main accomplishments include:

- Oral language skills.
- Motivation to learn
- Awareness to printed words.

It has been noted that children relate reading to school work only. Pleasure reading or reading for fun has been ignored as a waste of time. Studies have proved that pleasure reading has contributed significantly to the development of speech and written language.³ A child's success in school, college and later in his career depends upon his vocabulary that is acquired only through reading habits. An inculcation of free voluntary reading habit in children seems to be the foremost task of parents and teachers in this modern period of technological advancement.

Studies have proved that reading habit is not only important for the mental growth of an individual but is also important for the economic growth of the country because it has been found out that innovations are adapted more easily by educated people than uneducated ones. Providing literacy to the people is not adequate, because literacy means that a person is only able to read and write. To make the literacy automatic, reading is important.⁴

Motivation is necessary for the children to read. Many factors contribute to the motivation of reading among children. Some of these factors are:

- . Passing examination,
- . Pressure from parents and teachers,

¹ Burns. M.S, P.Griffin and C.E Snow. Starting out right: A guide to promoting children's reading success (National academics press January 7,1999). 6-9.

² Christine Hall & martin Cols. Children's reading choices. (London: Routledge 1999). 109.

³ Stephen D. Krashen.The power of reading: insight from the research (Libraries Unlimited Inc. 1993), 72.

⁴ Biran Cox. Literacy is not enough. Essays on the importance of reading. (Manchester University Press 1998) 125.

- . For relaxation,
- . To learn new things,
- . Enrichment of vocabulary,
- . Improvement of spoken and written language⁵

A study conducted in twelve developing countries reveal that a majority of children read for passing examination.

It was believed that parent's income, nationality and level of education effects child's level of education, but research (Doctor Maria Evans, University Nevada Reno) has shown that above all these factors the presence of books in the home has a greater influence on the child's academic achievements. Children who grew up with books in their homes reached high levels of education than those who did not.

The greater the number of books the greater the benefit

“The presence of books helps the children from families in all walks of life and all around the world. The greatest advantage is to the children from disadvantage homes.”
 “Reading is a behavior that transfers strongly from generation to generation”-⁶

A recent study in China has shown that the presence of 500 books elevate the children 6.6 years further in their education. The effect is less in United States (2.4 years). In over all 27 countries the average advantage is 2.7 years.

Importance of reading

Increase knowledge

1. Knowledge is power and books are full of knowledge. Reading books increase children's knowledge and information.

An active mind

2. Reading stimulates the mind when children are given colorful and interesting books for reading. The part of the brain deal with vision and creativity stimulates.
3. Reading builds up initiative, creativity and character.
4. Reading helps in acquiring fundamental skills:
 Reading increases the child's attentions span and make him focus, improve his concentration ability and comprehension. Reading also helps in improving reading speed, spelling and grammar.⁷
5. **Improves vocabulary:** reading a variety of books widens a child's horizon. Expose him to the wonderful world around him. He became to know that the universe is diverse and exciting at the same time. Vocabulary, spelling and new words are just some of the wonderful gifts that a child can earn through their fantastic books.
6. **Concentration and focus:** when a child spends hours in reading he unconsciously learn to concentrate on the task at hand which is required in his later life with lots of distractions around. The most common complain that the teachers make is the lack of concentration in the students. Reading helps to overcome this problem and make the children focused.⁸

⁵ C.Gordon Wells, John Nicholes. Language And Learning (Heneman Educational Books 1985) 96-103.

⁶ Chitra Sen. A Parents' Guide to Develop Reading Habits in Children. Article Source: <http://ezinearticles.com>

⁷ C.Gordon Wells, John Nicholes. Language And Learning.180.

⁸ Wells, C.G.The Meaning Makers. Children learning Languages and using language to learn, (London, Hodder and Stoughton 1986). 76.

7. Reading is important for cognitive development
8. Reading starts the thinking process and the child develops better understanding towards his surrounding and enjoys life more fully.
9. **Increased self-esteem:** reading books give new ideas and experiences to the child. With increased knowledge the child becomes more and more confident, imaginative and innovative. They acquire problem solving skills and become independent.
10. **Memory boost:** through reading books children unknowingly acquire memory and retention boost. The longer a child is engrossed in a book the better is his memory. The child has to remember what happened in the beginning and at the end in order to comprehend a story. Therefore reading is exercising the child's brain and improves his memory.⁹
11. **Calm the mind:** books are steady companions for all times. They are the child's best friend. The child finds new love in books and easily makes their world a fuller and better place as long as they have books to take them through. When the child faces any problem of difficulty he stays calm and attempts to find solution. So many possibilities and alternatives appear to the child, which were not there before.¹⁰
12. **Creativity:** we don't want to make our child a book worm, practical implications of the reading must be taught. Child must be able to apply his knowledge to his surroundings and become creative.
13. **Reading improves speech and written language:** reading and writing have very close relationship. Reading helps students to become good writers. They learn to write with creative styles and correct grammatical structures. Their sense of accuracy in spellings increase.
14. **Achieving educational success:** a child's educational success depends upon leisure reading. When a child reads other than academic books on topics of his interests like science, history, geography, etc. he gains additional knowledge. He becomes more informative and expressive. This means that reading prepares the child for future learning and prepares him to read challenging materials in the future. It helps him to grow and be employable in the modern world.
15. **Understanding the religion better:** reading religious books strengthens the child's faith. Stories of religious history provide great lessons and helps in the moral development of the child. They learn to behave in socially acceptable ways and become good citizens. Reading also helps them to deal with the social problems and negative consequences in the proper manner.

There are many reasons for lack of reading habits among children:

1. **Poverty:** undoubtedly poverty poses numerous threats to children's education. Children belonging to poor families mostly have uneducated parents who are unable to help them in literacy. Food is also scarce and they are usually under nourished. Most of them don't even go to schools. Those who manage somehow attend sub-standard schools. Reading for fun is out of question as these people can't even get the basic necessities of life.¹¹
2. **Illiteracy:** children of families where parents are illiterate can't get any help in the development of reading habit. The early years of their life go wasted because their parents are not able to read. They don't get the opportunity to see their parents involved with the books and the home environment isn't ideal to promote the reading habit among them.
3. **Dearth of good children's literature:** authors and publishers are less interested in children's literature because they think it is not that important and also because it is

⁹ Vygotsky L.S. *Mind In Society*. (Cambridge MA Harvard University Press 1978). 32.

¹⁰ Vygotsky L.S. *Mind in Society*. 46.

¹¹ Stephen D. Krashen. *The power of reading: insight from the research* (Libraries Unlimited Inc. 1993). 87.

less lucrative. Most of the children literature in our country has always been imported from different countries like Malaysia, Singapore, United States, Canada, etc. which is the main reason for their high costs. Thus they are not affordable by common man.

4. **Excessive homework:** one of the drawbacks of our educational system is that the students are piled up with increasing amount of uninterested and unimaginative text books. It's a usual trend of burdening the child with loads of homework which leaves him with very little time to get indulged in other activities like leisure reading. Another shortcoming of way of teaching those text books is that the child gets repulsive with all kinds of books.¹²
5. **Absence of stimulation by parents and teachers:** when children observe their parents and teacher involved in reading, they themselves develop the interest in it. When they see that the teacher is only instructing them to read but herself is not involved in reading so they get a bad impression about it.
6. **Distractions:** television, radio (FM), internet (Face book, chat rooms, blogs, YouTube), computer games, cell phones (text messages) are the biggest distractions from books. They consume most of their precious time. Doctors have found that children develop eating disorders because of watching too much television. They miss exams and outdoor sports due to their favorite tele-serials. TV time also effects children's eyesight.¹³
7. **Lack of children libraries and book displays, exhibitions and book fairs:**
8. **Screening by early childhood professionals to identify any problem with the child:** professionals like pediatricians, nurses and other healthcare experts are in direct contact with the child. It is their responsibility to detect at routine checkups from infancy to pre-school years, the following kinds of problem that would put the child at risk of developing reading difficulty:
 - Mental retardation
 - Hearing impairment: early identification and intervention is especially important which decide whether a child can become a successful reader or not.
 - Early language impairment: during the first four year the child acquire language at very fast rate. Yet some children are clearly behind by age two or three. This is an important signal of learning impairment of neurological problem. Any of these conditions put the child at risk of future reading difficulties.
 - Delays in expressive and receptive language: children's language development during preschool years has direct link with later reading development.¹⁴

Methodology of the study

Pre-constructed questionnaire was used for the collection of data. Very simple words and phrases were used to construct the questionnaire while keeping in mind the educational level of young students of primary school. The students of the following school contributed to the study. All these schools are located in Gulshan-e-Iqbal, Karachi:

- 1- The Educators Renaissance Campus 1.
- 2- The Educators Renaissance Campus 2.
- 3- S.M Public School,
- 4- Crescent Academy,

¹² Biran Cox. Literacy is not enough. Essays on the importance of reading. (Manchester University Press 1998). 111.

¹³ Times Educational Supplement (2000). Boys drop books in favor of computer and TV. Retrieved March 25, 2007, from <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/database/boys/english.html>

¹⁴ Burns. M.S, P.Griffin and C.E Snow. Op.cit., p.52.

5- Sanober Academy.

Ten students were randomly taken from primary 3, primary 4 and primary 5 of the above mentioned schools. In this way the sampling of this study was based on fifty students in total. Before the students were asked to fill the questionnaires, they were explained the difference between academic reading and leisure reading or reading for fun.

The questionnaire had total three parts: the first part was about general information for example name, school name, class, gender and age of the participating student. The second part was gathering information about the reasons for reading and when do the student get time for leisure reading. The third part was related to the sort of material they read, in which subjects they were interested and also their favorite activities.

The questionnaire was submitted personally to all the participants with the assistance of the teachers of the above mentioned schools. Those questionnaires were then filled. Students were also briefed on the objectives of the study and were given simple instruction regarding the questionnaire. Each question was even read out to the students and if they had any difficulty in understanding, they were encouraged to seek clarification from the teacher present, before they give any answers to the questions. The total fifty students that participated in answering the questionnaire were between age 7 to age 10.

The data collected was scientifically processed and analyzed carefully through simple frequency and percentage distribution tables. For better understanding, the reading habits of primary school children, discussions on conclusions and recommendations are all given in table-1.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographics: total 50 students participated in the study. Table 1 shows there were 16 students from primary class 3, 18 students from class 4 and 16 from class 5. The number of boys and girls were kept equal.

Table 1

Grade level	Boys	Girls	Total
Primary 3	7	9	16 (32%)
Primary 4	9	9	18 (36%)
Primary 5	9	7	16 (32%)
Total	25	25	50 (100%)

Why do you read?

The students were asked to give reasons for their reading activities. Most of the students (84%) said that they read for achieving good grades in their examination. Many students (50%) were also found to be studying for improving their vocabulary and learning new things. Students (50%) also pointed out the pressure from teachers and parents for reading. Homework and school projects are another reason for many students (64%) to do reading. Only a small percentage (5%) of students said that they read for relaxation. 38% have acquired reading as a hobby and 42% children read when they have nothing else to do.

It appeared that academic reasons are very strong for the students to do reading.

Table 2
Why do you read?

Reason	Mostly	Sometimes	Rarely
For better grades in test and examination	42 (84%)	8 (16%)	0.0 (0.0%)
For improving my language skills	25 (50%)	20 (40%)	5 (10%)
For learning new things	22 (44%)	23 (46%)	5 (10%)
For relaxing	5 (10%)	25 (50%)	20 (40%)
Reading is my hobby	19 (38%)	12 (24%)	19 (38%)
For my homework and projects	32 (64%)	12 (24%)	6 (12%)
When I have nothing else to do	21 (42%)	27 (54%)	2 (4%)
When my parents or teacher ask me to read	25 (50%)	21 (42%)	4 (8%)

Frequency of leisure reading

The participating students were asked how frequently they read for fun. Table 3 shows that most of the students (70%) read during school holidays. It shows a very disappointing figure of 0%, that no student was found to be reading for fun daily. The reason is our burden of school home work and attending private tuition classes.

Table 3
Frequency of Leisure Reading

Almost daily	0.0 (0%)
Every other day	9 (18%)
During weekends	6 (12%)
During school holidays	35 (70%)

From where do you get your reading materials mostly?

Most of the students (58%) mentioned that they get books from their school library. Another 28% said that they buy their reading material from the book stores. Only 6% students go to public libraries for their books and 8% said that they borrow from friends.

Table 4
From where do you get your reading material?

From bookstores	28%
From public library	6%
Borrowing from friends	8%
From school library	58%

Most chosen place for leisure reading

The students were asked to mention from where they chose to read their fun material. It was found that a vast majority of children (82%) preferred reading at their homes. Only (14%) said that they read in their school libraries and very few (4%) students said that they go to public libraries for leisure reading. None of the students said that they read while travelling or visit to restaurants. There could be many reasons for the children not using the libraries. The main reason could be that public libraries in Pakistan are mainly for adults, thus interesting children materials are not abundantly available there and because there is a scarce of public libraries in our country. Not every area of our city Karachi, which is the biggest city of Pakistan, has its own public library. Another reason is that access to these libraries is difficult for common man. Apart from this, the reading culture is not prevailing in our society which is very disappointing. It is not so common because most of the parents themselves do not visit these libraries, so how could their children go?

Table 5
Most chosen place for leisure reading

Place	Frequency
Public libraries	2 (4%)
Restaurants	0.0 (0%)
School	7 (14%)
Buses/ cars	0.0 (0%)
Home	41 (82%)

Most desirable reading material

When the students were asked to mention the desirable sort of material for fun reading, it was found that story books and picture comics were mostly preferred by young children. 64% of the children said that they love reading story books in their spare time, while 50% of them said that they love reading comics. Children rarely read magazines but did read from the internet and websites. They were reported saying that they sometimes read newspaper and that is also when pressurized by parents.

Table 6
Most desirable reading material

Subject	Frequency		
	Mostly	sometimes	rarely
Storybooks	32 (64%)	13 (26%)	6 (10%)
Comics	25 (50%)	15 (30%)	10 (20%)
Magazines	5 (10%)	18 (36%)	27 (54%)
Internet/ websites	11 (22%)	15 (30%)	24 (48%)
Newspaper	6 (12%)	26 (52%)	18 (16%)

Most desirable topics for fiction books

It was reported that some 66% of the participating children read fairy tales as the most desirable subject in fiction books, followed by adventure stories as well as funny stories. 46% of the student participants of the study said that they love animal character stories. It is also seen that horror stories are not so popular among the children as young as 7 to 10 years of age. Therefore the most popular subjects are fairy tales, animal stories, adventure and funny stories. The reason could be that the participating students are very young and like to live in happy, delightful world of fantasy and fairies. Horror stories upset them and make them unhappy, that is why they are reluctant to read them.

Table 7
Most Desirable Topics for Fiction Books

Subject	Frequency		
	Mostly	Sometimes	Rarely
Adventure stories	25(50%)	16(32%)	9(18%)
Funny stories/ jokes	25(50%)	18(36%)	7(14%)
Horror stories	14(28%)	17(34%)	19(38%)
Fairytales	33(66%)	14(28%)	3(6%)
Animal stories	23(46%)	14(32%)	11(22%)

Most desirable topics for non-fiction books

For the non-fiction books the most popular amongst the participants was hobbies such as art work. It seems that children (52%) so young are more interested in drawing, coloring and creating new things out of discarded material. The next topic in which children (40%) have been found most interested is sports, specially cricket. It may be due to more publicity given to the game and its player in media which makes the kids more attracted to it. Children are also found to have interest in topics related to animals and plants. Some 46% of the participating students say that they sometimes read books on science experiments. Probably this interest has been developed due to the teaching of science as a subject in schools.

Table 8
Most Desirable Topics for Non-Fiction Books

Subject	Frequency		
	Mostly	Sometimes	Rarely
Hobbies (artwork)	16(52%)	13(26%)	11(22%)
Animals and plants	19(38%)	21(42%)	10(20%)
Sports	20(40%)	11(22%)	19(38%)
Science (experiments)	16(32%)	23(46%)	11(22%)

Enjoyable activities among children

The participating students were asked to choose three activities which they love to do most, out of the eight popular activities among children, and rank them 1st, 2nd and 3rd, according to their liking. The findings are very much expected, as most of the children (70%) chose hobbies and sports as one of their three top most enjoyable activities. The second most enjoyable activity they voted for is playing on the computer or internet. 56% children indicated it as one of their top three enjoyable activities. Then comes watching television as the third most enjoyable activity among them. It is really shocking to see reading at the fourth place, when only 30% children indicated that they enjoy reading books.

Table 9
Enjoyable Activities among Children

Activity	1 st choice	2 nd choice	3 rd choice	Total
Hobbies and sports	11(22%)	14(28%)	10(20%)	35(70%)
Playing on computer or internet	13(26%)	10(20%)	5(10%)	28(56%)
Reading	5(10%)	6(12%)	4(8%)	15(30%)
Watching television	9(18%)	9(18%)	7(14%)	25(50%)
Playing or going out	7(14%)	6(12%)	7(14%)	20(40%)
Listening music	5(10%)	3(6%)	7(14%)	15(30%)
Sleeping	-	1(2%)	3(6%)	4(8%)
Other activities	-	1(2%)	7(14%)	8(16%)
Total	50(100%)	50(100%)	50(100%)	150(300%)

Recommendations

It is a challenging task for the parents to develop reading skills at an early age so that the children grow mentally and work to their full potential. They cannot fulfill their potential without the cognitive growth which comes from reading widely. Reading helps in shaping individuals personality and also important for economic growth. More adolescent today are facing reading difficulties it could have been avoided if they were properly motivated in developing reading habit at an early age.

Some practical suggestions for the parents to improve their child's fluency and raise their reading level:

1. Introduce reading as an activity that is fun an enjoyable and free from stress. It should not be given as a task but as a playful activity. Make it so much fun that the child looks forward to it.
2. Have a book corner in your home and stuff all sorts of books there.
3. Create a routine: make a routine of reading for 20-30 minutes same time every day for example before or after dinner, or before going to bed.
4. Quiet and comfortable place: it is very difficult to concentrate with the television on or music being played or the telephone ringing. Thus create a suitable comfortable and cozy environment which would enable the child to concentrate on one thing only and that's reading. To the very young child give a reading buddy or any soft toy.
5. Be positive but firm when it comes to regular practice: have patience because the child's concentration in the books will develop and improve over time.
6. Read aloud to them: parents should read the books to their young ones in a way that they will enjoy listening to you. Read to them in an expressive and exciting manner. Show the pictures of the books as well and described it to them which would help them visualize the story.
7. Book choice: use books full of pictures for better understanding.
8. Read slowly so that the child can comprehend you:
9. Ask questions related to the story so that you can see his level of understanding. This would also give an opportunity to the child to express his thoughts.
10. Find out their interest: let your child select the book of his choice. If we give the children what they want rather than what we think they should have, they will start reading.
11. Make reading time, family time: the entire family should get involved in reading together for better outcomes. When kids see their parents reading, then they understand that it is an important part of their life.
12. Motivate your child to read: new things attract child's interest. Buy him new books as presents on different occasions like birthdays, result days or as a reward for doing something good.
13. Be a role model: read a lot of stuff yourself, like magazines or newspaper, etc. daily and discuss interesting news with him. And also encourage your child to read newspaper headlines to their grandparents who are unable to read themselves.
14. Be persistent: make the reading time fun and be persistent even if the child seems uninterested at first.
15. Make regular visits to the library and book fair.
16. Allow limited television watching time to the child.
17. The child should read easy books first and difficult ones later on.
18. With very young children, use play time to encourage reading.
19. Use daily activities for reading: for example during walks and long drives show commercial signs to the child. Also during visit to the supermarkets let him read the shopping lists and in the restaurants encourage him to read the menu.

20. Teach your child to take good care of the books. Advise him to use them without tearing or damaging them.

Schools are regarded as second home to children. They need to promote a reading culture inside and outside of school for the development of life-long learners. More attention should be given to the primary classes for the development of reading habits because this the time when habits become part of their personalities.

Few suggestions for schools

- 1- There is a famous saying that you learn reading by reading. Thus more reading should be done in schools even in the subject like science, social studies and mathematics.
- 2- Home reading program should be introduced, especially in primary schools, in which children should take a book home with them every day to read it for 10 to 15 minutes and write a few comments about the story that they read. These comments enable the teacher to acknowledge what the students have read and how much they have comprehended.
- 3- Make school libraries easily accessible by students even during lunch breaks and after school.
- 4- Setting up reading corners in the class room. Parents can also help in providing reading material to the classroom reading corner like any used story book or an old magazine, newspaper, etc. Students should also be allowed a specific period for using the reading corner.
- 5- Numerous activities can be done in the school library like story-telling program, in which librarian, teachers and parent volunteers can take turns in sharing stories with children.
- 6- Organized buddy reading program in which advanced level students can read stories to younger ones. This will help the advance students as well as the young ones.
- 7- Schools must conduct informative sessions and workshops for the awareness of parents and providing them practical tips for developing reading habits in their children.
- 8- Throughout the early grades, time material and sources should be provided to support daily independent reading by children of books of their interest. It should be kept in mind that the books are according to the children's capacity of reading.
- 9- Support should also be provided daily for reading slightly difficult material to promote advances in the student's capacity.
- 10- Home reading assignment should be given daily for the promotion of independent reading outside of school.
- 11- Before summer and winter vacations, provide them with a list of interesting and exciting stories, according to the child's grade level.
- 12- Also encourage parental involvement.

Conclusion

There is a world wide drive for the promotion of life long learning and this aim could only be achieved through the development of reading habit. The best time for developing such habit in the child for the love of books is his precious childhood period.

The parents and teachers have great responsibility is assisting their child in all the available possible ways to develop his reading habits and continuously helping him to become a life long learner.

Leisure reading which is reading for fun has been proved to improve the reading skills of an individual. Therefore students must be encouraged towards reading different kinds or books in which he feels he has his best interests. The findings of this study revealed that mostly students are reading under the pressure of acquiring good marks in their respective examinations. Thus their sole aim is actually related to academics rather than to benefit from reading. This is probably due to the pressure from the parents and teachers which places high emphasis on achieving good grades in their academic's subjects. Even the young students of primary classes are in this stressful state which plays a very negative role in their young minds.

Mostly students complain that they are only getting time for leisure reading over school's summer and winter vacations because of the enormous load of homework which exhausts them and leave them with no time for fun reading. The primary school management must take a look into this serious matter and should take some prompt initiative like reducing the homework load and giving them ample time for leisure reading inside as well as outside the school, if they really want their students to go higher in their education.

Recent technological advancements like cable television, computers, video games and other electronic gadgets, are gaining popularity among children. Due to the easy access and low cost of these electronic gadgets there influence is growing more and more day by day therefore affecting the children's reading habits. Sports and other essential physical activities are also suffering as the time that should have been provided to them is being consumed by the modern technology and electronic media.

Parent and teacher can help the children in maintaining balance between their school work and leisure reading. Access to school and public libraries should be increased and they should be stocked with interesting, captivating and culturally acceptable reading material for children of all ages.