

Investigating Students' Leisure-Time Reading Preferences in Upper Primary Classrooms in Fiji

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Abstract

This quantitative study investigated upper primary school students' leisure time reading preferences in Fiji. A structured questionnaire was administered to 92 students in Years 7 and 8 of a select school in western Fiji. The findings revealed that the majority of students engaged in leisure reading, with storybooks being the most preferred reading material, followed by newspapers, magazines, online materials and religious texts. Adventure stories emerged as the most popular subgenre, and horror, comedy, romance, and suspense were also preferred by students. The study identified specific titles and authors that captured the students' interest, with J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series being the most popular. These findings challenge the notion that students do not read during their leisure time and highlight the importance of promoting and supporting reading habits among young learners. The study has significant implications for teachers, parents, and policymakers in promoting literacy and cultivating a love for reading. Teachers can accommodate students' diverse interests by incorporating a variety of reading materials and genres into educational settings. Parents can encourage reading at home by providing access to books and modelling positive reading habits. Policymakers can support literacy initiatives by investing in well-stocked libraries and promoting community-based reading programmes. By understanding and nurturing students' reading preferences, stakeholders can create an environment that encourages lifelong learning and enhances overall academic achievement.

Keywords:

Reading, Literacy, Reading for Pleasure, Leisure Reading, Comprehension

Introduction

Reading in leisure time plays a fundamental role in students' academic and personal development, particularly in upper primary classrooms where reading habits are still being shaped. Developing a strong reading culture during this period can improve literacy skills, foster creativity, and contribute to lifelong learning. However, understanding students' reading preferences during leisure time is essential for teachers, parents, and policymakers to design effective literacy programmes and interventions that align with student interests.



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Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims to ensure inclusive and quality education for all, focusing on promoting lifelong learning and acquiring basic literacy skills, including reading. Reading is defined as the process of deriving meaning from text (Cline et al., 2006). Developing this skill is crucial for students to achieve success in life, as children who read frequently and widely tend to outperform their peers who do not. Reading enables students to better understand their beliefs, values, and aspirations. In addition, it allows them to understand the lives of others, fostering empathy and a sense of compassion. According to Putra et al. (2012), reading is an essential skill for all students, regardless of their level of education. It is one of the four language skills that students must master to comprehend texts fully. While some students read for academic purposes, others read for pleasure. Several studies have been conducted to identify students' literacy interests in their classrooms (Anderson, Wilson, et al., 1988; Greaney, 1980; Lagi, 2019; Shameem, 2002). These studies consistently show that reading books in one's leisure time is the best predictor of measures of reading achievement. However, most students rarely participate in this activity. Research has also demonstrated that reading helps students succeed, but there is little research on students' reading habits during leisure time, particularly in Fiji. This study addressed this research gap by investigating what students read in their leisure time and their preferences for books and authors. By identifying these preferences, teachers can better support students in developing positive reading habits that extend beyond the classroom and into their daily lives.

The findings of this research will provide valuable insight into how reading preferences evolve in upper primary years and inform strategies to foster a reading culture that aligns with students' interests and needs.

Literature Review

For a considerable period of time, children's literature has served as a supplement to the curriculum in many classrooms, a tradition that continues in some areas today. However, over the past three decades, teachers have increasingly acknowledged the vital role that children's literature plays in fostering literacy (Gamble, 2019; Leland et al., 2022). This shift in pedagogy during the 1980s and 1990s, from the use of highly structured literacy materials to the incorporation of children's literature, has elevated the importance of children's literature in teaching reading (Florence, 2017; Gabrielsen et al., 2019; Leland et al., 2022). The transition from literacy materials to children's literature demonstrates the significance of leisure reading as a crucial aspect of literacy. Leisure reading not only provides enjoyment but also promotes learning (Garces-Bacsal et al., 2018). Through participation in leisure reading, students develop skills beyond the

basic literacy components. They begin to recognise textual patterns and connections between various literary texts, enhancing their comprehension and discourse (Deane, 2020).

Reading is a crucial skill that plays a significant role in the cognitive development of young minds. According to Castles et al. (2018), effective reading habits help children gain practical, meaningful knowledge. To understand the meaning of written text, readers must determine and derive meaning from printed words (Foorman et al., 2016; Tulomana et al., 2023). The process involves converting the written symbols into linguistic sound symbols and using language knowledge to reassemble the writer's message. Zainal and Husin (2011) emphasise that reading is a cognitive skill that requires the reader to apply various abilities such as inferring, questioning, predicting, and making conclusions to extract information from the text. Reading also allows one to reflect on previously held beliefs and introduce new ideas. Ainscow and Messiou (2017) highlight that reading can stimulate the reader's thinking and provide context for previously held beliefs.

Reading plays a crucial role in the practical aspects of our lives, as evidenced by numerous biographies and autobiographies that emphasise its significance. For instance, in the autobiography *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story* (Carson & Murphey, 1992), Ben Carson highlights the impact of reading on his personal development. He recalls developing a passion for reading about animals and nature, which improved his skills in identifying rocks and improved his performance in school. Visiting the library regularly expanded his interest in other genres and categories, resulting in better vocabulary and comprehension. Reading also helped him solve mathematical problems by enhancing his critical thinking skills. The positive effects of leisure reading, as demonstrated by Ben Carson's experiences, are undeniable and far-reaching.

According to numerous studies, many students do not have a habit of reading frequently. For example, Zafar (2018) found that very few preschool and primary-grade students opt to read books during their free time at school. Greaney (1980) discovered that fifth-grade students spent only 5.4% of their out-of-school free time reading, and 23% read nothing. Furthermore, a study by Delgado et al. (2018) revealed that students spend little free time reading. In addition, research conducted in various parts of the world, including Singapore and the United States, has shown a steady decline in reading habits as children age (Ferguson, 2020; Gander, 2013).

Scholars from diverse fields have investigated how much time students spend reading and its impact on cognitive functions. Foorman et al. (2016) found a

strong relationship between reading and academic achievement. They asserted that a student who is a proficient reader is more likely to succeed academically and pass exams than a student who is a poor reader. Furthermore, they discovered a strong correlation between reading ability and vocabulary knowledge. As a result, students who read widely tend to have a large vocabulary. Similar findings were reported by Kumar (2017), who also highlighted the importance of reading in academic achievement. Therefore, determining whether students read and what they read is equally important.

According to Cunningham (2019), reading storybooks stimulates imagination in students and unlocks a treasure trove of experiences that transcend time and distance, connecting people in meaningful ways. By reading, individuals gain a wealth of experience, enabling them to broaden their perspectives, intensify and expand their interests, and deepen their understanding of themselves, other human beings, and the world. With the emergence of new genres such as cli-fi or climate fiction, traditional literary genres are being supplemented, and reading interests are evolving.

Several researchers and teachers agree that exposing students to diverse and high-quality books helps them develop an appreciation for literature (Baba & Affendi, 2020; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Rapanta et al. (2020) emphasised the importance of reading in preparing young students for entry into the realm of literacy. Reading aloud to young students is widely regarded as the most effective method for building the knowledge necessary for eventual reading success (Anderson, Hiebert, et al., 1988; Senawati et al., 2021).

Evans et al. (2014) posited that books in a home environment positively impact a child's educational attainment. Evans additionally emphasised that the availability of books at home is more critical than the father's level of education and more essential than the child's socioeconomic background. Baker et al. (2020) and Chandra and Chand (2024) argued that teachers who read aloud to their students foster strong language and reading comprehension skills in their students. The advantage of having books at home and reading to children from an early age is that it exposes them to literacy and promotes a lifelong love of reading. When reading becomes a habit, literacy development is likely to follow.

According to Ganapathy and Seetharam (2016), increasing the availability of books and employing them to stimulate language and play activities can improve literacy levels. Scholars widely accept that reading interest is closely tied to one's concepts, opinions, and attitudes toward learning (Florence, 2017; Nespor, 1987). The National Reading Panel (US) (2000) posits that reading interest can contribute

to developing a positive literacy attitude. Reading interest can serve as a driving force for people to acquire and develop knowledge based on their unique requirements and needs. This notion is supported by Vig and Sharma (2014), who argue that reading interests can influence lifelong learning and continuing education.

Language instructors frequently prioritise independent reading, exposing students to authentic literature from their initial interactions with print and incorporating sustained silent reading time in their classrooms. Studies indicate that students who read books at school are more likely to continue this activity outside of the classroom environment (May & Elder, 2018). Despite this, research suggests that some teachers lack the necessary knowledge of children's literature, which can hinder their ability to introduce students to the wide range of books available and may result in ignorance of the influence their teaching methods have on students' attitudes toward reading (Mohammed, 2018).

The notion that students who engage in considerable amounts of voluntary reading have a positive attitude toward reading is supported by both qualitative and quantitative evidence. Research conducted by Ahmadi (2017), Busse (2017), Greaney (1980), Mohammed (2018), Stutz et al. (2016) and Tsang and Fung (2023) all point to this conclusion. It is also well-established that students' reading achievement is closely related to their academic success and the amount of independent reading they do (Delgado et al., 2018; Greaney, 1980; Majid, 2018). These findings suggest that the more one reads, the more proficient they become at reading.

Independent reading, often referred to as leisure reading (Greaney, 1980), free time reading (Searls & Ward, 1985), recreational reading (Manzo & Manzo, 1995) and reading outside of school (Mohammed, 2018) has consistently been associated with increased vocabulary, reading comprehension, verbal fluency, and general knowledge (Delgado et al., 2018; Greaney, 1980; Guthrie & Greaney, 1991; Majid, 2018). Students who engage in independent reading tend to develop into stronger readers, perform better on achievement tests, and have a greater grasp of the subject than those who do not read independently (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991; Majid, 2018; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1993).

According to Shameem (2002), English proficiency is emphasised at all levels of primary education in Fiji. Lagi (2019) conducted a small-scale study in a primary school in Ovalau to identify students' primary literacy difficulties and the methods employed by teachers to overcome them. Her findings revealed that phonology (speech sounds) and orthography (spelling patterns) are students' two most significant literacy problems.

Marx (2018) highlighted that regular monitoring of phonics and reading assessments leads to measurable outcomes. In addition, targeted phonics courses benefit students struggling with reading. Kumar (2017) underscored the significant relationship between pleasure reading and academic achievement. Students who read a substantial amount of fiction for pleasure tend to perform well on English tests (Kumar, 2017).

The ongoing efforts of education stakeholders to improve literacy have achieved considerable progress. However, the issue of illiteracy, particularly in reading, remains a significant concern. As Lacanivalu (2017) noted, there are legitimate concerns raised by education stakeholders regarding the impact of modern communication technologies, such as texting and Facebook, on children's reading habits. This concern is supported by numerous international studies, including Bal (2018) and Sari et al. (2020), which have documented the negative effects of the digital age on pleasure reading and the decline of the English language standard.

Since 2009, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has revealed that students who have a fondness for reading consistently outperform their peers in literacy assessments (OECD, 2021). Similarly, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (2007) reports that students with a positive attitude toward reading perform well in the Progress in International Reading Literacy study. However, reading abilities can be hindered if students struggle to access storybooks or lack the time to read them. Unfortunately, the International Literacy Association (2020) notes that the issue of access to books and the opportunity to read remains a significant concern in several countries and states.

Children denied access to books during their formative years often struggle to cultivate healthy reading habits (Deavers et al., 2000). Palani (2012) states that fostering healthy reading habits is essential for building a literate society. Reading not only shapes one's personality but also promotes critical thinking. Palani (2012) posits that effective learning is linked to effective reading habits, where readers quickly identify symbols and their associated meanings, ultimately leading to comprehension. When students understand the texts, they ultimately learn (Bhan & Gupta, 2010; Majid, 2018; Ogbodo, 2010; Singh, 2011).

Background and context of the study

Fiji comprises approximately 330 islands in the Pacific Ocean, located between the equator and the south pole. With roughly one-third of its islands inhabited, the total land area spans roughly 18,333 square kilometres. The archipelago has two significant islands: Viti Levu

and Vanua Levu. Of these, Viti Levu is the largest and the location of Fiji's capital, Suva, where most Fijians reside.

Due to its location, Fiji faces various challenges in educating its population. The Ministry of Education has continued difficulties supplying curriculum materials, conducting professional development workshops, and ensuring internet and communication services in remote schools. The nation's geographical features and its remote location in the Pacific make delivering education to its children and people a significant challenge (Tikoisuva, 2000). Like other Pacific Island nations, Fiji adopts a centralised curriculum development approach (Chand, 2015; Koya, 2015).

Fiji has a rich oral tradition in which the stories of its history, folklore, myths, and legends are transmitted orally through recitation and storytelling. The advent of print culture in Fiji can be traced back to the arrival of Christian missionaries in 1835. With the establishment of *The Fiji Times*, a daily newspaper, in 1869, information became more accessible to the public. English written works gained prominence in areas such as news reporting, advertising, and education. According to Lothington (1998), the Fijian population has yet to develop a significant literate tradition beyond ritual reading patterns, including religious texts, newspapers, and school materials. This may explain why the culture of reading books at home or school has not taken root strongly.

Literature in English for adults has achieved a notable position with the emergence of writers, authors, poets, and playwrights who have produced a distinctive blend of Fijian literature. The publication of literature in Fiji has a history of approximately half a century. Some prominent Fijian writers include Pio Manoa, Raymond Pillai, Satendra Nandan, Subramani, Vilisoni Hereniko, Larry Thomas, Joseph Veramu, and Sudesh Mishra. Emerging writers also work in both English and their vernacular languages. Although these writers have written about various topics, such as Fijian, Indian, colonial projects, postcolonial, independence, coups, political landscape, and modern and postmodern literature, there are no significant contributions to children's literature.

Since independence, the 2000 Education Commission highlighted that a major concern of successive governments has been ensuring equal access to educational facilities for all children (Bacchus, 2000). Bacchus said that though formal, there is concern about education and its quality. One of the significant recommendations for improvements in the primary schools made by the 1969 Education Commission was to increase the supply of books and reading materials amongst the students in schools.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. Do students read storybooks for pleasure in their leisure time?
2. What are the preferred genres among primary school students in Fiji?

Methodology

This quantitative research aimed to determine whether upper primary school students in Fiji engage in pleasure reading. An exploratory case study design was deemed appropriate for this study as it sought to provide preliminary information regarding children's leisure time reading, which can be utilised to draw hypotheses for further research with specific intentions, such as investigating the correlation between student leisure reading and their spoken English or their academic achievements (Mills et al., 2009).

Students in years 7 and 8 of a select school in western Fiji were purposefully chosen for this study. This age group was chosen because they possess the ability to complete the questionnaire with minimal assistance. Ethical guidelines were followed, including obtaining approval from the Ministry of Education and the school being studied. Participation in this study was voluntary, and a parental consent form was provided to all students in years 7 and 8 for their child's participation in the research.

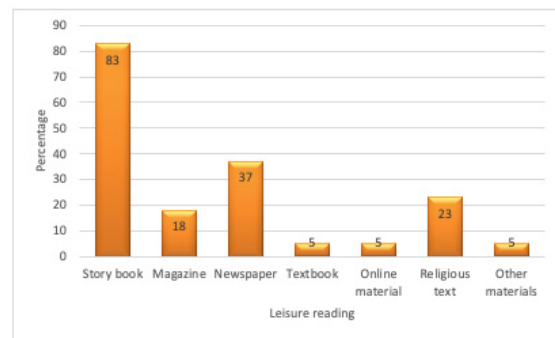
The case study school had 120 students in grades 7 and 8. The parental consent form was sent to all parents, and 77% (n=92) responded positively. A structured questionnaire was used as the primary instrument for data collection. The questionnaire used existing literature on children's reading preferences and was adapted to the unique Fijian setting to ensure cultural relevance. It included sections on reading frequency, preferred genres, and motivations for reading. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with a select group of students from a comparable population to assess the clarity, comprehension, and appropriateness of the questions. Minor adjustments were made to enhance the language and structure of the questions based on the feedback received. These 92 students were asked to complete the final version of the questionnaire, which consisted of closed-ended questions with Likert scale options. The data collected were analysed using simple descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages, which are represented in the form of bar graphs.

To establish the validity of the research instrument, expert opinions were obtained from experienced teachers and literacy specialists to assess its content validity. The researcher ensured reliability by being thorough, careful, and honest in conducting the research.

Results of the study

The participants were presented with seven options to choose from in relation to their leisure-time reading habits: storybooks, magazines, newspapers, textbooks, Internet materials, and religious texts, among others. Most of the respondents indicated that they preferred to read storybooks, which were found to be the most popular choice. Newspapers were the second most popular option, followed by the other choices that received less attention. The preference for leisure-time reading is illustrated in Figure 1.

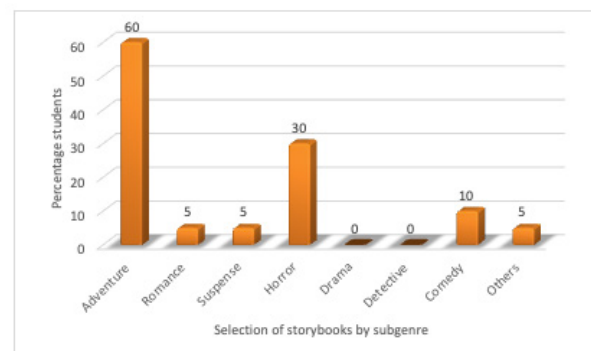
Figure 1.
What do students read in their leisure time?



When asked about the number of books they had read, 55% of the participants reported reading more than eight storybooks; 10% read between thirteen and fifteen books, 10% read between sixteen and eighteen books, and 15% read more than twenty-one books in a single year. The remaining individuals had read fewer than eight books and one participant had read only two storybooks.

When selecting books from subgenres, most participants chose adventure storybooks (60%). However, a closer examination of subgenre preferences reveals that horror stories also attract a considerable readership, suggesting a nuanced taste among students. On the contrary, only a small percentage of participants preferred suspense, romance, drama, detective fiction, or comedy, among other subgenres. The distribution of storybooks across different subgenres is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2.
Selection of storybooks



When asked about their favourite titles, the students exhibited a high degree of discernment in their selections. They mentioned a variety of titles, including *Beast Quest*, *Teacher's Pet*, *Rain of the Moon*, *Goosebumps*, *Harry Potter*, *Strongman*, *Cinderella*, *My Book of Bible Stories*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Dork Diaries*, *Lily Alone*, *Treasure Island*, and *Malory Towers*. A critical analysis of these choices reveals a preference for both classical and contemporary literature, reflecting diverse literary influences. *Harry Potter* emerged as the most popular title among the options listed. The authors associated with these works included Adam Blade, Chris Demarest, Tom McCaughhren, RL Stine, Jules Verne, Stephanie Greene, Walt Disney, Johann Wyss, Rachael Renee Russell, J. K. Rowling, Jacqueline Wilson, Johanna Spyri, Briana and Enid Blyton. Rowling was the preferred author among the participants and her works were the most frequently cited. The most popular subgenre among students was adventure, followed by horror, comedy, romance, and suspense. These findings emphasise the need to explore how popular authors influence students' reading choices and preferences.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study reveal significant insights into the leisure reading preferences of primary school students, offering a contrast to previous studies while highlighting the diverse genres and materials that capture their interest. A deeper critical evaluation suggests that students' preferences may be influenced by factors such as peer recommendations, media exposure, and accessibility of reading materials.

Previous research conducted by Delgado et al. (2018), Greaney (1980), and Zafar (2018) suggested that reading books in one's leisure time was the strongest predictor of reading achievement. These studies also found that most students did not read significant amounts of books on a daily basis. On the contrary, the present study found that primary school students prefer to read stories during their free time. These students not only read storybooks, but also enjoy reading newspapers, magazines, online books and materials, and religious texts. When it comes to subgenres, adventure stories are the most popular, followed by suspense, romance, horror, and comedy. One possible explanation for these findings may be that storybooks provide an escape from reality. Through immersion in different worlds, time periods, or fantastical settings, readers can temporarily relieve themselves from the pressures of everyday life and stimulate their imagination. Another possible explanation for this could be that many stories contain characters and situations that readers can relate to, allowing them to empathise with the experiences and emotions of the characters. This emotional connection can be deeply satisfying and enhance the reader's enjoyment of the book.

Further analysis is required to determine whether the appeal of adventure stories stems from their narrative structure or thematic elements.

Castles et al. (2018) discovered that cultivating effective reading habits in children can lead to the acquisition of practical knowledge. For example, one such practical knowledge is the ability to select an appropriate title to read. Students often identify popular titles that suit their interests or recommendations from peers and teachers. In this study, numerous titles preferred by students were identified. Among these, *Harry Potter* emerged as the most popular title, with J.K. Rowling being the most preferred author. The *Harry Potter* series has garnered a wide readership among children because of its captivating and imaginative narrative. It would be valuable to investigate whether the preference for Rowling's work is due to thematic depth or its widespread cultural impact.

This research indicates that a substantial number of students engage in leisurely reading. Although some students have an insatiable appetite for books (15%), others selectively choose what they read (55%). The salient assumption is that all students, irrespective of their reading habits, occasionally peruse storybooks, contrary to a commonly held belief among parents and teachers. Storybooks are the most preferred reading material. Adventure stories remain the most beloved subgenre, but students also show interest in suspense, romance, drama, detective fiction, and comedy. This finding calls for further exploration of how educational policies can support and promote leisure reading.

Conclusion and implications of the study

Research suggests that most primary school students participate in leisure reading, with storybooks being their preferred choice of reading material. Contrary to popular belief, children do not limit their reading to storybooks; they also read newspapers, magazines, online materials, and religious texts during their free time. Adventure stories emerged as the most popular subgenre, followed by horror, comedy, romance, and suspense. The study also underscores the importance of effective reading habits in acquiring practical knowledge, as evidenced by students' preferences for specific titles and authors, with J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series being the most popular. These findings challenge the notion that students do not read during leisure time and emphasise the importance of promoting and supporting reading habits among young learners.

This study presents several implications for teachers, parents, and policymakers in promoting literacy and cultivating a love for reading among primary school students. To encourage primary school students to read more, teachers and parents must recognise

the variety of materials children engage with during their leisure time, including newspapers, magazines, online content, and religious texts. Teachers can accommodate students' varied interests and preferences by incorporating these diverse materials into educational settings. Understanding students' preferred subgenres, such as adventure, horror, comedy, romance, and suspense, can help teachers and parents select appropriate reading materials. By offering a wide range of books across different genres, they can cater to individual tastes and encourage students to explore new genres. Incorporating popular titles and authors, such as J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, can also capture students' interest and enthusiasm for reading. Research shows that effective reading habits are essential to acquiring practical knowledge, and teachers and parents can emphasise the importance of cultivating strong reading habits, such as regular reading routines and active comprehension strategies, to help students derive meaningful insights from their reading materials. Policymakers can also play a crucial role in ensuring that primary schools have sufficient resources and access to diverse reading materials by investing in well-stocked libraries, providing funding for classroom libraries, and promoting initiatives that encourage reading at home and in the community.

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