

**The Reading Praxis: A Study of Reading Practices of Pakistani Educators**

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*Abstract*



*This study explores the state of reading culture in Pakistan via the role of teachers and school administration associated with children (aged 6-16 years) in the Sargodha region of Punjab, Pakistan. The main proposition is that the reading culture among students cannot be improved without strengthening the teachers' bond with reading. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-five teachers and six school principals from the schools of three different socioeconomic categories. The data was analyzed to ascertain whether the school teachers and administration were promoting reading habits, specifically pleasure reading, among young learners or not. The findings reflect that pleasure reading is disregarded by the schools in Pakistan and they only promote one narrow version of reading viz. 'academic reading' which ignores the social and personal benefits of reading. Moreover, such readers with no interest in autonomous reading will lead to a generation of poor readers in the country.*

**Keywords:** Reading, Recreational Reading, Reading Culture, Pakistani Teachers, Literacy, Sargodha  
**Introduction**

This study of teachers' attitudes towards pleasure reading is aimed at the investigation of reading culture in Pakistan during the digital age (Atta, 2016; Aqil, 2020). As an oral society, there has never been enough emphasis on reading within the country; however, over the years the already minimal influence of reading has been receding. Unfortunately, not many academic studies have been conducted to figure out the reasons and the role of teachers in the decline of reading culture in Pakistan. This research investigates the relationship of teachers and students with pleasure reading but is primarily a part of bigger research done to explore the role of parents, teachers, students, libraries, and schools in the promotion of pleasure reading in the Sargodha district of Pakistan.

Suleiman and Crossman (1980) define reading as a sense-making activity and an interactive process for the promotion of personal, socio-economic, and civic life. Reading is also one of the essential tools for the enhancement of vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension skills (Paulson, 2006). Moreover, the reading culture brings good changes in every sphere of life not only in academia by differentiating readers from non-readers.

Reading is generally categorized into reading for survival, reading for learning, or academic reading and pleasure reading. Hence, the present study focuses on pleasure reading—defined by Nell (1988) as something "that allows us to experience other worlds and roles in our imagination", which does not generally begin on its own and has to be introduced by a mentor; however, afterward, it continues on its own due to the readers' willingness to read. Reading for pleasure involves creating an active connection between the book and the reader in form of the reading experience (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; KwaZulu-Natal Education Department, 2005). Krashen (1993) is a strong advocate of reading for pleasure because he claims "when children read for pleasure ... they acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called *language skills* ...."

The other terms associated with Pleasure Reading are Leisure Reading, Reading for Pleasure, and Reading for Fun. All these include reading storybooks, magazines, newspapers, and books – basically, anything that the students do not have to read as a mandatory part of their course evaluation.

### **Reading Culture**

According to Griswold, Wright, and McDonnell (2015) “reading class” is a category that routinely read in their leisure time. Historically that class has been an elite group having privilege in form of money or power. However, with industrialization, it became possible for the middle class to gain access to reading material (Levine, 2002).

The study uses the term reading culture to refer to how a particular community promotes reading. This essentially means the government which promotes reading at national, regional, and local levels; a thriving publishing industry that is responsible to provide the reading material at economical cost, a developed and well-stocked library system; an educational system that does not fixate on the academic reading; the reading mentors in form of teachers and parents who are avid readers and all this that results into a generation that actively engages in pleasure reading. Magara (2005) describes reading culture as the ‘one where reading is highly valued and appreciated’ not only for academic purposes but as “something practiced in all aspects of our lives”. Dorian (2009), in her study on literacy in the multicultural world, modifies the famous African proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” to stress the importance of the sociocultural practices in the promotion of reading habits. Heath (1983) views this sociocultural role as something that promotes or scaffolds reading among the readers.

While the cognitive function of reading cannot be declined, it is significant that reading is a socio-cultural practice and is dependent on societal traditions for its promotion (Morrow and Young, 1997). Parents, Teachers, Schools, Libraries, and the Publishing industry are the influential factors in promoting reading and not only the positive or negative attitude but also a selection of particular reading genres depending on cultural practices.

### **Literature Review**

A survey conducted by Gallup and Gilani Foundation in 2019 found out that about 75% of Pakistanis avoid pleasure reading. It shows that a staggering number of people in a country are struggling to enhance their literacy skills. Further in their survey, they found out that only 16% of the people read books for one hour a day.

Laster et al. (2009) focus on different aspects of kindergarten teachers' behavior to know about the early acquisition of literacy skills. An educator plays a significant role in developing literacy (Arbeau & Coplan, 2007; Justice et al., 2008). Teachers can modify the attitude of students regarding reading by promoting their relevant skills. It has been observed that in the classrooms where there are positive teacher-child relationships, children have better reading skills (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Teale and Sulzby (1989) recommend teachers adopt the patterns of loud reading and introduce the books by motivating students in discussion regarding the reading material. Teaching reading is described as “rocket science” by Moates (1999) due to scarce resources to teach this skill. While it is a myth that a teacher alone can prevent reading failure (Coyne et al., 2004), what is needed are the teachers who read and the readers who teach as they will be well-aware of children’s choices in reading (Cremin, et al. 2009; KwaZulu-Ntal Education Department, 2005).

Gambrell (2007) in her article on the promotion of pleasure reading lays stress on teachers being readers as only then they will be able to “serve as active, rather than passive, reading models for their students” (pg. 16). She further adds that such teaching mentors will be effective to shape the students into members of the reading community.

### **Research Questions**

As earlier stated, this study was a part of a bigger project that investigated the role of book-publishers, parents, and libraries in the Sargodha region of Pakistan, the research question for the study was what kind of role the academics (schools and teachers) are playing in promotion of pleasure reading. An investigation into the material resources and attitude of academics were the two main factors this research explored.

### **Research Methodology**

This study was conducted in the Sargodha district of Punjab (Pakistan) where twenty-five teachers and six school principals of students (aged 6 to 16 years) participated. Data was collected from teachers and school administration regarding their attitude towards recreational reading, their preferences for reading material, and the support they were providing to the students for pleasure reading. The schools were divided into three categories depending upon the socioeconomic classes they broadly cater to evaluate reading practices among different classes of the Sargodha region. The

three categories will be referred to as categories one, two, and three, respectively. The category one schools are the government schools which take a nominal fee, the category two schools cater to the middle class which does not approve of government school teaching but cannot afford their children to be sent to the category three schools. Category three roughly refers to the elite schools charging a fee of 2000 and more per month and do not follow the Punjab Textbook Board curriculum.

Semi-structured interviews were an appropriate data collection method for this study since detailed information about the school staffs' views and their practices about pleasure reading was required and the researchers recorded and later transcribed the interviews for an in-depth focus.

### **Data Analysis**

This section presents the semi-structured interviews conducted with the teachers and school principals of the area. The data was then put into different themes and sorted into two broad categories of Teachers and Principals.

- **Significance of Pleasure Reading**

The participant teachers agreed upon the significance of reading as one of the teachers from category one used the flight analogy associated with reading. He elaborated it as a skill that enables one to explore history, myriad ideas, and experiences. However, when it comes to pleasure reading, about 60% of the teachers focused on the academic results and favored pleasure reading only when it can bring good grades for the students. For instance, a 9<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher from category two suggested that science students must read science subjects to gain "a better understanding of their topics". Moreover, from the third category, a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher added that pleasure reading is good for O-level students as there is no fixed syllabus for this grade and such reading will be helpful in exams in the long run.

On the subject of the importance of reading, most of them supported reading for pleasure. In Category One school, the principal expressed a negative attitude towards reading claiming that it wastes students' time and leads them to ignore academic reading. When asked if it is important for the general public other than students to read for pleasure, the reply was in affirmative with an elaborate discussion on the positive impact of reading for pleasure including opinion building, keeping track of new information, and developing vocabulary. However, he did not see any utility of pleasure reading for students.

It can be concluded that Pleasure reading has been made subservient to academic reading and it is not perceived to have a purpose of its own.

- **Personal Reading Habits**

When inquired about their reading habits, 52% replied that they did not read as they had no time for reading whereas, 36% replied that they just read informative books. In a semi-structured interview, the researchers had the opportunity to probe further so on asking them to elaborate on what type of informative books they read, they mentioned religious books and newspapers. This was found in a majority of interviews. Below, an excerpt has been provided from the interview with a male teacher from category one:

So, you like to read religious books. Which one is your favorite?

Teacher: Seerat-un-Nabi (S.A.W.)

Please tell me the names of any other books that you have read.

Teacher: You know Seerat-un-Nabi (S.A.W.) has seven volumes. When I finish reading the first, I start reading the second one and till the time I'm on the seventh volume, I have to go back to the first one as I don't remember what was written in that.

A female 6<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher from category one claimed to be an avid reader but while explaining she made it clear that her reading was limited to the course books issued by Punjab Text Book Board only.

The remaining (16%) said that they read novels, magazines, newspapers, and other such material if available. However, the data showed that more elderly teachers were non-readers as they did not find any value in reading books other than the ones specified by the Text Book Board.

Most of the principals who were interviewed were above 40 years of age except for some principals in Category Three schools. The study shows that only 25% of the principals read for pleasure. Moreover, they were also not keen on promoting pleasure reading among their staff as one of them vocalized, "It will be unfair to force the teachers to do an extra reading as they already have a

lot of workloads". Furthermore, not many of the school principals were tech-savvy; for instance, a quote provided below from one of the Category One school principals about the connection between reading and the internet clarifies the point:

Principal X: I have heard students use the internet. Main ny kabhi net daikhi nahi hai magr mera kheal hai wo koi achi cheez nahi hoti. They cannot read anything there.

[I have heard of students using the internet. I have never seen the internet but I believe it is not a good thing. Students cannot read anything there.]

- **School Support Towards Reading for Pleasure**

All teachers insisted on having received special support from their schools in promoting pleasure reading. The teachers from category three schools pointed out a lot of such schemes as the caterpillar scheme, award of reading badges, and the best reader of the session to promote pleasure reading<sup>1</sup>. The teachers from categories one and two also lauded the efforts of their heads in this regard but only mentioned the library period for reading to this effect. One interview question was '*what activities your school typically arranges to promote reading for pleasure?*' The researchers were told about the book fairs that two of the category three schools arranged annually whilst no such activities were reported by the participants from category one and category two schools. The teachers also seemed to be satisfied with the budget allocated for books. This disparity among the groups could be attributed to the rigid focus of category one and category two schools on the curriculum and the result-oriented approach these schools had.

The school principals from all three categories opined that the teachers were free to read for pleasure in their free time; however, there was no specific strategy for promoting pleasure reading among students and teachers for which they cited budget constraints as one of the primary reasons. It has also been observed that the principals from category two schools were oriented towards the promotion of spoken English programs for the teachers which they deemed more useful than reading activities. The category three school principals maintained that their teachers were avid readers as they had to be very knowledgeable for teaching O and A levels students.

- **School Budget Allocation for Pleasure Reading**

The schools selected from category two and category three were part of bigger networks with only one branch located in the research setting. On the contrary, category one schools were government schools that operated under the Education department. This means that these branches did not have any control over the budget allocation for books and needed prior approvals even if they were deemed to promote recreational reading. Only the category three schools reported that they could opt for receiving books via grants and book fairs; however, they also needed to get policy approvals.

### **Conclusion**

The research identified the role of teachers in promoting recreational reading and it can be concluded that the reading culture in Pakistani schools is oriented towards academic reading. Pleasure reading only serves the purpose to clarify the concepts mentioned in textbooks with no aesthetic value associated with them. Furthermore, they strictly believed in controlling the reading material so the students did not get 'distracted' from getting academic success. This belief is especially true for senior classes, i.e., from matriculation onwards as the students are supposed to prepare for college entrance exams such as MCAT and ECAT. It can be considered as one of the reasons for the decline in reading habits with age. This is supplemented by the finding that teachers over 30 are mostly non-readers.

As the students do not have direct access to the reading material due to its unavailability in general, the teachers and school principals are in a controlling position to serve as reading mentors for the students but their strongly held beliefs in favor of academic reading hinder the promotion of reading culture. Reading for pleasure must not be limited to a 30-minute library period with a very limited selection of books. On the other hand, it should be supplemented by a range of reading material easily accessible to the students.

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<sup>1</sup> The Caterpillar scheme refers to a growing chart, shaped in form of a caterpillar with a head and a tail, pasted in the class individually for each student. More charts are added depending upon the number of books a student reads in an academic year.

The findings of the study indicate that more than half of the participating teachers and principals (52%) were non-readers and, hence, can be considered as a major factor behind the receding reading culture amongst the students and teachers in Pakistan. If the teachers want to be effective reading mentors to convince the students of the value of recreational reading, they must first become avid readers (Searle, 1985). The popular genre among the teachers who read is informative books and most specifically religious books which reflects the prime choice of reading material for Pakistani adults.

### Recommendations

Every child deserves to have reading mentors and a supportive reading environment and this can effectively be attained through the role of schools, teachers, parents, and the community at large. However, the findings of the study elucidate that schools need to commit themselves to building a reading culture oriented towards all forms of reading and immediate steps need to be taken to improve the situation. The findings of this article may serve as a roadmap for the teachers, schools, and language planning policymakers to take steps for promoting reading culture amongst students and teachers in Pakistan which is crucial in the world of today.

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