

PILOT STUDY ON CHILDREN'S READING IN NAMIBIA: PITFALLS AND NEW STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to report on a pilot study conducted in 2011 that preceded a main study undertaken in 2012, investigating the reading behaviour and preferences of Grade 6 Namibian students. The aims of the pilot study were to develop an easy to answer and reliable questionnaire; to enable emerging researchers to gain experience in data collection through small-scale sampling; and to test whether the instruments of data collection were covering the main aims of the study. The questionnaire was developed and tested three times on small groups before the pilot study. In all 226 students, both rural and urban, from three educational regions in Namibia were included in the pilot study. Vast differences in the students' language ability and socio-economic situation were observed. The data analysis showed that the researchers underestimated the impact of the social desirability factor and the reading levels of the respondents. The questionnaire had to be drastically redesigned. Six further versions of the questionnaire were developed and tested before implementation in the main study. Careful reporting and recording of the pilot process ensured that a successful main study was conducted in 2012. While pilot studies are not frequently fully documented and reported on, it is argued that valuable lessons can be learnt from this honest report.

KEYWORDS

children's readership – Namibia, pilot study, questionnaire testing, Grade 6 respondents, social desirability factor, language proficiency

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE MAIN STUDY

A study entitled 'The reading preferences and behaviour of Namibian children' was jointly launched in 2011 by the University of Namibia (Unam), Faculty of Education and the Namibian Children's Book Forum (NCBF) in collaboration with the University of South Africa (Unisa), Department of Information Science. Unisa was envisaging a possible Pan African children's readership study under its auspices, involving research institutions in various African countries. Unisa approached the NCBF in 2010 to pioneer a study of the reading preferences and behaviour of Namibian children. The NCBF thereupon gained the collaboration of the Unam Faculty of Education to partner in this project.

The project comprised a pilot study and a main study. This article reports on the pilot study. General information on the main project will be provided in this first section of the article to situate the pilot study within its broader context.

The realities of multilingualism in Africa render readership studies very challenging. Developing a scientifically acceptable research methodology for the investigation of reading preferences in a multilingual society is a process fraught with many difficulties, some of which are almost insurmountable. Academics who embark upon such a study will invariably be faced with situations that require the breaking of new ground.

There are currently 14 languages, including Sign Language, in Namibia with an approved orthography (Namibia National Planning Commission 2011). At Namibian independence in 1990, Afrikaans was the *lingua franca* yet English was chosen as the only official language and as the main medium of instruction in the schools; this even though Namibia never was a British colony and very few Namibians, including school teachers, could speak English and the majority of the population not at all.

With English as the only official language, the other languages were given unofficial status as 'national languages', that is, these languages are not mentioned in the Namibian constitution as official national languages. According to the language policy (Namibia MoE 2009), mother tongue as medium of instruction is nevertheless, allowed during the first three years of schooling where-after the switch to English-medium instruction is made. An increasing number of schools, however, opt for English-medium instruction from Grade 1.

The 2012 report by the Education Management Information System ([EMIS] Namibia MoE), shows that 14 languages are used in 1 515 schools as the main media of

instruction during grades 1 to 3. These also include the minority languages, Ju/'hoan (San), German, Setswana and Sign Language in a few schools. Most of these schools offer the 14 languages further as a school subject as from Grade 4, the choice of which language depending on the geographical area.

The EMIS report also states that 55 422 students in Grade 6 were studying a 'national' language as a subject (Namibia MoE 2012). However, owing to the multilingual nature of some regions and within some school classes, some students are not studying their mother tongue, but a dominant language spoken in the region.

It has generally been observed that the vast majority of Namibian children have not developed a reading habit and that this situation is having a detrimental effect on school success. Research is necessary to establish the impact of language on the culture of reading. Findings could provide information and create a basis for advocacy to educators, libraries, publishers and other authorities responsible for children to make a more concerted effort to promote the reading habit, develop and support libraries and develop the various Namibian languages *inter alia* through publishing programmes.

The aim of this exploratory study was to investigate the reading habits of Namibian students in a systematic and scientific manner, in order to establish the percentage of Namibian children who read in their free time; what they like to read; whether they read in their mother tongue or English; and also how well resourced the schools and the surrounding environment are as regards reading materials. The research questions were based on these aims.

The main readership study was based on the demography and geography of Namibia. In all, 1 402 Grade 6 respondents participated in the main study. They belonged to six different language groups in seven regions (200 respondents per region, both urban and rural).

The instruments of data collection were a questionnaire for Grade 6 students and structured observation by means of field notes. A second questionnaire for the language and library teachers in the selected schools was designed after the pilot study, but it was tested before the main study to gather more information on the physical and human resources available to teachers and students, both in the school and the school surroundings. It was also thought that these data might be helpful to supplement and verify the field observations.

It was initially decided not to do individual interviews with students on their reading preferences as the culture, particularly in the rural areas where the majority of the respondents live, does not allow for free dialogue between children and adults. Other reasons were that many students were non-readers and at that early stage, readers had

not yet been identified. In order to enrich the data, interviews with students who are readers were added later after data collection for the main study.

The study thus made use of mixed methods of data collection, the main method being the gathering of quantitative data through two separate questionnaires, while the field notes and interviews were qualitative methods of data collection.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PILOT STUDY

Arain, Campbell, Cooper and Lancaster (2010:5) define a pilot study as follows: 'A pilot study is a version of the main study that is run in miniature to test whether the components of the main study can all work together. It is focused on the processes of the main study', while Moore, Carter, Nietert and Stewart (2011:336) see pilot studies as 'preparatory investigations that provide specific information needed for planning subsequent studies ... they are designed to test the performance characteristics ... capabilities and operational strategies that are under consideration for use in a larger subsequent study'.

For the social sciences a definition of pilot studies is given by Theis (2003:70): 'Piloting is testing draft research tools on limited samples before using them in the field.' He advocates that these instruments should first be tested out on friends or family members, and once errors in wording and instructions have been corrected, 'select small groups of participants similar to the sample groups required for each tool and go through the entire procedure of using the tool. Decide what works, what doesn't work and what can be done differently'. Re-testing after the revision of instruments should be done: 'test them again, agreeing on final changes', He stresses that 'all research tools must be tested before they are used and modified where appropriate' (Theis 2003:75). Each new research tool should be tested (Theis 2003:77).

Namibian publications in the social sciences use the term 'pilot study' rather loosely. Tseng (2007:7) refers to her study based on 58 respondents as 'mini or pilot research'. Full results with percentages in the form of charts are however given and no follow up main study was undertaken. According to Arain et al (2010:6), the results of such a small sample should be interpreted with caution 'as hypothesis testing requires a powered sample size'. In other Namibian cases, a pilot study is an extensive fully fledged study, with a large group of respondents. Keulder (2009:3) elicited data from 14 684 mobile phone respondents but refers to this countrywide study as a 'pilot project'. It is possible that the term 'pilot' was used in this case because of the use of a novel mobile based, Interactive Voice Response (IVR) platform as the instrument for data collection. The 44-page full report contains results with 58 charts (1 graph, 34 bar and 23 pie charts). This was an autonomous study without any follow up larger study.

A 'pilot' study by Van der Walt, Liman, Gross and Rogers (2007) was followed by another report in 2009, but no reference is made in the 2007 report on the 'pilot' study of the intention to do a follow up larger study. Respondents for the so-called pilot study were 124 teacher-educators (lecturers) at the four training colleges. The report on this study consists of 50 pages, including ten tables and nine figures (5 bar and 4 pie charts). The 2009 report is a different study which targeted school teachers. The two-pronged study, therefore, produced separate and autonomous results for two different sets of respondents. The first report is no pilot study but is, like the second report, a full study on its own. In this case, the term 'pilot study' may have been used because it was the first of the two studies, both of which were aiming to elicit the same type of information, on the one hand, from teacher educators (lecturers) and on the other hand, from teachers.

None of the abovementioned Namibian pilot studies matches the definitions of Arain et al (2010), Moore et al (2011) and Theis (2003). Some are small studies, consisting of not more than a testing session of a very small group of respondents, while others are stand-alone major studies that are in no way preliminary investigations in preparation for a yet larger study.

Some researchers consider a pilot study to be unnecessary. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) HIV & AIDS Unit (2007:15) opines that: 'In some circles, pilots are frowned upon. This is because scaling up from a pilot to a wider programme can be a challenge and some pilots do not make the transition, in which case they may be viewed as a waste of time and resources.' Lancaster, Dodd and Williamson (2004:307–312) report that '50% of pilot studies reported the intention for further work ... yet we identified only 8.8% which were followed up by a major study'.

Where pilot studies do take place, not all of them are publicised, thereby resulting in a dearth of literature on pilot studies. Some research teams publish the pilot study as a separate report, but most others report on the pilot study as part of the main report. In such a case, it is mentioned in the introduction that a pilot study preceded the main study, but little or no further information is divulged. A few paragraphs may indicate that the pilot study led to some changes to the instruments of data collection such as the reformulation or correction of questions of a questionnaire or the questions for interviews (eg, Sharma 2008:47; Siririka 2007:36). In cases such as these, a pilot study is seen as a testing of the instruments only. The process is viewed as not significant enough to warrant a separate report.

In many cases, more extensive pilot studies, however, also are not published, as in the medical sciences. Moore et al (2011:336) state that 'many investigators make little or no effort to publish negative or unsuccessful findings, and this contributes to publication bias'. Arain et al (2010:2) also report that 'many pilot studies are never published' and that 'the reporting of pilot studies was poor'. The authors state that many pilot studies do not have clear objectives. They advocate that the data of pilot studies and those of the main study should not be mixed and stress that the pilot study 'has specific hypotheses,

objectives and methodology' (Arain et al 2010:6). They report that published articles on pilot studies tend to put 'inappropriate emphasis on hypothesis testing'. In their opinion pilot studies should not try to draw conclusions from main study research questions and hypotheses (Arain et al 2010:2). Lancaster et al (2004:307–312) state that 'a well-conducted pilot study, giving a clear list of aims and objectives within a formal framework will encourage methodological rigour [and] ensure that work is scientifically valid and publishable'.

There is consensus that reports on pilot studies should be published. The benefits of pilot study publications are, according to Moore et al (2011:336), that both positive and negative results 'can provide valuable information for future research', while Arain et al (2010:6) state that the publication of 'well conducted pilot or feasibility studies is important for research, irrespective of outcome'. The SADC HIV & AIDS Unit (2007:16) opines that, if pitfalls are never documented 'the mistakes tend to keep being repeated thus compounding the costs'. The authors argue that documentation on lessons learnt should be freely available as a resource in the region to those who wish to learn and to consider new ideas.

3 WHY A PILOT STUDY AND WHAT MUST IT ACHIEVE?

Whereas not all studies necessarily require a preliminary pilot study, the Namibian team had to feel their way along on largely unknown terrain and therefore considered a pilot study as essential to ensure, as far as possible, that the main study would render reliable results. The exploratory nature of the study suggested that it would be very risky to launch a costly nation-wide main study without first having gone through a pilot study. Clarity needed to be found on the uncertainties raised. From the outset it was clear that small group pre-testings of the questionnaire might also be necessary before launching the pilot study. In addition, if many changes should be necessary after the pilot study, post-pilot testings might also be needed. It was argued that only through several trial runs appropriate instruments for the main study could be developed.

In the planning and execution of the study, the research team learnt many valuable lessons that might be beneficial to fellow researchers embarking on similar research projects. The intention of the current article, therefore, is to offer an honest report on the pitfalls and lessons learnt through these processes. As researchers we share our experiences from the inception of the research until the roll out of the final data gathering. From the outset, the intention of the pilot was not to test and report on the results of research questions of the main study, but to report on the development of the questionnaire(s) used during the planning stages towards the main survey, the sampling process as well as the lessons learnt from the pilot and the new strategies devised.

A pilot study and possibly also pre-testings, therefore, had to answer the following questions:

- How can the questions for the questionnaire be formulated to ensure, as far as is possible, truthful answers?
- Since most Grade 6 students will have enjoyed three years of mother tongue education and then had to switch to English education in Grade 4, in which language would they be more proficient to respond in the open ended questions?
- On what level of simplicity should questions in English be for rural Grade 6 children from an environment where English is not heard outside the school building?
- Are questions on reading through electronic means relevant for respondents in rural areas where there is no electricity, no computers and in many cases not even mobile telephones?
- Will it be possible for rural children imbedded in an authoritarian traditional culture that does not encourage free dialogue between adults and children, to overcome this taboo and interact with adults who are strangers?
- Will it be responsible to expect inexperienced data collectors to visit 36 schools in seven regions, travelling more than 10 000 kilometres without having learnt through trial runs at a few schools, how to organise materials, write structured observations in the form of field notes, approach school principals, teachers and students and afterwards prepare completed questionnaires for electronic data input?

Thus, the aims of the pilot study were:

- to develop a questionnaire that would –
 - be a useful and reliable instrument for data collection for the main study
 - be suitable for administration to Grade 6 respondents as far as the level of difficulty of questions is concerned
 - be suitable for children belonging to 13 different language groups
 - take the social and economic realities of the majority of children into consideration while also recognising the realities of the minority;
- to gain experience –
 - through small scale sampling how to do sampling for a representative target population for the main study
 - in administering a questionnaire to students
 - in writing structured observations
 - through a small scale study how to manage a large scale study;
- to find out if it would be possible to conduct interviews with respondents;
- to test if the instruments of data collection will address the aims of the main study.

4 METHODOLOGY OF THE PILOT STUDY

According to Theis (2003:125), a research method in the social sciences 'is a scientific technique for gathering data', such as the decision to conduct a survey to study a particular matter of concern. The research method is not identical to the research tool, 'but can be used in research tool design'. He opines that, 'To answer the key research questions takes more than one research tool' (Theis 2003:69). A research tool is a purpose designed structured instrument to gather systematic answers to specific research questions.

As with the main study, mixed methods of data collection were used in the pilot study. The quantitative method was used to gather information: a questionnaire was developed as an instrument to collect descriptive data, the answers to which were numerically converted and analysed through statistical methods. The qualitative method was also used to gather information. The instrument used was field notes documented by the researchers through observations and conversations. A description of the surroundings in which the respondents to the questionnaire found themselves was necessary to form a picture of their reality. These data complemented the statistical data in order to understand the research context. As will be shown, interviews could not be used during the pilot study as these could only be conducted at a later stage.

4.1 INSTRUMENTS OF DATA COLLECTION

4.1.1 The questionnaire

The respondents of the questionnaire were Grade 6 students. As far as the language problem was concerned, it was decided that data analysis in 13 languages (Sign Language excluded) would be too difficult. As all Namibian Grade 6 students in government schools are already in their third year of English-medium instruction, the decision was made that the language medium of the questionnaire would be English but with options to answer the four open questions in a language of the respondent's choice. It was felt that respondents, even though they might be able to tick off answers to questions put in simple English, might not be able to answer the open questions which required free writing in English.

Since data analysts would be unable to understand all the written answers to the open questions in the various languages, student teachers studying at Unam could be used to help with the translation into English.

The questionnaire to be answered anonymously consisted of the following sections:

1. General information (name of school, age and gender of respondent)
2. Language questions (mother tongue, languages receiving tuition in)
3. Reading questions (choosing books and favourite themes or topics in books, language of books chosen, use of other reading materials)

4. Encouragement to read (by parents, teachers)
5. Availability of reading materials
6. Listening to story-reading and reading to others
7. Listening to storytelling and telling stories to others.

The questionnaire was designed to contain mainly simple questions that could be marked off with an X. As it is impossible to think of and list all the possible reasons why children do not read, what they do with their free time, and so on, four open questions were included.

4.1.2 Field notes and observations

During every school visit, field notes and observations were collected according to a standardised format. The following elements were tabled: name of school; urban/rural location; number of students tested and their home language; and time and date of pilot study. The form also provided space for information gained from the principal and language teacher, on:

- the number of respondents;
- the availability of textbooks;
- the availability of other books in classroom collections and/or a library.

During administration of the questionnaire, notes were made on the venue where the session took place; whether the students asked questions, how they responded/behaved; whether they were confident to use English; whether an interpreter was necessary; and how long they took to complete the questionnaire.

4.2 TESTING AND PILOTING

The research team treated testing and piloting as two different processes. The pilot study had to be more than merely testing the understanding of questions and the time needed for administering the questionnaire. Small pre-pilot group sessions in schools were used to establish these two matters and in how far explanations were necessary. After every testing, changes were made so as to arrive at a workable version for the pilot study. It was decided beforehand that if the pilot should reveal flaws in the questionnaire, post-pilot testings would have to be done as well in order to reach a final questionnaire that would render relatively reliable information.

4.3 SAMPLING DESIGN

The type of sampling used was quota sampling and not random sampling (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell 2005:68). The quota agreed upon was at least 10 per cent of the units of analysis selected for the main study. The main study also made use of quota sampling

in that 200 respondents, that is, units of analysis, per region were decided upon. This resulted in 1 402 respondents for the seven regions chosen for the main study. Thus, for the pilot study 140 units of analysis would have been the minimum, but ultimately 226 units out of 1 402 (16%) were taken.

As the study endeavoured to select a sample for the pilot study that would be a microcosm of the main study sample, the demographic and geographic characteristics of the intended main study were taken into account. Three out of the 13 Namibian regions, where three languages are spoken by the majority, were selected for the pilot study. The quota sampling was furthermore also proportionate in that important strata, such as the rural/urban distribution in the population, were reflected by the sample of units of analysis. Care was therefore taken that the multilingual stratum be reflected and also that the majority of respondents should be from rural communities, similar to the demographics of Namibia.

The Oshana region with nearly 100 per cent of Oshiwambo speakers, the largest ethnic and language group, was one of the three chosen regions for the pilot study. One urban and two rural schools were selected as the research wanted to establish whether the rural children in this region would be able to understand the questionnaire and interact with the researchers.

In both the Khomas and Otjozondjupa regions, students from the Khoekhoegowab and Afrikaans communities were involved. Two rural schools in Otjozondjupa and two urban schools from Khomas were selected (see Table 1).

Table 1: Pilot population

School	Town and region	Language	Number of respondents		
			Rural	Urban	Total
A	Ongwediva, Oshana	Oshiwambo	–	58	58
B	Amutanga, Oshana	Oshiwambo	34	–	34
C	Ekambo, Oshana	Oshiwambo	35	–	35
D	Otavi, Otjozondjupa	Khoekhoegowab	29	–	29
E	Windhoek, Khomas	Khoekhoegowab	–	20	20
F	Mangetti, Otjozondjupa	Afrikaans L2	30	–	30
G	Windhoek, Khomas	Afrikaans	–	20	20
Total: 7			128 (57%)	98 (43%)	226 (100%)

The questionnaire was designed in such a way that it would be suitable for all respondents despite possible differences between regions, languages and rural and urban areas.

5 ETHICAL MATTERS

Research ethics require that permission be elicited to collect data from human beings and/or the environment. Potential respondents should be fully informed about the objectives of the study. Appreciation should be shown to those who cooperate in the study. Confidentiality should be strictly adhered to and feedback be given on the results of the study to participating authorities.

For the testings, schools were contacted telephonically and an appointment made for the visit. For the pilot study, permission for the research was obtained in writing from the Namibia Ministry of Education (MoE). Schools were identified and contacted in collaboration with regional offices. The researchers contacted the school both telephonically and in writing, explaining the nature of the research. Appointments were then made for a visit. When arriving at a school, the researchers first met with the principal or his representative and discussed the aims of the visit. Before the questionnaires were administered, students and teachers were informed that the questionnaires were not tests, that there were no wrong or right answers, but that primarily the opinions of respondents were sought. After completing the questionnaire, students were given a pencil and a sweet for their willingness to cooperate. (But no prior information was given that they would be rewarded.) The NCBF also donated a storybook to the school as a token of appreciation. As the pilot study and the testings did not test main study hypotheses or research questions, there were no results of importance to present to participants.

6 PHASE 1: DESIGN AND PRE-PILOT TESTINGS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

6.1 VERSION 1

The first draft of Version 1 was completed in February 2011 and consisted of 32 questions. The format was informal and user friendly. Some questions contained options to be ticked 'Yes' or 'No', while others contained up to 14 options of which more than one could be ticked. There were also four open questions.

The first version of the questionnaire was tested at a Windhoek school on 23 March 2011. Six Grade 6 students, differing in ability, were selected by the principal. The outcome of the session was positive. Students completed the questionnaire in between 15 and 27 minutes. As paging back and forth proved to be confusing, it was decided that all options to a question should be on the same page.

6.2 VERSION 2

The amended Version 1 was sent to Unisa for comments. On advice from a statistician, it was recommended that major changes be effected in order to extract more information, such as the inclusion of questions requiring the ranking of options; the indication of the number of hours per week devoted to each chosen activity; and also Likert-type questions requiring an indication of the degree to which statements are agreed or disagreed with (five possible variants to each question were suggested). As a result the new Version 2 became lengthy and more complicated.

Version 2 was tested on 5 July 2011 in a very poor, informal residential area of Katutura, Windhoek. The Oshindonga teacher assisted the researcher in this Grade 6 class with 42 students. The same explanations were given as with the first school testing.

As the reading ability of these students was much poorer than at the previous school, the researcher read each question aloud, one at a time. The teacher explained nearly every question in Oshindonga, but the students were still totally overwhelmed by everything they had to read. Rereading each question before answering resulted in a very slow pace. Respondents tired after the first 30 minutes and needed one hour to complete the questionnaire.

Observations were that the written explanations to every question confused students, as these required more material to be read. They had problems with remembering the different instructions, varying from 'I agree/I don't agree', to 'Mark with an X', to an instruction to comment on all options. This more complicated questionnaire was a disaster. It was clear that not all statisticians take the realities of respondents into consideration.

6.3 VERSION 3

Deliberations between the Unisa/Unam/NCBF teams early in July 2011 resulted in a more user friendly Version 3, albeit still more complicated than the first version.

An inviting front cover was designed (see Appendix 1). The level of difficulty of the English was reduced. Some options on electronic media were reduced. Likert-type options were simplified to 'Often', 'Sometimes' or 'Never'. Only minimal writing was required as open questions were mostly optional.

Version 3 was tested on 22 July 2011 in Khomasdal, Windhoek. Ten Grade 6 students completed the questionnaire in less time than at the previous school. Students who could read with understanding had no problems. Version 3 was not redesigned as the outcome of the testing was quite positive.

7 PHASE 2: THE NAMIBIAN PILOT STUDY: 25 – 30 JULY 2011

As indicated in section 4.3, the pilot study was undertaken at seven schools in three regions (Table 1). The 226 Grade 6 respondents received tuition in the Oshiwambo, Khoekhoegowab and Afrikaans languages as school subjects. Version 3 of the questionnaire was used for the pilot study.

7.1 OBSERVATIONS DURING ADMINISTRATION OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

7.1.1 Rural students

As low reading levels were anticipated, it was decided that the researcher would give oral support by reading the questions one by one to the group of students and explaining each item, either with the assistance of an interpreter, or by switching between English and Afrikaans. Students wrote down the answer to every question each time after the explanation. This led to a slow pace, but it helped to provide greater comprehensibility and systematic completion of the questionnaire by the respondents.

Students were shy and hardly vocal, and whether or not an Oshiwambo interpreter was present, almost no questions were asked. Efforts by researchers to relax the students and to ensure understanding were only partially successful. The same observation was also made by Siririka (2007:41) who stated that children attending a rural school in the Omaheke region of Namibia ‘are not used talking to strangers. They were shy and they could not articulate easily’, even though they were invited to enter into a dialogue in their mother tongue by a speaker of the same tongue.

Apart from concepts that were quite new to many, the interpretation of basic words was problematic. It was evident that in-depth interviews with individual students or with groups on their reading behaviour and preferences would have been futile, even if conducted in their mother tongues. It would only be possible to make efforts to conduct interviews after readers had been identified during the main study.

Students found it difficult to interpret the instructions. Constant repetition of the instructions and guidance from the researchers could not prevent many errors. Some questions required the marking of four options out of nine, others again required the marking of all options, and yet others required ‘Yes/No’, ‘Like/Don’t like’ or ‘True/Not true’ responses. Students were also confused where the selection of a certain option meant that they were excluded from filling in other options.

In the poor rural areas, some options were just embarrassing. For example, no one in a whole class had a mobile phone or access to television, and they had never heard of a comic or a magazine.

7.1.2 Urban students

The English of urban students seemed adequate to answer the questionnaire. They were more relaxed and open, and not intimidated at all. There was no need for translators. While the same procedures as for rural schools were followed, many students were able to complete the questionnaire without assistance. Observations were that urban students generally had a better vocabulary and comprehension skills than their rural counterparts. They spoke English with a lot more confidence and were more vocal.

The urban school (G), situated in an advantaged area in the capital, was a unique experience. Students far outperformed those from other schools in terms of comprehension and the speed with which they could complete the questions without assistance. Some of the questions included specifically for rural students evoked responses of laughter and disbelief, for example, on whether they listened to stories over the radio.

7.1.3 General observations of school contexts

The seven schools differed widely, in terms of infrastructure, access to textbooks, storybooks and student: researcher interaction. School G had a fully operational school library and respondents in schools D and G had access to the library in town. Five of the seven schools had no operational school library and there was also no other library in the vicinity students could visit. Reading opportunities outside the classroom in the mother tongues seemed to be very limited. All teachers indicated a severe shortage of storybooks for the students, and that storybooks in the Namibian languages were virtually unavailable. Only one class had a book corner for donated books.

Language proficiency differed from school to school. The time it took to complete the questionnaire also differed widely, ranging from 35 minutes to about 90 minutes. The social setting of a school clearly has a marked impact on the performance of students, but social setting is not necessarily linked to geographical setting. Field experience revealed that it would be wrong to assume that there are no disadvantaged schools in the urban areas. In the urban capital city of Windhoek students from the two schools responded quite differently. Students from Windhoek school (E) in a more informal settlement were just as disadvantaged as the students from an Otavi school (D) a northern rural settlement situated 350 kilometres from Windhoek.

It is evident that the differences between *disadvantaged* rural and urban students compared to *advantaged* students are very, very wide, and that even within the urban areas, there will possibly be no comparison between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

7.2 OUTCOME OF THE PILOT STUDY WITH QUESTIONNAIRE VERSION 3

While it never was the intention to publish the full results of the pilot study, it was hoped that responses to the questionnaire would already give some reliable indication of the reading behaviour and preferences of Namibian children. However, regrettably the results did not show anything of the kind despite, or rather on account of, the extremely positive outcomes as regards reading.

Of the 226 respondents, 88.9 per cent indicated that they liked to read storybooks. Almost half (46%) of the students indicated that they read seven or more books for pleasure per year. Yet very few students could mention a recognisable title of a storybook. A high percentage (67.7%) of the students indicated that they obtained books from the school library, while the school often had no library. Many students had no access to any kind of library. Respondents who hardly ever read, due to lack of materials or interest, completed questions intended for respondents who would be seen as readers. For instance, they indicated what kinds of books they read and how they choose a book.

The respondents' answers showed that they were confused by the way some questions were phrased, requiring differing responses such as 'Yes/No', 'True/Not true' and 'Like/Don't like'. There were discrepancies in responses, for example, a respondent would answer in the same question that she/he liked *and* disliked reading. Students also seemed to interpret the term 'free time' differently.

The majority of the respondents did not answer the four open questions and only 6 per cent of the students responded in their mother tongue and 29 per cent in English, while 65 per cent did not answer. Of the 35 per cent who answered, 60 per cent of the answers were irrelevant, that is, the answers did not make sense. Frequently, a question already ticked was just copied again. It was clear that the instruments did not yield useful results. The researchers needed to go back to the drawing board.

8 PITFALLS AND NEW STRATEGIES

8.1 PITFALLS

Despite all the effort that went into the designing of version 3, the pilot study revealed serious problems. The following pitfalls were identified:

8.1.1 The social desirability factor

In the light of the field observations that revealed a book-deprived environment in which most schools were operating, there was reason to suspect that most respondents did not answer truthfully. The impression was that an option was ticked if the option was

understood or regarded as a 'right' response. As shown in 7.2, there is reason to believe that social desirability influenced students' responses.

Nederhof (1984:264) defines the phenomenon as follows: 'Social desirability reflects the tendency on behalf of the subjects to deny socially undesirable traits and to claim socially desirable ones, and the tendency to say things which place the speaker in a favourable light.' He further opines that 'norms are important determinants of socially desirable behaviour, as they determine what constitutes a good impression in a given situation'. McKenna (2001:139 quoted by Lukhele 2013:4), supports this view by stating that one's attitudes towards reading are influenced by 'one's "beliefs about cultural norms concerning reading (conditioned by one's desire to conform to those norms)"'.

The fact that the researchers explained at the outset that they were trying to gather information on reading behaviour seems to have influenced the respondents, that is, it acted as a prompt for subsequent responses. It appears that most respondents tried by all means to respond to questions in the way they hoped would please the researchers even if it meant that their response was false.

Respondents were clearly aware of the status of being regarded as a reader in their culture and thus presented themselves as such. They portrayed awareness of the value of reading, without being readers themselves. Their attitude towards reading did not reflect their true behaviour. Lukhele (2013:1) reports that Mathewson (2004) in his model of reading attitudes 'asserts that a positive reading attitude does not guarantee actual reading behaviour. He [Mathewson] suggests that an additional factor is needed to be a reader: the *intention to read*'. A positive attitude towards reading 'is of little consequence: one's attitude may be positive but one may lack the intention to read, resulting in non-reading behaviour being exhibited'.

Since such a strong possibility existed that the social desirability factor influenced the students' responses, it was decided that the results of the pilot study were too unreliable to come to any conclusions as regards reading behaviour and preferences.

8.1.2 Complexity of the questionnaire and the language

Most respondents had great difficulty in understanding and completing the questionnaire. As the English reading proficiency of most Namibian Grade 6 students is extremely poor, the wording of the questionnaire was clearly too complicated for the average Namibian Grade 6 student. Some students, for example, did not know the meaning of simple English words such as 'boring', 'often', 'hours' or 'folk tales'. The finding of the 2010 SACMEQ 3 English proficiency study is that only 45 per cent of Namibian Grade 6 students passed the basic reading test (SACMEQ 3: Table 7.3).

As regards the opportunity that was offered to respondents to answer open questions in their mother tongue, this provision proved to be superfluous. Only a minority answered the open questions, and mostly in English, but most of these answers did not make sense.

It is possible that many respondents are unable to write coherently either in English or in their mother tongue. SACMEQ studies do not test writing proficiency but students' writing will in all probability be even worse than their reading proficiency. If the extra information obtained through the 6 per cent of mother tongue (often incoherent) written replies was weighed against the effort it took to get the very few and poor responses translated, the exercise can be considered as not having been worthwhile.

The researchers realised that they were partly responsible for the unreliable results of the pilot, through their efforts to include all participants.

8.2 NEW STRATEGIES

To limit the social desirability factor, that is, ensure more truthful answers, and facilitate as well as expedite the administering process, it was decided that the following points should be adhered to:

- Do not tell the respondents what the research is about. All they need to know beforehand is that you want to find out what they do with their time after school, at week-ends, and during holidays.
- Avoid all 'telling' information on the questionnaire such as the wording, 'Readership Research Project', or a heading such as 'What do you read, when, why and how?', or pictures of children reading.
- Include a few questions in the questionnaire to shift the focus to activities other than reading, for example, about the kind of chores respondents have to do around the home, the TV programmes they like to watch, their sports activities, and so on. Answers to these questions will not be coded or could be used for another study.
- Simplify the English wording but not so much as to jeopardise the aims.
- Design questions as far as possible that require respondents to mark with an X, 'Yes' or 'No' only.
- Shorten the questionnaire and reduce the amount of reading, that is, limit long explanations and instructions.
- Limit the options respondents may choose from but ensure that there will be possible answers for both the urban and the rural child.
- Do not waste time on long oral explanations. If the questions are simple enough, the readers (in most schools a minority) will understand. The focus of the research is on the *readers*. The non-readers are mainly relevant for general and statistical purposes.
- Accept that all readers do not necessarily like to read stories, but some (possibly a minority) prefer non-fiction for general reading. So do not exclude these respondents by asking only questions related to story-reading but distinguish

between story-readers and general readers, while still allowing 'all-readers' to indicate their tastes.

- Do not distribute the whole questionnaire at the beginning of the session. First hand out a sheet with a minimum of only five questions through which it will be possible to classify a respondent as a non-reader, a story-reader or a reader of mainly factual literature. These questions should be so neutral that respondents will not be able to tell what the whole research is about. (When the second part of the questionnaire is handed out, respondents will see that the research is about reading, but if they thereupon, do not tell the truth, it will not influence the study as the classification of readers and non-readers will have been done on the basis of the first five questions.)
- Before launching the main study, test the questionnaire again to ensure that all the research questions can be answered.
- If necessary, re-design the questionnaire and test the next version again.

9 PHASE 3: DESIGN AND POST-PILOT TESTINGS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

During the course of Phase 3, all suggestions made in 8.2 were incorporated in the questionnaire before the launch of the main study. This entailed further simplification of the English; the regrouping of question clusters; and the reformulation of questions so as to elicit mainly 'Yes/No' responses. Also the simplified Likert-type questions were removed.

Major changes were that no indication was left on the front page of what the questionnaire was about. The top heading only contained the wording, UNISA/UNAM/NCBF RESEARCH PROJECT with a smiley below it.

The questionnaire was split into two parts. Questions 1–5 were separated from Questions 6–21. The purpose was to develop a first part in order to establish two things:

Firstly, Part 1 was designed to classify respondents into readers and non-readers. The five questions were composed in a certain way to minimise the social desirability factor.

Secondly, Part 1 made the classification of respondents into readers of predominantly fiction or non-fiction possible. Two sets of Part 2 of the questionnaire were developed, one set for story-readers and a second set for readers of non-fiction, further referred to as general readers. After having divided the respondents into two groups, namely story-readers and general readers through Part 1 of the questionnaire, Part 2 could be distributed.

The procedures for administering were that all respondents complete and hand in Part 1 (Questions 1–5). Data collectors would then briefly check only Questions 4 and 5 to see if storybooks or fact books/non-fiction were named and chosen. Separate questionnaires

for story-readers and general (non-fiction) readers could then be distributed accordingly. It was very important that respondents should not see Part 2 before Part 1 had been handed in.

On 28 November 2011, ten Grade 6-students from the Afrikaans class of a Windhoek school completed the questionnaire – now administered in two different parts. It only took the students 30 minutes to complete the whole questionnaire. No assistance was given. The checking of the answers to Questions 4 and 5 of Part 1 during the session required only 10 minutes. Identification of the *readers* could, however, only be done later after numerical conversion and analysis through statistical methods. The readers could be identified on the basis of the answers to three questions in Part 1. Requirements were that:

- reading must be spontaneously mentioned as an after school activity; and/or
- reading must be ranked as preference 1–4 out of 6 activities; and
- a respondent must be able to match 3 out of 5 definitions with the appropriate type of book and non-book materials, i.e. the question tested if a respondent could distinguish between a storybook, a book of information (non-fiction), a magazine, a comic book and a newspaper.

Part 2 of all questionnaires that did not meet these requirements were not included for the data input on reading preferences as those respondents were not readers.

Part 1 of the questionnaire was once again administered to ten students from a Khomasdal, Windhoek school on 2 March 2012. The purpose of the testing was mainly to enable data collectors to practise the administering of Part 1 and the identification of story-readers and general readers within a short time. No assistance was given as students were supposed to be able to *read* and to understand. It took respondents 11 minutes to complete Part 1, but many had problems with the matching question.

In the final Version 9, the matching question was simplified and the questionnaire was expanded from 21 questions to 25 questions. Four irrelevant questions were added to Part 2 in an effort to minimize the social desirability factor. The questions gauged how many hours the respondents play with friends per week, what kind of jobs they do in and around the house, what kinds of sports are participated in and the listing of favourite TV programmes. These distractor questions were excluded from data input.

10 LIMITATIONS OF THE PILOT STUDY

The research team took pains to ensure a well-designed questionnaire. Before the pilot study one testing of a young family member and three testings of small groups in schools, as well as the drafting and redrafting of the questionnaire three times were done. The

results of the pilot study, however, led to the decision that a drastic change of action was necessary. Another two testings and six redraftings of the questionnaire followed.

The main limitation of the pilot study was that the social desirability factor was not taken into account. It appears that reading in Namibia, even in remote rural communities where illiteracy or semi-literacy is still prevalent, is seen as very desirable. As respondents were informed beforehand that the study was about reading they wanted to please by giving answers resulting in unusable information.

This outcome seriously delayed the progress of the study. The total process of drafting, testing, adapting, refining and finalising the questionnaire took more than one year. All in all a total of five small group pre- or post-pilot testings, one larger pilot, nine versions of the questionnaire and numerous smaller changes between versions, were necessary to conclude the process with a reasonably reliable final questionnaire for the main study.

11 CONCLUSIONS: WERE THE PILOT AND THE PRE- AND POST-PILOT TESTINGS NECESSARY?

In retrospect it was clear that, without the pilot study, the full scale survey would have been a disaster. The researchers initially overestimated the reading ability and the ability of students to deal with a long and complex questionnaire. Much effort thus went into simplifying the language and the technical aspects of the questionnaire. However, it also became clear that even though oversimplification may make the questionnaire more understandable for many students, they are the very ones whose poor language ability actually excludes the possibility of them being readers at all.

The huge impact of the social desirability factor could also be addressed to a large extent.

The researchers also ascertained that it was unnecessary to make provision for written responses in the various Namibian languages.

Due to the constraints that limited interaction between the researchers and students and also between students and teachers/interpreters, it was clear that the value of trying to interview students would not have been worth the effort at that early stage before the readers could be identified.

Although the researchers were aware of the vast differences between rural and urban students from the outset, the realities of Namibia in terms of the availability of educational, reading and other resources for students required that some adjustments had to be made during the final planning.

The pilot study proved invaluable in terms of logistical issues specific to Namibia. In planning the main study, realistic travelling schedules and school visits per day could be

made, given the vast distances that had to be travelled. It offered an ideal opportunity for the two inexperienced researchers to gain hands-on experience regarding data gathering, interacting with and guiding respondents. Even basic issues, such as the packing of questionnaires and pencils per school, counting and recording data after every school visit were positively influenced by the pilot study.

The lessons learnt during the pilot gave valuable guidelines for selecting the final population. While in the initial stages it was decided to include 10 per cent of all Grade 6 students in every selected region for the main study, it became clear that this sample would be too large for the researchers to deal with. Therefore, a representative quota sample of only 200 respondents per region was finally decided upon.

The pilot study showed that socio-economic factors might prove very important for the final study. This observation prompted the team to broaden the base of data collection and include a sub-study to establish if well-resourced schools and environments produce more readers than poorly resourced schools and environments. As instrument of data collection, the teachers' questionnaire for the 36 target schools was designed.

Finally, ending up with three separate questionnaires for students (a part for all respondents, as well as two separate questionnaires for story-readers and general readers), and adding a questionnaire for teachers, the researchers felt ready to launch the full scale survey.

The final survey included 1 402 students from 36 schools and seven regions, with approximately 70 per cent of respondents selected from rural areas. Data gathering for the main study was successfully conducted from 25 July to 5 August 2012. The newly developed questionnaires worked reasonably well, and it was possible to classify respondents into readers and non-readers. A separate article on the results of the main study will be published in due course.

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APPENDIX 1



QUESTIONNAIRE UNISA / UNAM / NCBF RESEARCH PROJECT

The reading habits and preferences of African children

The Namibian Chapter in collaboration with UNISA

WHAT ARE YOU READING, WHEN, WHERE AND WHY?



This questionnaire is confidential.

Do not put your name on it. Nobody will know who you are.

Please answer honestly. This is not a spelling or grammar test.

PLEASE DO NOT WRITE IN THE GREY BOXES AT ALL. THEY ARE ONLY FOR CODING