READING BEHAVIOUR AND PREFERENCES OF NAMIBIAN CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This study was motivated by the observation that most Namibian children have not developed adequate reading habits. The study gauged the percentages of Namibian children who either do or do not read in their free time. It also explored the reasons why some children do not read in their leisure time; the kinds of reading material readers are inclined to choose; whether they prefer

to read either in their mother tongue or in English; and the role of traditional storytelling and oral literature as a form of pre-literacy in Namibia. The findings revealed a picture of deprivation in the schools and environment of the majority of Namibian children. Of the 1 402 Grade 6 students in seven regions of Namibia selected for the study, 77.6 per cent do not read in their free time, while 22.4 per cent, most of whom attend well-resourced, mainly urban schools, read in their free time. Many children struggle to read, and reading materials, particularly in their mother tongues are scarce. The study established relationships between the students' reading behaviour and various other factors, including resource provision in Namibian schools, the availability of reading materials in the environment as well as the socio-economic conditions of Namibian families. Extensive recommendations have been made for government, educators, libraries, publishers and other authorities responsible for the education of children, including ways in which a more concerted effort could be made to promote good reading habits and develop the various Namibian languages.

Keywords: reading behaviour, reading preferences, reading proficiency, school library services, socio-economic conditions in Namibia

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the Namibian Children's Book Forum and the University of South Africa (Unisa) requested the collaboration of the University of Namibia (UNAM) to join forces to launch an extensive project on the reading behaviour and preferences of Namibian children. The three-and-a-half year study was concluded in the first half of 2014. A report of 367 pages was presented to the Minister of Education on 30 June 2014 (Kirchner, Alexander and Tötemeyer 2014). This article is based on the methodology, findings and recommendations of the report. The motivation for the study grew out of the observation that Namibia does not have a well-developed reading culture and that this situation is an impediment towards the development of a knowledge-based society.

Even though the goal of getting 100 per cent of all children of school age admitted to Grade 1 each year has now been reached, it is a matter of concern that many children do not complete their schooling. According to official statistics (Namibia MoE 2012, Table 33), 49 240 students between Grade 1 and 12 dropped out of school in 2011. Of this group of school leavers, 16 per cent were in primary school, some even dropping out during the lower primary phase (Namibia MoE 2012, Table 37). It is an open question whether or not early school dropouts could be proficient in reading.

The research sought information on various reading-related matters but the parameters of the study excluded an investigation into *reading proficiency*, which is a domain within the discipline of education. This means that the research did not probe

the students' acquisition of reading skills and their comprehension of texts. What was undertaken is *readership research*, which is a part-discipline of information-user studies. It includes information behaviour research and reader behaviour research in the field of information science. It is also part of the sociology of reading.

A search was undertaken to find published readership and reading-related studies conducted during the last decade in Namibia and in other African countries. A South African study of relevance by Snyman (2006) focused on the reading behaviour and preferences of a group of relatively privileged Afrikaans-speaking students ranging from 9–15 years old in both urban and rural areas.

A second study, conducted by Wikan et al. (2007), was a comparative study of the reading habits and attitudes of Namibian and Norwegian Grade 6 students, also both rural and urban. The latter study presented mainly combined statistics of Norwegian and Namibian respondents and was therefore of limited use for the current study. In addition, the findings of Wikan et al. (2007) on the reading habits of Namibian children differed in many respects from the findings of the current study. The researchers admitted that responses on reading habits may have been unreliable (Wikan et al. 2007, 23).

Intensive database searches produced meagre results on readership studies of African children, while several studies were found on formal education, reading proficiency, child literacy as well as family literacy, child poverty, the effects of HIV AIDS on children, child mortality, child disability and the empowerment of female children. These studies will be referred to below where relevant.

Several studies on African school libraries have been conducted over a period of many decades, of which the most recent were those by Mojapelo and Fourie (2014), Mutungi, Minishi-Majanja and Mnkeni-Saurombe (2014) and Smith et al. (2008). These studies did not focus on readership issues but are of some relevance to the study under discussion. Nengomasha, Uutoni and Yule (2012) found that school libraries as centres of books and other information materials may be influencing factors of children's reading behaviour.

The current study gauged the percentages of leisure time readers and non-readers and the preferences of the former for either fiction or non-fiction. Preferences for reading in either mother tongue languages or in English were also investigated, as well as the topics that respondents like to read about.

The researchers, in addition, required information on the status of information provision in the environment in the form of books, non-book print materials, audiovisual and electronic media and from which sources these were accessible for respondents.

Some of the questions that arose during the research were:

- Are these materials available in the schools and homes?
- Are there libraries in the schools and surrounding environment?

As the status of information provision in the schools and the surrounding environment varies greatly in Namibia, the research therefore studied the reading behaviour of students in well-resourced schools as compared to the reading behaviour of students in reasonably- or poorly-resourced schools.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

When Namibia became independent in 1990, English was declared the only official language in the country. The language policy for Namibian schools adopted by government in 1991 called for mother tongue languages as media of instruction for Grade 1 to 3. In 2012, 13 languages were used in 1 515 schools as the main media of instruction from Grade 1 to 3 (Namibia MoE 2012, Table 17).

From Grade 4 on, students gradually switch over to English as the medium of instruction and in addition study one of the other Namibian languages as a school subject. In 2012, 55 422 students in Grade 6 were studying a local language as a subject (Namibia MoE 2012).

2.1. The qualifications of language teachers

According to statistics supplied by the Namibia Ministry of Education (MoE), almost one third of all primary school teachers are not qualified to teach the languages they teach (MoE 2012, Table 43). Being a qualified teacher in Namibia also does not automatically mean that the teacher can speak, read and write English well. According to the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ II 2005, Table 7.4), 58.8 per cent of Grade 6 language teachers could not reach the highest level on the scale for Grade 6 student reading competence. Teachers with the lowest competencies were teaching in more than 70 per cent of the primary schools in the country.

2.2. Tertiary teacher training for the Namibian languages

Teacher training for the Namibian languages is inadequate. Currently, UNAM does not train Grade 8 to 12 teachers for all 13 Namibian languages. No teacher training is offered for six local Afro-Namibian languages (Tötemeyer 2010, 27–29). Furthermore, the full-time enrolment figures for the Bachelor of Education (BEd) Secondary in Otjiherero and Khoekhoegowab are low, with student totals of 19 and five, respectively, in 2012. The possible expansion of mother tongue instruction in schools will lead to a severe shortage of local language teachers in almost all languages.

2.3. Reading proficiency

As mentioned above, the study did not probe the reading proficiency of Namibian students, but it is nevertheless important to take the results of reading proficiency research into account as low reading proficiency levels may be a reason – albeit not necessarily the only reason – why students do not read.

The results of the three SACMEQ studies published in 2000, 2005 and 2010 (SACMEQ I, II and III), were of particular interest as they reported on reading proficiency in 14 sub-Saharan African countries, including Namibia. According to SACMEQ III, 38.7 per cent of Namibian Grade 6 students could not read for meaning in English in 2010 (IIEP 2010, 12–14).

The latest Namibian study showed that English reading proficiency is deteriorating in Namibian primary schools. The last Namibian National Achievement Tests (SATs) showed that 45 per cent of Grade 5 students have a reading proficiency for English second language that is below the basic achievement level, which means they cannot read for meaning. The 2013 results have declined by 2 per cent since 2011 (Mupupa 2014, Table 2; Figure 2).

No extensive study to test the mother tongue reading proficiency of Namibian students or their teachers could be found. Mother tongue reading proficiency does not seem to have a high priority for the Namibian government.

2.4. Tertiary training in school library management and the teaching of information skills

According to Beukes-Amis (pers. comm., April 10, 2014) there has been no professional tertiary training for either school librarians or for teachers to teach the compulsory non-promotional school subject, Basic Information Science (BIS), since 1998. Without instruction school-going children do not seem to know when and why they need information. BIS enables students to source knowledge and information independently, and teaches them how to evaluate, use and communicate it. The teaching of BIS, however, is being allocated to teachers who are not professionally qualified for the task (Ndala, pers. comm., April 25, 2014; Smith et al. 2008).

Currently, student teachers receive very basic information training at university as part of a subject called Integrated Media and Technology Education (UNAM 2014).

A new reformed school curriculum is currently being implemented by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture. In this curriculum BIS is no longer a subject, but is integrated into a new subject called Information and Communication (Wannberg, pers. comm., May 11, 2015).

2.5. The role of government regarding school and community library services

In 2000, the Namibia Library and Information Service Act (No. 4 of 2000) was announced and a directorate for the service was instituted. Community libraries, especially in the information-deprived north, were established, which numbered 64 in 2015 (Shuumbili, pers. comm., May 8, 2015). Most remote rural areas, however, do not have either community libraries or school-community libraries as alternatives.

School libraries have not advanced well (Smith et al. 2008). By 2008, only 368 out of 1 610 schools had a standard library. In 1990, the year of independence, full-time school librarian posts in the 66 former white schools were scrapped, resulting in the closure of some of the biggest school media centres in Namibia. This was a pity because in the same year these schools were opened up to all races. Mojapelo and Fourie (2014, 127) report that this also happened in South Africa in 1995.

A positive step to rectify the situation was the institution of posts for school librarians by the Ministry of Basic of Education in 2010. However, these posts were misused from the beginning, and are still misused today, primarily in order to appoint an extra teacher for other subjects (Kirchner et al. 2014, 17–22). No library assistants are being appointed to keep the school libraries open at all times during school hours. Teachers' resource centres are being managed by mainly unqualified staff.

2.6. Availability of children's books in the indigenous languages of Namibia

Since independence, the indigenous African languages in Namibia have been neglected. Tötemeyer (2013, 17–18) reports that the publication of trade books for Namibian children in the various Namibian languages diminished from 13 trade books per year to less than four (3.8) books per year during the 12-year period from 2000 to 2011. Publishers do not find African language publishing economically viable, especially in the face of the language policy for schools, which favours English.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The research team of three, namely the authors of the article, undertook the gathering of all primary and secondary data. Assistants were not used.

3.1. Research process

A questionnaire for Grade 6 students was developed and tested three times on small groups. A pilot study of 226 students in seven schools, both urban and rural, in three

education regions, speaking three languages was conducted in 2012. Data analysis of the pilot study showed that the researchers underestimated the impact of social desirability bias. There was reason to suspect that social desirability bias motivated most respondents to answer untruthfully.

Black (2003, 223), Huisamen (1996, 123) and Nederhof (1984, 264) define social desirability bias (or social desirability response bias) as the tendency to provide information that places the respondent in a favourable light; to deny socially undesirable traits; and to claim socially desirable ones.

The results of the pilot study also showed that the respondents' reading levels were much lower than was expected. The questionnaire had to be drastically redesigned. Six further versions of the questionnaire were developed and tested on small groups before implementation in the main study. The level of difficulty of the final questions was designed in such a way that the students could answer them independently without the intervention of adults. This first phase of the research has been published in a separate article (Tötemeyer, Kirchner and Alexander 2014, 2–24).

The outcome of the pilot study resulted in two decisions, namely: that additional information should be gathered from teachers in order to form a more complete picture; and that interviews with students would only be possible once leisure time readers had been identified.

3.2. Instruments of data collection

According to Welman, Kruger and Mitchell (2005, 92–93), *non-experimental research* includes surveys and examines the relationships that occur between two or more variables, such as age, gender and socio-economic status. Many variables *co-vary*, that is, they occur together and mutually influence one another. Welman et al. (2005, 231) define *descriptive statistics* as being 'concerned with the description and/or summary of the data obtained for a group of units of analysis' (respondents).

The instruments of data collection for the main study were a separate self-administered questionnaire for students and another self-administered questionnaire for teachers and librarians. Observations by means of field notes were made and interviews were held at a later stage with selected students who had been identified as leisure time readers. The study thus made use of mixed methods of data collection, the two questionnaires being quantitative methods to gather non-experimental, descriptive data.

After the data had been collected, the questionnaires were coded, that is, numerically converted, and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The Chi-square test of independence was done to determine if variables were independent or related. The variables in the analysis were:

- area (rural and urban);
- resources of schools (poorly-, reasonably- and well-resourced schools);
- gender;
- reading preferences.

Observational methods that were applied included a structured observation form for the observer to complete, and uncontrolled observations in natural settings, without precision instruments through field notes and photographs (Gilham 2008, 19; Kothari 2004, 96; Muijs 2012, 48).

Interviews were conducted by means of a semi-structured set of pre-determined, specific but open questions in the form of a guide. A set of carefully chosen books, a list of topics and themes and cards with certain types of literary characters were used. These instruments assisted interviewees to clearly indicate their preferences and actions when choosing books. Summaries and transcriptions were made of the responses.

3.3. Triangulation, reliability and validity

Triangulation is a device for enhancing the credibility of research undertaken and a powerful technique that facilitates validation of data through cross-verification from two or more sources. According to Jick (1979) and the Global Environmental Facility (2010), triangulation can be applied in both quantitative and qualitative analysis. For the methodological type of triangulation these may be questionnaires, interviews, observations, focus groups and documents. Documents may include specific studies, national statistics and other official documents, trend analyses, policies, strategies, action plans, other external documents and personal communications.

Triangulation is an alternative to traditional criteria like reliability and validity as it increases the credibility and validity of results. In this particular study, reliability and validity were strengthened not only by triangulation, but also through piloting and anonymity as suggested by Lambert (2012, 137–139). Therefore, the study did not require standardised tests to measure reliability.

Multiple versions of the questionnaire were tested in pre- and post-pilot small-group sessions, in an attempt to address consistency over time. Internal consistency was addressed by adapting the questionnaire to finally include three items with the same aim in mind, namely, to identify *readers*.

Jick (1979, 603) refers to this method as 'the "within method" … a form of triangulation that is used to cross-check the same construct for internal consistency or reliability'. In the study under discussion, respondents' answers to the three items contained in Part 1 of the questionnaire, could be applied to identify and rule out respondents whose answers to Part 2 of the questionnaire were influenced by social desirability bias.

The 'between or cross methods' type that allows for cross-checking data from multiple sources is, according to Jick (1979, 602), the one mostly used. The method searches for regularities in the research data using multiple methods 'to examine the same dimension of a research problem … to test the degree of external validity' (Jick 1979, 602).

Interviews were conducted with 14 Grade 6 students (leisure time readers) at four schools at the end of the data collection period. The interviewees were selected from well-resourced and medium-resourced schools only, as few readers emerged from poorly-resourced schools. The interviewees were numbered Int 1 – Int 14 for reference purposes (see Section 4.3).

3.4. Sampling

The researchers endeavoured to choose samples that were unbiased and representative as far as possible. Huysamen (1998, 37) and Muijs (2011, 33) consider this as important to ensure population validity. There are various methods of sampling to choose from. Huysamen (1998, 40–43), Muijs (2011, 36), Kothari (2004, 15–17), Black (1993/2003, 118–121) and Welman et al. (2005, 68) present information on the various types of sampling that may be used for a given population. They describe the following types of sampling, namely: random, stratified random, stratified, cluster, area, judgment, convenience and purposive. Kothari (2004, 15–17) states that several of the methods of sampling may be used in the same study in which case it can be called 'mixed sampling'.

For the current study, the primary sampling was based on geographic, linguistic and demographic considerations. The population (as in 2012) was 55 422 Grade 6 students in 1 515 schools in the 13 regions of Namibia, studying 13 mother tongues or local languages. The following sampling methods were applied:

1. **Area sampling:** Seven out of the 13 regions (as in 2012) were chosen to include regions from the north, the south, the east and the centre of Namibia, namely: Khomas, Hardap, Omaheke, Ohangwena, Oshikoto, Kavango and Caprivi.

Figure 1:   Map of Namibia

Two of the regions chosen, Kavango and Caprivi, underwent certain administrative changes after data collection. Late in 2013, the Kavango region was divided into two regions, Kavango East and Kavango West, rendering 14 regions. A name change for the Caprivi region to Zambezi region was also announced. This article will, however, refer to the Kavango and Caprivi regions, as these were the official areas and names used during data collection in 2012.

2.   **Linguistic sampling:** In each of the seven chosen regions, at least one of the six main local language groups had to be the dominant language which is also taught to Grade 6 students. Schools were thus selected that offer – in diminishing order of number of speakers – Oshiwambo, Khoekhoegowab, Afrikaans, Otjiherero, Rukwangali or Silozi as a subject in addition to English.

3.   **Demographic (urban/rural) sampling:** Official statistics show that more than 70 per cent of all Namibian primary schools are situated in rural areas and less than 30 per cent in urban areas. The research team therefore selected schools according to the proportion of 70 per cent rural – including schools in remote areas – and 30 per cent urban.

4.   **Quota sampling:** A total of 200 Grade 6 respondents in three to five schools from each of the seven regions was selected. This rendered 1 402 respondents in 36 schools. The number of teachers selected for the sub-study depended upon

the number of languages offered in each of the 36 schools, and whether the school had a library teacher. The library teacher for the school, as well as one teacher for each language taught in Grade 6, was selected. This rendered 88 teacher respondents.

5. **Stratified sampling:** According to Kothari (2004, 15–17), a population group that is not homogeneous may be 'stratified into non-overlapping sub-populations or strata'. As there are vast differences in socio-economic conditions and the availability of resources among Namibian schools, the research team created three strata of respondents, namely: learners in well-resourced schools; those in reasonably-resourced schools; and those in poorly-resourced schools. The intention was to see if there were more readers in well-resourced schools and environments than in poorly-resourced schools and environments. For this purpose *ex post facto* correlations were made between reading findings and the three strata, taking into consideration that correlational relationships are not causal (Black 2003, 64; Welman et al. 2005, 235). This means that it is not possible to infer that one event is caused by another event.

6. **Judgement sampling:** As it was unknown at the time of data collection which schools belonged to which resource stratum, the seven regional directors for educational and cultural matters were asked to provide a list of schools in their respective regions which they judged as being representative of each of the three strata: well-resourced, reasonably-resourced and poorly-resourced. This initial classification of schools was, however, considered as provisional only. The final classification was based on the outcome of the separate survey for the teachers.

7. **Convenience sampling:** From the lists compiled by the regional directors, three to five schools per region that could be most conveniently reached were chosen, taking care to include schools representing all the different strata on the list for each region. Some rural regions, however, did not contain any well-resourced schools (see Section 4). The team visited a number of remote schools even though it entailed extensive travelling.

3.5. Questionnaires and data gathering

During a data-gathering visit to every school, Grade 6 students and the language teachers, as well as the library teacher if there was one, completed the respective questionnaires. The language medium of both questionnaires was English. The rationale was that Namibian Grade 6 students would be in their third year of English medium instruction and should therefore be able to answer questions in simple English. There was a 100 per cent response from the chosen students' sample. There was also a 100 per cent response from the language teachers, but not from the library teachers. Since there are almost no full-time librarians in Namibian government schools, library teachers in some of the schools were not available during data

gathering; they were busy teaching other subjects and the library was not accessible for viewing. Of the 36 schools visited, 22 per cent had no library and 47 per cent had a collection of fewer than 500 books.

During the visits, observations were also recorded and photos taken inside and outside the schools. Interviews were only conducted at a later stage after the coding and analysis of gathered data was completed.

3.6. Contents of the student questionnaire

The self-administered student questionnaire, which was in two parts consisting of 25 questions in total, was answered anonymously. Only 21 questions were used for data capturing, because four 'distractor' questions were used. The majority were simple questions that could be marked off with an 'X'. There were also dichotomous, 'Yes/No' questions, one ranking question, one matching question, multiple-choice questions, and some open-ended/free-response questions that required written replies.

Part 1 of the questionnaire was distributed to students first as it contained three questions by which it was possible to establish if a respondent was either a reader or a non-reader. Only after a respondent completed and handed in Part 1, did he or she receive Part 2 which probed his or her reading preferences.

3.7. Contents of the teacher questionnaire

The self-administered teacher questionnaire consisted of 27 questions to be answered anonymously. The answers to the teacher questionnaire enabled the researchers to do the final classification of the 36 schools into three groups: well-resourced, reasonably-resourced and poorly-resourced. This was needed for the correlational studies. As there were three or four respondents per school (totalling 88 teachers), a group or majority answer for certain generic questions was taken as representative of a particular school (totalling 36 answers, i.e. one group answer per school). For questions that invited opinions, however, all 88 respondents' answers were considered individually (totalling 88 answers).

3.8. Ethical matters

Permission for the research was obtained in writing from the Namibia MoE. Schools were identified and contacted in collaboration with regional offices. Letters of thanks were sent to all participating schools and authorities that were involved in the selection of schools.

The school principals and teachers were fully informed about the aims and objectives of the research. Researchers furthermore adhered to the ethical requirements of anonymity and confidentiality. Recommendations were made with

a view to contribute to an improved learning environment, including conditions and facilities in the schools.

3.9. Limitations of the main study

1. General information on whether language teachers are qualified to teach the languages they teach was procured only from the MoE tables.

2. Namibia is a large country but the sample was selected to be as representative as possible, as regards the coverage of the six main languages taught in the schools and the rural/urban distribution of the schools.

3. Shyness was a challenge, particularly among rural students. It is possible that some students misunderstood certain questions but were too shy to ask for clarification. A possible reason for this reticence is traditional African culture that does not encourage free conversation between adults and children and particularly not with strangers. The pilot study as well as other research showed that interviews with children may lead to inhibited behaviour, particularly among children from poorer educational and socio-economic backgrounds (Ferguson 2010, 334; Siririka 2007, 41; Thorne 2010, 418). The researchers observed this behaviour in poorer rural areas, but most of the respondents who finally emerged as readers were not from poor backgrounds and were generally more vocal and candid. Interviewees were chosen from this group.

4. Social desirability bias was no limitation to the main study. Where there was reason to suspect the influence of elements of social desirability bias it was emphatically stated that those results should be viewed with caution.

5. Although the researchers were aware of certain limitations attached to observational methods and interviews, this information was nevertheless essential to complement the statistical data in order to facilitate full understanding of the research context. It was noted that Maxwell (2013, 125–126) cautions against 'reflexivity' in the sense that the interviewer always influences the interview. He is, however, of the opinion that interviews 'provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on'.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Demographic and socio-economic profile of students and schools in Namibia

The purpose of the teacher questionnaire was, mainly, to obtain a profile of all schools visited and to gather information on the students' socio-economic status. The respondents were language and library teachers. The profile could also be used to ascertain how far the study findings are corroborated by other studies.

4.1.1. Rural/urban distribution and resource status

As there are vast differences between rural and urban schools in many respects, it was important to study the demographic distribution of Namibian schools. It was also important to establish the resource status of schools. The following two figures present this information:
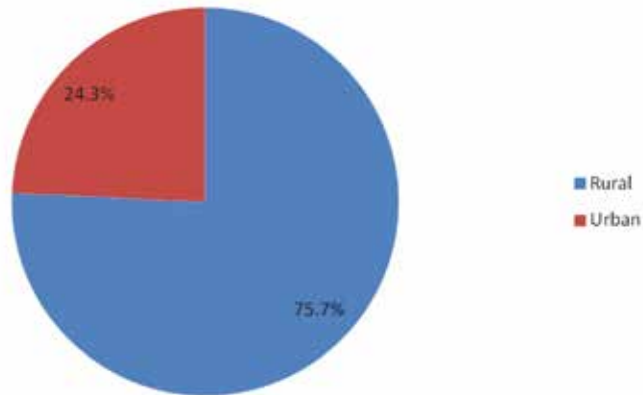

Figure 2:   Demographic setting (rural or urban) of schools

Of the 36 schools visited, 24.3 per cent were in urban areas and 75.7 per cent in rural areas. This is very near to the distribution of all schools in Namibia.
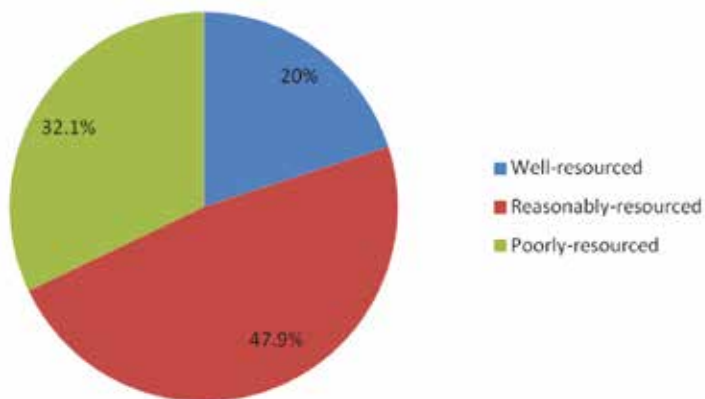
Figure 3:   Resource status of schools

Nearly half of the schools (47.9%) could be classified as reasonably-resourced, while a third (32.1%) were poorly-resourced. One fifth (20%) could be classified as well- resourced. (Tests of independence were done to ascertain whether there were significant differences between the responses of students from these types of schools.)

4.1.2. Gender

Among the student respondents, the two genders were equally represented. This is also the average real gender balance in Namibian schools. In the analysis of gender by answers to questions as reported in Section 5 (even though small differences existed), no significant differences between male and female respondents were found. The study, therefore, does not support the findings of Wikan et al. (2007, 67, 71), for example, that girls demonstrate more positive attitudes towards reading than boys.

4.1.3. Status of school libraries

Schools indicated that the school library is the most important source of information for students.
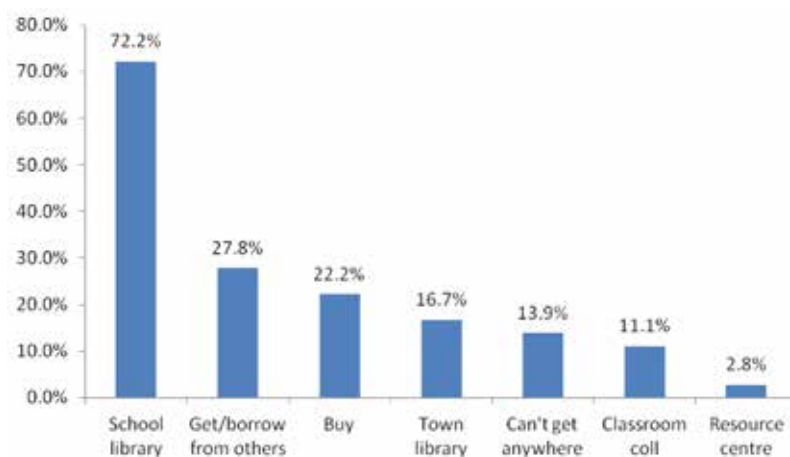
Figure 4:   Where students get books to read

The school library was indicated by most teachers (72.2%) as the main source for students to obtain books. Other, far less reliable sources for books were also indicated: 27.8 per cent of the teachers stated that students may borrow books, or get books as presents from friends or family members, while 22.2 per cent opined that books are bought for students, for example, by their parents. Only 16.7 per cent

indicated that a town library is an option to obtain books, and even fewer mentioned classroom collections (11.1%) or a nearby resource centre (2.8%) as options. Some teachers (13.9%) indicated that students cannot get books anywhere.

In her study of reading preferences among Afrikaans students, Snyman (2006, 169–171) also found that the school [library], as well as the public library are important sources of books.

As the school library is the most important and often the only source of information for students, it is a matter of great concern that the majority of these libraries are under-stocked, poorly managed and lack proper lending systems. The researchers also observed that very few libraries could be regarded as functioning properly. Most (91.3%) schools indicated that the library teacher was also teaching other subjects, that is, there was no full-time librarian.

The information from the schools further indicated that 29.4 per cent had access to the internet, and that 26.5 per cent could provide some access to computers for students.

The study findings are in line with other studies on the conditions of schools and information resources in Namibia (Makuwa 2005; Marope 2005; Smith et al. 2008; Nengomasha et al. 2012), which have shown that Namibian school libraries are in a poor state. Smith et al. (2008) found that three-quarters of Namibian schools had either no library or only a small collection that did not meet minimum standards. The average size of collections was a meagre 37 books in 2008, and many libraries were housed in store rooms. Information communication technology (ICT) was absent in more than 80 per cent of the schools and the majority of Namibian children were not familiar with the internet as they did not have access to it (Smith et al. 2008, 4.1.6 and 7). There were also no full-time librarians in government schools. This situation resulted in a library that was poorly managed and rarely open. The subject BIS was neglected to the point that it was not being offered at all, even though there were slots on the time-table for BIS.

Recent studies conducted in South Africa and Kenya on libraries and information resources in rural schools and the training of teacher librarians yielded similar results (Evans 2014; Mojapelo and Fourie 2014; Mutungi et al. 2014).

4.1.4. Teaching materials

The current study showed that language teachers mainly make use of school textbooks supplemented by photocopied pages of stories to teach. Only 14 of the 66 language teachers (21%) indicated that they have classroom collections. The observations of researchers were that classroom collections are virtually non-existent.

4.1.5. Other sources of information

Namibia is predominantly a book and information poor society with great regional variances. In the north-east and in some of the central northern regions there is an extreme lack in this regard. SACMEQ II (2005, Table 3.1) states that in 2004, the national average number of books at home was 22.

Kasokonya and Kutondukoa (2005, 117) found that 50 of the Namibian homes they visited had no books or printed materials of any sort. Only 6 per cent of the homes had newspapers and only 2 per cent storybooks or children's books. Eighty percent (80%) had radios and 14.5 per cent television sets (2005, 101).

In the current study, 61.8 per cent of schools reported that they cannot provide school books for home study, and 76.5 per cent of schools further reported that students do not have access to reading material at home.
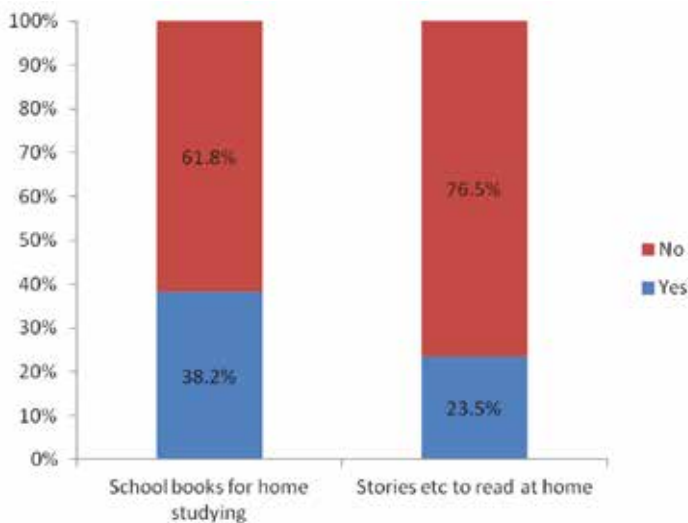
Figure 5:   Availability of textbooks and other reading materials to use at home

Schools further reported that other libraries and resource centres were too far away to be a source of information for students. Two thirds (66%) indicated that these centres are further than 5 kilometres from the school, and 38.2 per cent indicated these centres are further than 20 kilometres away.

4.1.6. Socio-economic conditions

Studies by the Namibia Directorate of Adult Education (Namibia MoE 2011, Figure 2.1.9), the Namibia Household Income and Expenditure Survey of 2009/10 (Namibia Statistics Agency 2010, Graph 1, Table 1.5) and the United Nations Children's

Fund (UNICEF) Trend and GAP Analysis (2011, 19 and 44) showed how poverty was impacting on the health and education of Namibian children. Nearly one fifth (18.3%) of children were living in severe poverty and a third (34%) in poverty. Regions with a higher annual per capita income and less poverty achieved better results in the SACMEQ II Grade 6 reading proficiency test. Better results were also found in schools where the teacher was using a teachers' resource centre.

The state of nutrition of many students is related to the above statistics on poverty. Of the schools surveyed, 57 per cent reported that only half or less than half of the students have enough to eat.
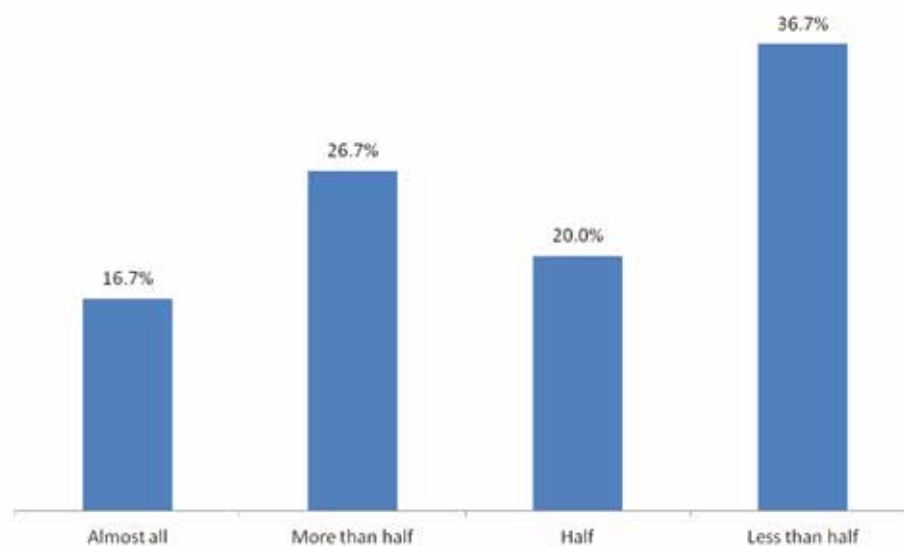
Figure 6: Percentage of students who have enough to eat

Nearly 80 per cent of schools were relying on feeding schemes. More than 80 per cent of the teachers stated that parents do not have enough money to take proper care of their children. Schools further indicated that more than three-quarters of students live in traditional huts and that nearly all students walk vast distances to and from school. Wikan et al. (2007, 6–7) recognise the impact of similar socio-economic and home environments in their discussions of reading habits and attitudes of Namibian students.

4.1.7. Parental involvement

Studies by Kaperu (2004, 56–57), Kasokonya and Kutondukoa (2005, 96–119), SACMEQ II (2005, Tables 3.1(b) and 3.2), Siririka (2007) and Wikan et al. (2007), have shown that Namibian parents were only minimally involved in the education of

their children. Only a minority of parents supported their children with homework. Almost 40 per cent of parents had either no schooling or only minimal primary education.

The results of the current study were similar to those of the abovementioned studies: 81.9 per cent of the schools stated that less than half or almost none of the parents help their children with homework, and 61.8 per cent of the schools stated that less than half or almost none of parents are involved in the school.

4.2. Reading behaviour and preferences of Namibian students

For the purpose of the current research, a reader was defined as 'a person who had some knowledge of the basic types of reading material available, who either spontaneously mentioned reading for pleasure as an activity, or gave reading a priority among various options on which a substantial amount of time was spent after school'. Part 1 of the questionnaire enabled researchers to distinguish between readers and non-readers, as well as to identify reader preference for fiction (stories) or non-fiction (fact books). The researchers labelled the two main types of readers as *story readers* and *general readers*. There were some questions specifically for readers of mainly fiction and other questions specifically for readers of non-fiction. The main findings were as follows:
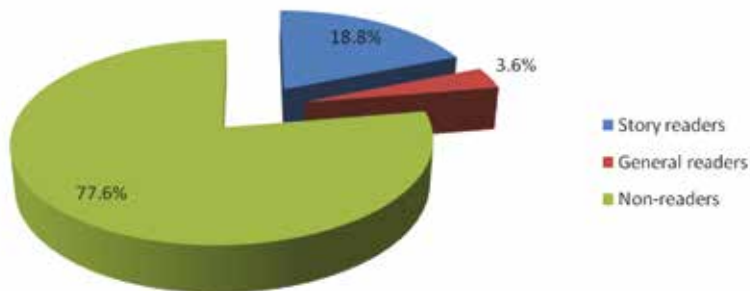

Figure 7:   Reading behaviour and preferences of Namibian Grade 6 students

The majority (77.6%) of the sample population were non-readers. Readers formed a minority of the students, 314 out of 1 402 (22.4%). Furthermore, the study showed that very few Namibian children prefer to read non-fiction for recreational purposes. Readers of non-fiction (general readers) made up only 3.6 per cent of the total respondents, while 18.8 per cent preferred fiction.

This behaviour is at the root of many challenges the education system is currently facing. However, given the socio-economic conditions of the average student as shown by the study, these results were hardly surprising. Students cannot improve their performance without improving their reading skills – and their reading will not improve if students do not have access to enjoyable and rewarding reading materials, outside as well as inside the classroom.

Part one of the questionnaire also attempted to find out what these Grade 6 students do in their free time. Students had to rank a series of activities.

The histogram in Figure 8 indicates the percentage of students that ranked a particular activity that takes up most and second most of their time.
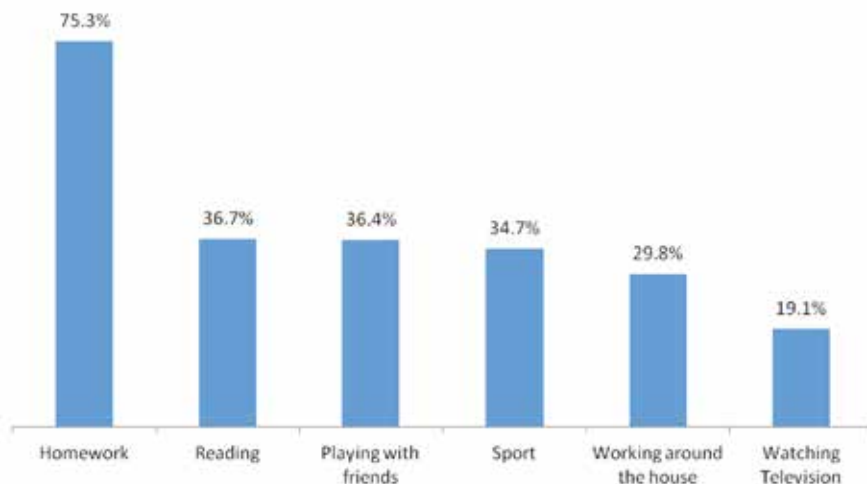

Figure 8:   Activities on which students spend most time

Homework takes up most of the students' time after school – very little time is left for anything else. More or less equal time is spent after school on reading (36.7%), playing with friends (36.4%) and on sport (34.7%). It is interesting to note that reading was rated approximately equal to these other activities. Watching television was ranked first or second by only 19.1 per cent. In Namibia television is available in some schools but is not widely available in rural homes. Nearly one third (30.1%) of students indicated that watching television outside of school hours is an activity they seldom or never do.

Regarding the relationship between the number of readers, the situation and the resource status of a school, it was clear that more readers are produced by well-resourced schools and by urban schools:
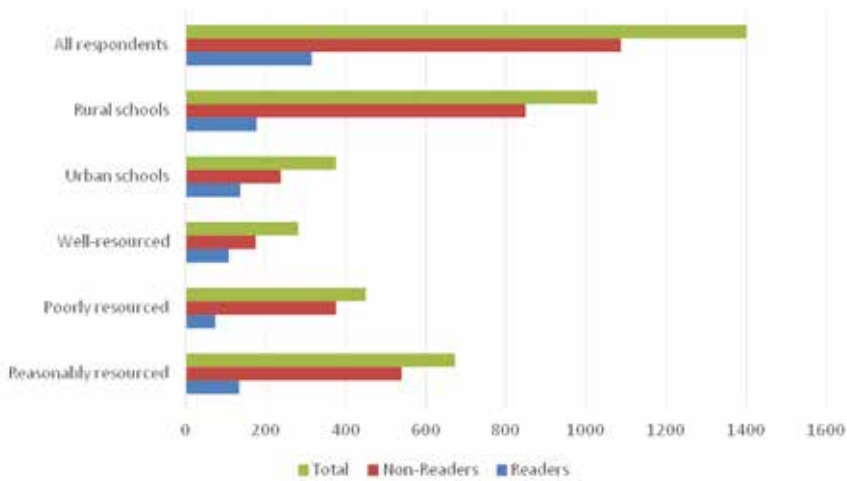
Figure 9:   Readers and non-readers produced by type of school

In well-resourced schools 37.9 per cent of students were categorisd as readers compared to 19.9 per cent of students from reasonably-resourced schools, and only 16 per cent of students in poorly-resourced schools. In rural schools only 17.3 per cent of students were found to be readers, compared to 36.5 per cent from urban schools.

Although it is not the only factor, it is evident that the area (whether rural or urban) and the status of resourcing of schools play a vital role in the development of readers. In poorly-resourced schools 83.6 per cent of students could not be classified as readers. As with various other factors, it seems as if the urban child, given that the environment provides better access to information, has greater opportunity to develop into a reader. However, percentages of readers remain low across the country The differences in reading preferences between these groups, as they emerged in tests of independence, will be discussed in the next section.

4.3. Readers' reading preferences

Part two of the questionnaire was designed to determine the readers' attitudes towards reading (stories or non-fiction); the kind of topics, characters and themes they liked to read about; and the criteria they used when choosing a book. It was also ascertained where readers got the books from; who motivated them to read; and in which languages they read. Finally, some questions focused on whether stories were read or told to them; and if they listened to stories on the radio.

4.3.1. Students' perceptions of reading

While the readers in general had a very positive perception of reading, they rated the functional or educational value of reading higher than reading for enjoyment and fun. Some readers even indicated that they do not like reading. Some respondents seemed to think that liking an activity does not mean that it is fun to do it. Interviews corroborated the abovementioned functional view of reading – as being important solely to gain information. Some interviewees, however, also mentioned reading for enjoyment – that it can be interesting and fun. Some responses were:

> I like reading because it's my hobby and I love reading … (Int 1)
>
> … it's fun for me to read and I get more information … (Int 2)
>
> I like storybooks because it's always interesting and I enjoy it … (Int 1)
>
> … it is part of my leisure … (Int 13)
>
> … there is always something interesting behind it … you get a surprise … (Int 3)
>
> … reading is not a nerd thing … (Int 11)
>
> I read to understand … (Int 10)
>
> It makes me feel new … (Int 11)
>
> … as if I am in another world (Int 14)

The tests of independence revealed that more students in well-resourced schools viewed reading as a fun activity than students in poorly- and reasonably-resourced schools. This view can be linked to the lack of entertaining stories and interesting factual books in the poorer schools.

Students' perceptions of reading, the value of reading, as well as the language of reading material were determined. These results are given in the figures that follow:
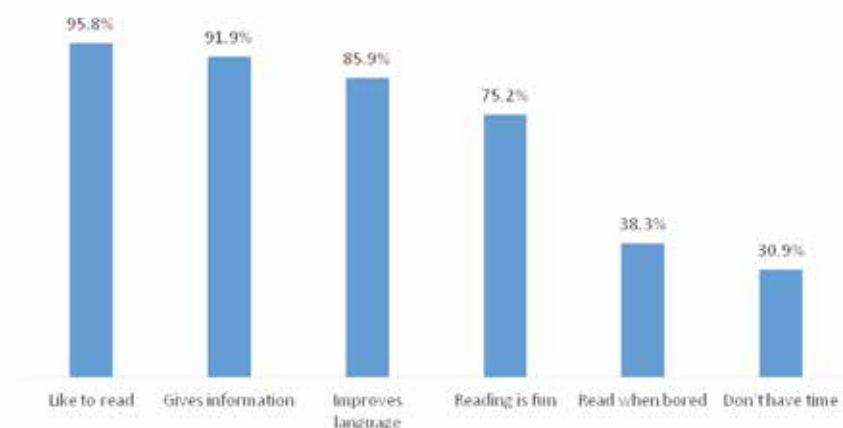

Figure 10: Students' perceptions of reading

- 91.9 per cent of the reader group indicated that reading improves their knowledge.
- 85.9 per cent felt that reading improves language skills. These views were supported during the interviews.
- Readers also indicated that they were aware that books can 'teach you a lesson'.
- The view that reading could be interesting and fun, and that reading develops the imagination and conveys information in a more interesting way, was supported by a smaller percentage.

4.4.   Language used for after-school reading

Nearly all readers (94.3%) indicated that they read in English after school and fewer readers (58.7%) that they read in the mother tongue after school. While it appears that respondents prefer to read in English, this may be because students have access to mostly English materials while publications in Namibian indigenous languages are virtually non-existent (see also, Snyman 2006, 155; Tötemeyer 2013, 17–18).

The results from the tests of independence showed that students in well-resourced schools are less inclined to choose a book written in their mother tongue than those in poorly- and reasonably-resourced schools. Rural students prefer to read in their mother tongue. During the interviews, a respondent indicated that English is *more beautiful* than the mother tongue (Int 14). This statement reflects the low esteem in which indigenous languages are generally held in Namibia.

4.5.   Reasons why students do not read

The reasons for students preferring not to read either in English or in their mother tongue were similar: either there is nothing to read, or reading in the language proved to be too difficult. Nearly 70 per cent (69.7%) indicated that there is nothing available to read in English and 19.4 per cent indicated that English is too difficult. With regard to the mother tongue, 44.7 per cent indicated that there is nothing to read and 34.2 per cent that they find reading in the mother tongue difficult.

4.6.   Characters and themes in storybooks; topics of non-fiction

The following types of stories were favoured. Bible stories were chosen by 79.5 per cent – making these the most popular texts, followed by school stories and stories set against a time in history. The popularity of Bible stories might be connected to the fact that these were the only stories readers really knew well. Interviews supported this information:

> I liked the story because God was in it … (Int 1)
>
> … then I know what happened long ago … (Int 1)
>
> … it's about a kid trying to get through his middle school without getting into trouble (Int 12)

The more sophisticated readers, however, indicated that they also like humour in stories, adventure, enriching information, for example on nature, a captivating storyline, suspense and a story where a problem is solved in the end:

> … you laugh about it and you enjoy it … (Int 14)
>
> I chose the book about electricity because I think it is exciting! (Int 4)
>
> … because it is about nature and many people trash nature … (Int 11)
>
> … there is the nasty vampire they must get rid of ... (Int 13)
>
> … about people who were lost … and then they were found … (Int 4)

The results further showed that story readers are open to stories about people who are different from them or who lived long ago. Story readers are nearly equally attracted to characters who are fellow Namibians (76%) and to those who live in other countries (72.9%).

Interviews indicated that readers want to identify with the character, who must be colourful/lively and that they want to learn from the character:

> It did grip me because it teach me … When I'm at high school I will know what is coming next ... prepare me for things ahead … (Int 3)
>
> He (the Wimpy Kid) is like me … (Int 12)

4.7. How readers choose books

The questionnaire as well as the interviews gauged how students choose books. In the interviews a practical activity was included where students could choose from a selection of children's books, followed by a discussion on the reasons for choosing a specific title.

Researchers observed that interviewees chose a book by looking at the cover picture, the title and by paging through. Some said that in a book shop or library they would go to certain sections to find their favourite theme: for example, adventure stories or Bible stories. Some indicated that the author played a role; some read the back cover to see if the topic was interesting.

The results from the questionnaires showed that the recommendation of another person (especially a teacher) was the most important consideration for choosing fiction. Generally accessible and easy-to-read texts were also important for readers. The tests of independence further showed that the role of the school and the teacher is very important in the rural areas – more than in urban areas, and that rural respondents would rather choose a book that looks easy to read, has an inviting cover and has pictures inside, and with easier language and less print.

This is in line with the fact that many rural readers do not see reading as fun. Urban respondents were much less influenced by these factors, and emerged as much

more self-regulatory, independent and discriminatory readers, many of whom also read for enjoyment.

4.8. Motivators of children's reading

The majority (86.9%) of the readers indicated that they love reading and do not need to be motivated by anyone to read. External motivators were, as mentioned, teachers (79.3%), followed by parents (55.8%) and then peers.

   The tests of independence revealed that grandparents, family members, friends as well as teachers have a bigger influence as motivators of reading in rural areas than in urban areas. Teachers' influence showed high scores (89% rural against 67.2% urban). When asking interviewees if they would read a book if a teacher recommended it, one response was:

   Yes … the teachers know more than the children … and sometimes they are right (Int 14)

4.9. Where readers find books

The analysis of the tests of independence on sources available to students in well, reasonably and poorly resourced schools revealed that the highest percentage of readers in well-resourced schools get books from family or friends. They were also the predominant book buyers among all the readers identified by the study. More readers from poorly-resourced schools indicated that they use church libraries. Together with reasonably-resourced schools, readers in poorly-resourced schools make greater use of the school library than those in well-resourced schools.

   The school library remains an important source of information, but *readers* have far more possibilities of accessing books than *non-readers*. Eighty per cent of the readers have access to school libraries, while 67 per cent could also get books by buying, as well as from friends and family (66.3%). The interviews showed that most of these respondents lived in urban areas. This is indicative of the affluent reader. The study therefore poignantly demonstrates the inequalities among Namibian children and the way in which this situation is influencing their reading or non-reading behaviour.

4.10. Story reading and storytelling

The last questions of Part 2 of the questionnaire determined if reading stories to groups and storytelling were still activities taking place in the different Namibian communities. Some respondents did not answer this question. Of those who answered, nearly one third (31.5%) indicated that parents told them stories and one quarter (24.3%) indicated that teachers told them stories. During the interviews some readers said that it was mostly their grandmothers who told the stories at home.
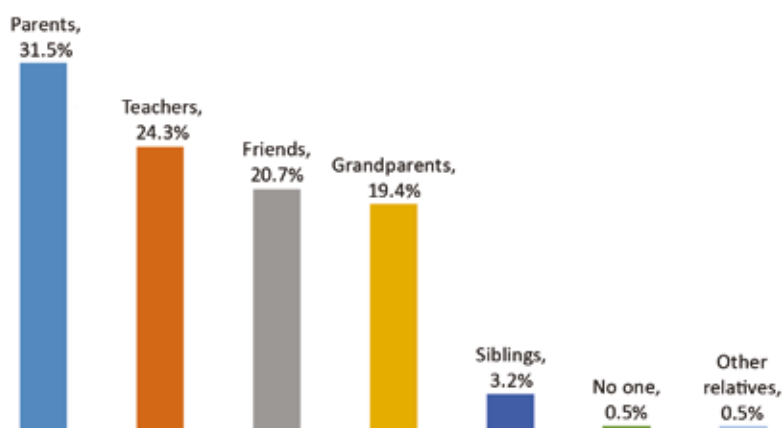
Figure 11: Storytellers

When asked whether someone read stories to them, 76 per cent of the respondents answered in the affirmative and that it was mostly the teachers who did so. A substantial percentage of readers, however, did not answer this question. Both teachers and students indicated that the children sometimes listen to stories on the radio. The interviews corroborated this. The tests of independence revealed that these oral forms, storytelling, story reading and listening to stories on the radio, were activities practised more in the rural areas than in urban areas.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the recommendations is to advise stakeholders on how an enabling environment more conducive to reading could be created. As a significant proportion of Namibian parents are not role models for reading, the recommendations focus mainly on schools. They include the following:

5.1. Strengthening reading

- School curricula should include reading programmes across the curriculum.
- Mother tongue languages should be the media of instruction in primary schools and English be phased in gradually.
- The urgent need to improve the reading proficiency of students in both English and mother tongue languages requires that teachers be supported through a variety of books in both English and the relevant mother tongue languages, over and above teacher manuals, set books and readers.

- The production of children's books in the indigenous languages for use by language teachers could be increased if publishers and government collaborate to produce the needed literature. A special fund could be established to subsidise publishers for such purpose.

5.2.   Improving access to reading materials

- Government should make real efforts to give children more access to books and information materials through the development of school libraries, as the school library is often the only source of reading materials in the community. The minimum size of a school library collection should ideally be at least ten information units per student in all languages offered in the school and on a variety of topics. Even though this minimum size is considered quite a small library, it may be necessary to start with an even smaller number, namely a collection of five units per student and gradually enlarge the collection.

- Every standard school library should have a special needs collection that will include books to meet the needs of reluctant readers, poor readers and students with emotional problems. These books can be used by the qualified librarian together with the responsible language teacher for bibliotherapeutical purposes.

- A qualified librarian, dedicated to the library and the teaching of information skills *only* should be appointed for every school library as it must be open at all times during school hours.

- For schools without a library or where the school library is still in an embryonic stage, the following recommendations could be considered: the development of classroom collections, community library support to schools and/or the provision of book boxes to remote schools.

5.3.   Training for school library management

- UNAM was urged to institute courses in school librarianship and the government advised to make school librarianship a priority field of study with proposed quotas to the university, as well as provide dedicated study grants to these students.

- The government was requested to strengthen the short in-service training courses offered by Education Library Services to equip library teachers operating in schools without qualified librarians with the necessary skills.

- The MoE was also requested to investigate the misuse of school librarian posts for the full-time teaching of other subjects.

5.4. Training language teachers

- As teachers unqualified or under-qualified in the languages they teach are mostly not able to develop students into avid readers, it is recommended that they receive in-service training in reading-motivation techniques on a continuous basis. All teachers should be well versed in ways to help students master not only the mechanical aspects of reading, but also to become engaged with books. They need to know how to promote more sophisticated ways of selecting reading material.

- The training of language teachers should include basic knowledge of remedial teaching and reading support towards struggling readers.

- In order to address the shortage of indigenous language teachers across all school phases, the MoE should make the indigenous languages a priority field of study with proposed quotas to UNAM, and provide dedicated study grants to these students.

- The university was urged to offer courses in all Namibian languages and ensure that all teachers for Grade 0 to 5 be enabled to effectively use an indigenous language as medium of instruction across a variety of school subjects. It was suggested that university students of languages, in addition, be equipped to create and supplement the literature available in the specific language.

5.5. Promoting reader motivation

Various recommendations were made to promote reader motivation and engagement with children's books in order to enable all children, individually and in groups, to experience the joy and benefits of reading:

- Large classes and the overloading of language teachers should be avoided as these conditions are counterproductive to reading engagement programmes.

- The weekly reading period (as proposed in the new revised school curriculum) should be a social and rewarding experience. Engaging material, suitable for different reading levels and preferences in more than one language, should be available.

- The topics, characters and themes favoured by students (as they emerged from the study) should be taken into account in book selection for schools and libraries.

- It is important that teachers and librarians have a sound knowledge of titles available for different age and interest groups. If a variety of materials in English and in the local languages is not actively made available through a national drive, the danger will be that teachers use school textbooks and readers, and thus reinforce existing negative attitudes towards reading. If a teacher does not have

suitable books for the reading period, it is still better to use newspapers than boring school textbooks. Newspapers require minimal financial input and are widely available in all the major Namibian languages.

- Language teachers should make time for students to discuss among themselves what they have read and encourage the creation of book clubs/reading clubs to stimulate a reading habit among students.

5.6. Involving the parents

- Parents should be encouraged to get involved in the school, including the library, while ways and means need to be found to empower parents with a low level of education to become involved in their own education and that of their children. Family literacy and community education programmes should include the reading of picture books with minimal text within the family group, as the enjoyment of sharing books is a sure way to engender enthusiasm for reading.

- Parents from traditional backgrounds should be invited to share the indigenous knowledge of their culture with the school. Parents will feel respected for who they are, irrespective of their level of formal education.

- As the best way to get across a message is by means of a story, schools and community libraries should be encouraged to invite storytellers and knowledgeable senior citizens for storytelling sessions at the schools.

- Reading festivals should include the performance of poems, praise songs, dramas, proverbs and riddles and the exhibition and sale of books in the local languages. Particularly in remote areas people are often not aware of the existence of such books.

5.7. Harnessing technology

- Training or in-service training should prepare the language teacher to work under both ideal and less ideal circumstances – operating in a developed as well as a developing world setup.

- Access to technology and internet connectivity is rapidly changing in Africa. Teachers should be able to adapt and keep abreast of technological changes and use these innovatively to enhance their teaching and promote reading.

- Ideally all schools should have a computer centre or even classrooms with a laptop for each student. As very few schools are well-equipped in this regard, schools should at least have one or two notebook computers. Teachers could then use resource centres where information could be downloaded and then used in the school. It is therefore important that teachers be trained in the use of the

internet. There are reading websites where students and teachers can browse and find material to read for enrichment and/or to use in the classroom.

- Educational programmes and story readings in all the local languages and in English can reach schools and individual students in remote areas through the radio. New books in the local languages can be publicised through weekly or monthly book discussion programmes in the local languages.

- Television can also be used to communicate information on various topics and as a medium to promote an interest in reading (e.g., by dramatising popular storybooks).

- Social media can stimulate an interest in reading among youth (e.g., a blog on a very popular book where comments and questions could be posted).

   Mobile phones could also be used to read stories in serial form.

5.8. Improving students' well-being

- A strong plea to government was to strengthen the existing school feeding programme further, as under-nutrition results in stunted children with lower levels of cognitive ability and lower IQs.

- The last recommendation was that government develop after-school facilities where students can have a place to study and access information by establishing more hostels for students in remote areas.

- The relationship between the quality of school infrastructure and the quality of learning was pointed out, and that the development of a reading culture is dependent on the overall well-being of children and the accessibility of the needed literature.

6. FINAL STATEMENT

The study on the reading behaviour and preferences of Namibian children has revealed a picture of deprivation in the schools and environment of the majority of Namibian children. The main finding that 78.6 per cent of the 1 402 Grade 6 students selected for the study do not read in their free time, is therefore not surprising. Only 22.4 per cent of the 1 402 respondents, most of whom were attending well-resourced mainly urban schools, read in their free time, and the larger part of this small percentage, regrettably read mostly for utilitarian purposes. Very few of these children have had the opportunity to experience the joy of reading. Mere utilitarian reasons to read are not very conducive to forming a love of books and reading. The development of a reading culture is also connected to affective processes and not only mental processes (Merts 2002, 34).

The challenge for Namibia is to give children the opportunity to experience that reading is not only to learn facts but that it is fun to read and a source of pleasure. In order to achieve this goal, increased production of children's books, particularly in the local languages and nationwide access to these materials, should be a priority.

Another matter of prime concern is the poor English language competency of the majority of teachers. An extensive project to improve teachers' English language competency was launched far too late, that is, 20 years after the institution of English as the main medium of instruction.

The inadequate qualifications of most teachers to teach the various Namibian languages are likewise disturbing. Improvement of the language competency of mother tongue/local language teachers does not seem to be a priority with government.

The study as well as related studies and the statistics consulted show that the challenges the majority of Namibian children are facing to get a good education are just too great for them to cope with. The typical child identified by the study is about 13 years old; belongs to a poor and mainly uneducated family; does not receive any help with homework; lives in a hut without books in an information poor rural area where English is only heard within the school; feels hungry most of the time; and has to walk up to 10 kilometres and more a day to an under-resourced school often without the basic amenities and no functioning school library, with teachers who are not always qualified in the subjects they teach.

The government succeeded in getting almost 100 per cent of Namibian children of school entry age into school since independence but the infrastructure of the schools has been and still is inadequate to ensure quality education. Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution (Republic of Namibia 2010, 12) states that: 'Primary education shall be compulsory and the state shall provide reasonable facilities to render effective this right for every resident within Namibia.'

School libraries, particularly in the rural areas can be seen as 'reasonable facilities'. A standard school library is no luxury but an important factor of academic success and a facility without which no rural school can nurture the reading habit. Without basic reading materials in an easily understandable language, Namibian children will not be able to develop into informed and well-educated citizens. Namibia's mandate to evolve into a knowledge-based society within the next fifteen years as set out by Vision 2030 through ETSIP (2004) (Training Sector Improvement Programme), is being seriously threatened by the lack of a reading culture in the country.

No society can afford to waste talent. A part of at least two school generations (12 years each) of human potential has already been lost in post-independence Namibia in the face of the serious constraints under which many children have been trying and are still trying to get a decent education. That these children do not read is certainly not their choice; it is their fate.

In order to educate the next generation for citizenship, leadership and participation in the knowledge economy and also to promote social mobility depends on quality teaching and the resources to offer a rich learning environment. Giving access to education for all children is essential but a poor learning environment defeats the purpose. Children are precious human capital for the future; the country cannot afford to lose them during the most impressionable years of their lives.

Urgent attention to the recommendations that emanated from the research will pave the way towards the development of a reading culture that is a prerequisite for the advancement of a knowledge-based society.

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