

The Role of Jordanian Schools in Encouraging Students' Outside Reading

Mohammed S. Banihani

Assistant Professor
Department of Educational Administration and Foundations
College of Education
Yarmouk University
Irbid- Jordan

Khalifeh M. Abu-Ashour

Associate Professor
Department of Educational Administration and Foundations
College of Education
Yarmouk University
Irbid- Jordan

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the role of schools in encouraging students' outside reading habits. The study was carried out during the first semester of 2014-2015. In order to understand the role of schools, mainly principals and teachers, two methods of enquiry were employed. First was the collection and analysis of 64 essays that were written by teachers from various schools in Irbid, north of Jordan, as a response to the following question, "Why do you think children in Jordan do not read beyond their schoolwork?" Second, it is the analysis of 12 interviews, which were carried out with a purposeful sample of 12 school principals. Four categories emerged from the essays and the interviews that describe the challenges involved in promoting outside reading for children: Parents' ineffective role, Jordanian culture and reading, emphasis on school curriculum, and technology misuse. Participants recommended that a curriculum reform that includes reading outside of school is needed, providing interesting reading material, providing comfortable places for children to read, as well as the significant role of parents in encouraging their children to read by being role models.

Keywords: Education in Jordan; reading habits; school principals

Introduction

Children who read outside of their schoolwork make better use of their time and become more successful in school. As the digital media is capturing much of children's time, outside reading is not at the top of children's list. Children in Jordan are engaged in other activities than reading. Mainly they are either working on their heavy schoolwork or on the internet or playing computer games. The benefits of outside reading for children are unlimited. They include vocabulary and writing skills, entertainment, better focus and concentration, acquiring knowledge, improving students' memory and imagination.

Writing about outside reading for children comes timely important as the Arab World is troubled with the aftermath of the "Arab Spring." At the moment, thousands of children are unable to attend school in many Arab states. Let alone, in the first place, many of these countries are suffering from high levels of illiteracy in which as many as 75 million in the Arab world do not read or write (Banihani, 2014). In addition, many more children face inadequate education, which leaves many children unable to read although they have been attending schools. Jordan, however, presents a bright picture. It has made major improvements in its educational system. The official literacy rate in Jordan is 98%, which is one of the highest in the region. Public and private universities are available and steadily increasing in number. The first university, the University of Jordan, was founded in 1962, and then it was followed by Yarmouk University in 1973.

At the moment, there are twenty six public and private universities in Jordan. Public basic education is compulsory and free, and children are offered various opportunities to pursue their interest and choice of academic and vocational education.

This paper investigates recreational reading for children. What do school principals and teachers employ in order to improve children's habits toward recreational reading? Collection of data for the study was mainly made on the basis of two approaches. First, it is a content analysis of 64 essays that were written by teachers, and second, a set of 12 in-depth interviews with school principals. This qualitative study aims at understanding the perception that children rarely read outside of their school requirements.

The literature available about children's outside reading in Jordanian schools is limited to some academic papers that deal with the interest of children in reading and on the challenges that stand in the way of promoting such interests. There is more literature available about the early years of schools, which is the time when reading for pleasure should be encouraged. Do schools provide enough opportunities for children to read such as providing class time for reading, and provide reading material for the children; do parents read aloud for their children? Furthermore, in order to motivate students, do schools and parents make children aware of the importance of reading and how it relates to their development and success?

Although the assumption that people in the Arab world do not read is acceptable, statistics to show the percentage of people who read is not available. However, there was a report widely spread suggesting that Arabs read only six minutes a year (Al-Yacoub, 2012). But, Caldwell (2012) refutes this number by showing that the study did not exist anywhere, and this number was rather a myth.

In fact, reading for pleasure is declining in many countries in the world. For example, in a study by Alison (2013) in the UK found that reading for pleasure was decreasing. He studied 35000 children (8-16) year olds. He found that 40% of the children were reading in 2005, which dropped to 30% in 2011 and to 28% in the 2012. Children use multiple devices at the same time. For example, when they are online, 39% said to be watching television as well, 34% use the phone to talk or send text messages, and only 12% said they read a book. Children are leaving books for television and computer games.

The concern that children do not read is acceptable by parents and educators. To tackle this problem many Jordanian initiatives have been tried including providing books for children in schools. In 2006 an educators' initiative made an impact, "We Love Reading;" a project that was established by a Jordanian professor, Rana Dajani, who returned from the US. As she was searching for books for her children to read, she realized that some work needed to be done in order to increase the availability of books and raise better awareness about reading. Her project attracted many other volunteers and involved writing and distributing books for children. Over 5000 children benefited from "We Love Reading" project in Jordan (Freij, 2013). At the moment the project is replicated in many different countries all over the world. According to Dajani (2009), children do not read for pleasure because they have never been taught how to love reading, and parents do not read aloud for their children.

The literature lays the responsibility of children's motivation for reading on parents and schools. For parents, reading for pleasure is not on the top of their list. They are more concerned with their children's grades in schools. Parents do not encourage their children to read out of school and do not buy reading material for them (Bataneh and Barakat, 2005). They encourage them to read their schoolwork and earn better grades. While this sounds like a noble endeavor, it has a special meaning in Jordan as the educational teaching approach of education emphasizes on grades as opposed to anything else.

Starting the habit of reading at an early age is crucial. The role of parents in developing the habits of reading for children in the first three grades was studied by Sadi and Mansi (2011). The study was applied to a sample of 746 kindergarten and elementary schoolchildren employing two scales: Family Literacy Scale and Reading Interest Scale. They found that the motivation of children towards reading was low (Sadi and Mansi, 2011). Also, it was found that the level of education of parents had only a moderate impact on the children's habits of outside reading. It is not clear if the moderately educated parents are readers themselves.

Outside reading by children has numerous benefits including success in school. Studies have shown a strong correlation between outside reading and success in school. Studies in the UK and in the US confirm this finding (See Alison, 2013; and Arthur 1995).

For children, grades 4, 5, and 6, Arthur (1995) found that in a low socio-economic neighborhood in the US students who were identified with reading for recreation have scored more significantly in reading achievement scores in middle-school than the children who were identified with not reading for recreation. He found that reading for pleasure is the most important indicator of a child's academic success than the child's social background or parents' education. In addition, benefits of outside reading include "increased concentration, memory, confidence, greater self-esteem and general knowledge." Reading outside of school help students "build empathy, improves imagination and language development."

Finding reading material for children is particularly a troubling issue in Jordan. Parents find it difficult to find books for children to read, as well as available books are too expensive.

As we were researching this topic on the internet, social media groups complained about not finding enough material for children to read and that available books are too expensive. Children in schools mainly rely on the school library. Stories, magazines and picture books magazines are at the top of their reading interest (Bataneh and Barakat, 2005).

Unfortunately, Jordan lacks major public places for reading. Although schools have libraries, they are not well utilized and updated. There are not many public or even private places where people may read. One Jordanian supporter of improving the status of reading in Jordan observed that Amman is full of coffee shops that are crowded with people smoking water pipes, which in Arabic is called (Argilla). He suggested that there should be some coffee shops that are exclusively designated for reading.

To improve the overall status of recreational reading in Jordan, more measures of a practical nature should be taken. For example, parents and teachers should read aloud for children. Alnassar (2010) examined the impact of teachers' reading aloud to 2nd grade's children in improving their attitudes towards reading. The study was carried out in Saudi Arabia. It was based on an experimental methodology utilizing a sample of three groups of students in which one of them was a controlled group. The study revealed great improvements of the students' attitudes toward reading due to the reading aloud activities that were employed. Silent reading is also recommended. In addition to teachers reading aloud for their students, the whole school should silently read the first thing in the morning (Arthur, 1995).

Methodology

In order to understand the role of schools in encouraging recreational reading, we addressed our research question to teachers and principals during the first semester of 2014-2015. The study consisted of a class of students made up of 87 students in the High Diploma in education program at Yarmouk University. Sixty four students of the class were practicing teachers who considered the study. They were asked to answer the following question in an essay format, "Why do you think children in Jordan do not read beyond their schoolwork?" Both researchers read the essays and found all (64) responses were acceptable for analysis. Systematically the essays were analyzed using content analysis.

In addition to the essays, a set of 12 interviews were carried out with purposeful sample of school principals in Irbid. The purposeful selection was made on the basis of availability and the acceptance of principals to be interviewed. Interviews were analyzed using the Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2012). Four major domains emerged from the essays and the interviews: Parents' ineffective role, Jordanian outlook on reading, emphasis on school curriculum, and technology misuse by children. While teachers and principals were asked to respond to the study's main questions from their own perspective, many of them were also parents of children and their responses also included their parental experiences with their own children and recreational reading.

Discussion of Results

In analyzing the essays by using the method of content analysis participants of the study discussed many issues that attribute to the unfortunate reality that children in Jordan hardly read outside of school. The assumption of the research question as to why children do not read was confirmed by all the essays and interviews. Also, participants elaborated on the full picture as to why children do not read out of school and made some suggestions as to how schools might help in motivating children for recreational reading. We concluded four emerging categories from the essays and the interviews: parents' ineffective role, Jordanian outlook on reading, emphasis on school curriculum, and the misuse of technology.

In addition to these four categories, we will discuss the suggestion of all participants as to what should be done to improve children's outside reading. The following are further discussions of the four emerging responses and some suggested implications.

Parents Ineffective Role

For many parents, their children's grades in school are what really count. Thus, the parent's role in encouraging their children to read is rather low as they do not see the value of reading. Particularly, parents do not see recreational reading reflected in their children's grades report. It was also expressed that even parents themselves do not read. For parents not reading for recreation themselves, they will be unable to be role models for their children; and it goes counter clockwise to the social cognitive theory. Parents' behaviors discourage their children to read.

The following are some examples from the responses in the essays and interviews:

Children do not see teachers or parents as role models they could copy, as hardly grownups read either (Essay).

Parents do not value reading and do not encourage their children to read (School principal).

As a father, I do not spend much time with my children as both, my wife and I, have to work (Essay).

To be honest with you I can't control my children, I have no influence on them, these days children do not listen to us (Principal and Father).

We find children not paying attention to reading because they don't see their parents read. A case in point, in Ramadan, children read more as they see their parents read the Holy Quran (Essay).

Many of the responses of the essays and the interviews concentrated on the parents' role of discussing or modeling the phenomenon with their children. Participants reflected their perception of parents or based on their own personal experience as parents. Parents do not see the value of recreational reading by children as compared to the value of doing schoolwork. Jordanian schools do heavily stress schoolwork and daily load students with homework to the point of not leaving time for children to play and read. In addition, outside forces influence children more than parents. These forces include peer pressure, and electronic games. Some participants, however, gave parents' role a special importance and blamed them for not being role models. As many parents (teachers and principals) do not read themselves, it is hard to expect them to influence children to read.

Jordanian Culture and Reading

Another issue raised in the responses of the participants is related to the Jordanian culture. Reading outside of school is not popular in Jordan, although some people are serious readers. It is uncommon for Jordanian to read in public. For example, it is hard to see people reading in buses or in coffee shops or at the very few public parks, as one of the teachers wrote. High end technology users are perceived as educated but not necessarily people who read for pleasure. Reading is not a priority in Jordan. The following are some examples of participants' responses:

I don't see children reading because the reading culture is not part of the Jordanian culture. In fact if one took a book to read in the bus or any public places, he would look rather strange (Essay).

There are no public places conducive for reading (Essay).

Books are highly expensive (Essay).

The perception of the educated person has changed. The educated person now is the one who uses the latest technology (Principal).

Emphasis on School Curriculum

According to the participants of this study, the nature of school curriculum is overwhelming and requires a lot of time for homework and does not motivate students to read outside the requirements of the school. Also reading is not part of the required curriculum, although the Arabic language curriculum involves some required reading. In addition to the curriculum, school methods are still didactic, teaching methods still heavily depend on the teacher and on rote memorization.

Students are required to spend much time on their daily homework to the point that it leaves no time for them for recreational reading. It is suspected that, as some parents and teachers suggested, the curriculum is disliked by the children to the point that it entices negative feelings about books and reading in general. One teacher who is also a parent of children suggested, "Our children are burned out by homework and by the time they finish they will not have time to play, let alone to read for fun." While this is an important issue and should be discussed in another research, the curriculum should have enough material to entice recreational reading. Another point here related to the curriculum is that exams are abundant in the Jordanian system of education to the point that children spend much of their time preparing for exams. Principals and teachers admit to the fact that the curriculum is impacted and students study merely for the exams.

Technology Misuse

The issue of technology misuse was raised by respondents. As students are caught in spending long hours watching television and playing computer games, they do not spare time to read. Reading has to compete with watching television and other means of technology.

While it is widely reported that the overuse of electronic media has a huge negative impact on children, educators in Jordan and parents find this issue highly alarming. Principals reported numerous problems faced with children at schools because of the children's use of smart phones. Children seek to buy the best brands so they could show off to their peers and use them at school. Children navigate the internet during school time, and were reported watching "not permitted" material and wasting too much time on games. As both researchers are parents of children, the overuse of electronic medium by their own children is alarming. A familiar picture is having all the children in the house busy with phones, playing with gaming consoles, and watching television. Jordan is one of the highest users of internet in the Arab world.

What could be done?

The following question was imposed to participating principals: What are your suggestions to improve children's recreational reading habits? Participants concentrated on establishing some programs that may motivate students to read outside of the school requirements. These programs include reading competitions and establishing book clubs. Other suggestions were more innovative and considered teaching students to think of what is important for them, such as teaching them time management so they could better utilize their time and institutionalize reading across the curriculum. The following are some of the principal's suggestions:

- Encourage reading competitions among students.
- Create a book club.
- Attract students' attention to the importance of reading.
- Encourage students to utilize their idle time.
- Schools should institutionalize reading by providing an hour a week at least for reading.
- Reading should be the work of all teachers not only for language teachers.
- Parents should accompany children to the library and book stores.

While recreational reading is limited to some teachers' personal initiatives and efforts, principals suggested that there should be more systematic programs that encourage children to read, which may involve an hour of daily reading or having reading programs that fill the idle time for children, as well as establishing book clubs and promoting reading competitions. There is a need for innovative programs that encourage students and teach them to read for fun.

Conclusion

There are many obstacles hindering children's reading habits, which include availability of books or reading material, parents' concentration on schoolwork, the demands of schoolwork, the engagement of children in technology such as the social media and playing games. People in Jordan entertain themselves differently than reading; which easily noticed in the popping up of numerous coffee shops, but not of places for reading. Libraries, on the other hand, are not popular and one may find it difficult to find a public place that is conducive for reading. Schools libraries mostly close and even universities libraries close at an early time in the evening. In addition, many children have a deficit in reading and writing. One of the principals suggested that, "Students suffer from basic preparation in reading and writing, some students may even finish tenth grade without knowing how to read or write."

Another challenge of reading is the role of parents as they do not read for their children, neither are they being good role models by reading in front of their children; furthermore, they do not encourage their children to read.

Principals suggested that many efforts have been made in their schools to encourage students to read. However, these efforts are not enough and more systematic programs that provide better environments for reading outside of school are needed. Also, convincing motivational programs should be placed in schools and at different age levels. Furthermore, a connection between success in school and reading should be made clear to the students and parents.

References

- Alison, David (Nov. 1, 2013). Should we be worried about the decline of children's reading? The Guardian, UK.
- Alnassar, S. and Almjadel, M. (2010). Impact of Teachers reading a loud program on improving second grade elementary students' attitude toward reading. *Educational Journal*, VOL 24, No.96. 1-49. Kuwait.
- Al-Yacoub, Ikram (14 July, 2012). Sum of all fears: Arabs read an average of 6 pages a year, study reveals. Al-Arabia News Channel. Retrieved on 17 November, 2014 from: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/14/226290.html>.
- Arthur, Janise E. (1995). *What Is the Effect of Recreational Reading on Reading Achievement of Middle Grade Students?* (Report No. CS 012 329). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED391 143)
- Banihani, Mohammed (2014). Education Reform in the Arab States: Jordan, A case Study. In James O'meara (Ed.), *Literacies the Power to Change: Pathways to Literate Worlds*. England: Oxford University Press.
- Bataineh, R. and Barakat, A. (2005). The reading interests of Jordanian first, second, and third grade pupils and the obstacles limiting these interests. *Journal of Educational Science and Psychology*, VOL 6, No.3, 109-133.
- Caldwell, Leah (January 10, 2012). The Arab reader and the myth of six minutes. Alakhbar, English. Retrieved on November, 19, 2014 from: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/3168>
- Freij, M. (May 23, 2013). Initiative seeks to encourage children to 'read for pleasure.' Jordan Times, Amman, Jordan. Retrieved from the internet on April 7, 2014: <http://jordantimes.com/initiative-seeks-to-encourage-children-to-read-for-pleasure>
- Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (2012). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 7th Edn. Chicago: Transaction Publishers.
- Merriam, B. S. (1998). *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sa`di, I. and Mansi, E. (2011). The Role of Family Literacy in Developing Children's Reading Interests in Kindergarten and the First Three Classes. *Jordan Journal for Educational Sciences*, VOL 6, No. 3, 271-288.