AOSIS

Reading habits of student teachers studying at a distance-learning institution in South Africa

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Background: South Africans are widely perceived as not being a reading nation. For many South African children, their first encounter with books and stories occurs when they formally enter the schooling system. This raises the question of how teachers understand their role as reading role models.

Objectives: This article aims to investigate how pre-service teachers who are registered at an open distance learning institution evaluate their reading habits.

Method: The study employed phenomenography as a research design. All students registered for the Children's Literature module in 2023 were invited to participate in the study. The submissions of a formal forum discussion assessment of students who agreed to participate in the study were analysed and arranged in themes and codes using Atlas.ti.

Results: The article shows that most students perceive themselves as readers, though for varied reasons. The findings suggest the rejection of a monolithic definition of a reader identity. Instead, the notion of categories of readers provides more valuable information for understanding reading behaviour and reader identities.

Conclusion: This study confirmed that pre-service teachers are aware of the benefits of reading, though their actions to improve their reading ability, are inadequate.

Contribution: Since pre-service teacher training is arguably an important opportunity for addressing the literacy crisis, the findings of this study emphasise the important role of teachers as reading role models.

Keywords: pre-service teachers; reading culture; reader identity; reading for pleasure; reading practices.

Introduction and background

Huston, Polzer-Ngwato and Morse (2023) posit:

> Reading gives us power – to learn new things, tell our stories and shape our futures. It helps build a stronger, more equal economy and a connected society. It improves our educational outcomes, economic opportunities, critical thinking abilities, empathy, civic engagement, and child–adult relationships. (p. 1)

To cultivate a love of reading, children not only need access to high-quality books; they also need access to skilled readers who can mediate and scaffold their encounters with books. Unfortunately, Malada (2023) and Biesman-Simons (2021:1) report that South Africans are widely perceived as not being a reading nation. Furthermore, Mda (2017) argues that the expectation that primary caregivers will model reading practices and behaviour, reflects middle-class Western thinking and cannot be assumed in South Africa. Similarly, Biesman-Simons (2021:3) and Willenberg (2018) caution that one cannot expect parents and caregivers to model proficient reading practices or support their children's reading practices if they are not readers themselves. According to Mda (2017), a culture of reading can be cultivated at any age, but it is best instilled in early childhood.

Since many South African learners' first encounter with books and stories occurs when they formally enter school, teachers have an enormous responsibility to make reading enjoyable to young children and to cultivate a love of reading. Such circumstances prompted me to explore how pre-service teachers who are registered at the largest open distance-learning institution in Africa, which produces almost 50% of South Africa's teachers (University of South Africa 2018), assess their own reading habits. How student teachers assess their own reading habits is important because they must model reading-proficient practices to their young learners. It raises the question,

how teachers can promote a love of reading if they do not have strong reading habits themselves. How do teachers serve as reading role models for young children, if they do not identify themselves as readers? This leads to the issue of initial teacher training, which Willenberg (2018) argues to be an important opportunity for addressing the literacy crisis.

This is a priority, as better academic outcomes are associated with proficient reading skills (Balan, Katenga & Simon 2019:1470; Biesman-Simons 2021:1; Department of Basic Education 2017). The challenge is that many teachers come from the very same contexts as their learners and are products of the same schooling system. The Oppenheimer Memorial Trust Education Research Report (2023:60) reveals that only 55% of South African teachers met the Intermediate Benchmark of Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), in contrast to 82% of all Grade 4 children international. These norms, rooted in Wortham's (2006) autonomous model of identity (see the discussion under the theoretical framework) may be limited, yet reveal a snapshot of South African teachers' reading habits.

Instead, the National Reading Barometer of South Africa acknowledges that people read for varied reasons and in diverse ways, and it provides significant insight into the nation's reading behaviours. Huston et al. (2023:5) found that although 87% of South African people have some form of printed reading material in their homes (newspapers, magazines, dictionaries, and textbooks), 63% of South African households do not possess a single fiction or non-fiction book. Only 17% of adults live in a home that has 11–20 books. Huston et al. (2023:5) argue that owning any number of books makes people more likely to read, including reading to children. In 2023, 52% of adults who lived with children, reported that they read with them. However, Huston et al. (2023:5) found that 65% of homes with children under the age of 10, did not have even one picture book, and only 10% had more than 10 picture books. For many South African children, their first encounter with books and stories occurs when they formally enter the schooling system. These statistics may explain why 81% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning in any language (Department of Basic Education 2023:2 & 7).

Objectives of the study

As the lecturer for the module on Children's Literature, I need to understand the reading habits or reader identities of the students who are registered for this module, because they will function as reading role models for learners. One of the specific outcomes of the module is the development and promotion of a love of reading in young children. Self-assessment of their own reading habits may help students understand how to model and scaffold reading-proficient habits and promote a love of reading in young children. This skill is particularly important for the Foundation Phase teachers as many South African children are deprived of the experience of being read to, due to a plethora of socio-economic challenges. I am also interested in their motivations,

in other words, the criteria they use to identify whether they are readers. This study is of particular importance as it focuses on the reading habits of student teachers in an open distance learning environment as a unique group. The importance of this group of student teachers lies in the fact that, according to Horner (2018), almost 50% of South Africa's teachers are produced through open distance learning.

Theoretical framework

Although there are many definitions on identity and how identities form and change over time, for this study I view identity, and more specifically a reader identity, as shaped by the environment, past and current experiences and how individuals situate themselves within those experiences. As Mda (2017) emphasised, students' conceptualisation of what it means to be a reader, is constructed in early childhood. Through their interaction with reading materials, parents and caregivers, family members, peers and teachers, children have learned what it means to be identified as a certain type of reader. The norms connected with a particular reading identity, whether it be good or poor, are grounded in Wortham's (2006) models of identity. Wortham (2006:30) believes that individuals behave in certain ways, and those behaviours are interpreted by others as signs of identity. These signs serve as indications that the individual belongs to a specific social type. In school, learners learn that certain qualities are associated with a particular type of reader. The dominating categories are often not open to question, and it is expected that individuals should ascribe themselves accordingly. Although individuals can decide how to identify themselves, it is often authoritative figures (the teachers and school administrators) that get to decide what identities should look like within a specific context. Wortham (2006:30) refers to this kind of model as the autonomous model of identity. Within an autonomous model of identity, the identities of learners and students are created solely on the basis of what they can or cannot do, with little attention to social and cultural factors that can shape their reading habits.

By contrast, an ideological model of literacy views reading as a complex social practice that encompasses much more than reading skills and strategies (Wortham 2006:30). Instead, it focuses on both the formal and informal ways in which reading shapes our identities. Student's experiences and how they define themselves are central to what Wortham (2006) describes as the ideological model. Within the ideological model, students are not expected to conform to pre-existing models of identity. Instead, they are provided control to define and shape their identities. Based on the above theoretical framework, students' understanding of who they are as readers, contributes to the decisions they make about reading. I was interested in exploring the decisions my students make about reading.

Defining a reading culture

The most basic definitions of reading reflect Wortham's (2006:30) autonomous model of literacy. One such basic

definition that is offered by Biesman-Simons (2021:2), views 'reading' as having the ability to engage with written symbols and to make meaning from them. It therefore refers to the skill of reading, or the ability to read (cf. Figure 1). According to Biesman-Simons (2021:2), the most conventional definition of a reader would then refer to someone who has books in his or her home and regularly reads for pleasure. This definition adds two additional components that are critical for a reading culture, namely having access to reading material and the positioning of reading for pleasure. Biesman-Simons (2021:2) continues to define 'culture' as one's practices, perceptions, thoughts, behaviour, and habits. Simply put, a reading culture arguably centres on the practices associated with reading.

Therefore, the three elements of a reading culture are, in the first place, the ability to read; secondly, having access to reading material (cf. Figure 1), whether digital or in print; and thirdly, a motivation to read, which is premised on the ability to do so and having access to various forms of reading material, which are accessed for a wide variety of reasons, or with a variety of intentions (cf. Figure 1). The purpose of reading can involve reading for information, reading for communication, and reading for enjoyment. Only once all three elements are evident, a reading culture is established.

Reading cultures are influenced by inherent individual constraints such as education and income and these influence the subjective choices individuals make. If families struggle to put food on the table, buying books will not be high on their list of priorities (Malada 2023). According to the ideological model of identity, young children will construct their reader identity based on what is valued at home and in the classroom (Abodeeb-Gentile & Zawalinski 2013:35).

Defining reader identity

Kirca and Glover (2021:1183) believe that people reveal something about their identity when they describe themselves as readers. They argue that if we are what we eat, we most certainly also are what we read. As with other forms of identity, a reader's identity is not fixed but is fluid and dynamic, it develops over time and suggests a process of self-discovery. Kirca and Glover (2021:1183) as well as Abodeeb-Gentile and Zawalinski (2013:35) describe reader identities as
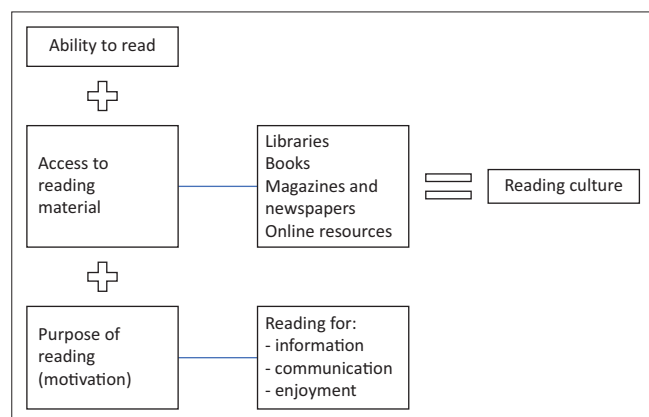

FIGURE 1: Elements of a reading culture.

social, changeable, and multi-faceted – and as growing out of the opportunities that are created within one's culture. It is through such opportunities that one's sense of self is developed, and how we see ourselves as readers.

Therefore, a reader identity is associated with, in the first place, with the extent of an individual's belief in how capable he or she is of reading and making sense of a text; and secondly, with the value he or she places on the reading. Kirca and Glover (2021:1183) suggest that reader identity simply refers to what an individual reads, how one reads, and what one gains from reading. These views strongly reflect the ideological model of literacy.

Different reading personas

According to Scoggin and Schneewind (2021), reader-identity comprises five elements, which reflect views from both models of literacy. The first aspect is the student's attitude towards reading, which can be either positive or negative. The second element involves a sense of self-efficacy – how confident they feel in their reading abilities. Habits such as where one reads, for how long and with whom, form the third element. The choice of reading material, involving genre and topic, forms the fourth element. The final element ties in with the second element and relates to the process of reading involving the input that is applied to read fluently. These elements have proven to help develop categories of readers or reader personas. The National Reading Barometer of South Africa (Huston et al. 2023:11) classifies reader personas as follows: non-readers, functional readers, occasional readers, regular readers, and committed readers.

Non-readers do not identify as readers, yet they understand the value of reading and are positive about children learning to read and about reading to children. Functional readers can read, but only read out of necessity, for instance when using messages to communicate. Functional readers may have Internet access, but rarely spend time on social media and rarely read for pleasure. Occasional readers read a bit of everything but not much of anything. They frequently read for communication purposes as well as for information and enjoyment. Regular readers also read frequently to gain information, to communicate, and for enjoyment. Additionally, they are more digitally active than people in the categories above and spend much time on the Internet as well as on social media. Huston et al. (2023:11) report that although they also read longer texts, they do so less frequently than committed readers.

According to Huston et al. (2023:11), committed readers identify strongly as enthusiastic readers. They enjoy reading a wide variety of genres and do so with both print and digital materials. According to Huston et al. (2023:11), committed readers may spend most of their day reading to gain information for communication, and they also read for pleasure.

Thomas and Osment (2018:1006), in turn, identify three reader-identity types, namely a manifest identity, an introject

identity, and a neutral reader identity. A manifest reader identity pertains to the individual who strongly feels that reading is an integral part of his or her identity in a wide variety of ways. This reader-identity correlates with what Huston et al. (2023:11) refer to as the regular or committed reader. An introjected reader-identity applies to an individual who has only a partial association with reading, meaning that reading is part of his or her broader identity, though within certain limits or boundaries (Thomas & Osment 2018:1007). This reader-identity correlates with what Huston et al. (2023:11) refer to as the occasional reader. The neutral reader-identity applies to the individual for whom reading is purely transactional. Reading is merely a way of communicating, and the individual does not feel a personal association with the activity (Thomas & Osment 2018:1007). Huston et al. (2023:11) describe this group as functional readers.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the ethics committee of the College of Education at the University of South Africa on 10 February 2021. The ethics clearance number is 2021/02/10/90443969/19/AM. Informed consent was requested from and granted by the students who participated in the study. The procedures performed in this study, to the extent that it involved human participants, were adhering to the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee, and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. As I am both the lecturer and the researcher, it was important to ensure that these roles did not impact negatively on the students' self-reflection as well as the research process. To prevent possible response biases, students were requested to participate in the research study only after they had submitted their Assessment 2 responses, and they could not draft their responses in a way that would allow them to perform in line with the research objectives. I also had to constantly check and recheck my own assumptions on what I regard as a reader identity, and not allow it to distort how I report on the student experiences.

Research design

This study employed a qualitative approach and used phenomenography in its research design. Hajar (2021:1421) defines phenomenography as an empirical approach that aims to understand and describe qualitatively different ways, in which individuals experience and understand the world. Phenomenography is therefore concerned with the descriptions of things as they appear to us. This is the most suitable research design, as I had to rely on participants' discursive accounts of their experiences (Richardson 1999:55). The use of phenomenography as a research design, allowed me to describe the relations between the students and the various aspects of the world around, them that have shaped their reading identities, regardless of whether those relationships manifested in the form of immediate experiences, conceptual thought, or physical behaviour (Richardson 1999:55). It allowed me both to investigate and study the variations in students' experiences and to

investigate my assumptions about the students' reading identities.

Participants, data collection instruments and the process of data collection

The population for the study was the 2023 cohort of students registered for one module in the B.Ed. Foundation Phase programme. In 2023, there were 3629 students registered for the module. During that year, 112 students dropped out, reducing the population to 3517. All the students had to submit Assessment 2 as a formal, graded forum discussion as per the approved 2023 assessment plan for this module, with the mark contributing to their year mark. The decision of the students to participate in the research was by no means influenced by their Assessment 2 mark, as the assessment had been graded way before I sent out the letter of invitation. Participation did not require any activity or action other than the submission of Assessment 2. Assessment 2 was particularly useful to this study, as it required students to reflect on their reader identities.

All students who registered for this module in 2023, submitted their responses for the graded forum discussion via Moodle, the official learning and management system of the institution, and only the responses of those students who had granted permission for their data to be used in the study, were downloaded from Moodle and saved in a Microsoft Word format.

Only after the registered students had submitted their responses and I had graded their assessments, I emailed an information letter to them, asking their permission to use their responses for this research. A total of 602 students responded to the call to participate, meaning that the response rate was 17.1%.

Of the 602 students who responded, 30 refused to grant permission for their data to be used. The submissions of the Assessment 2 forum discussions of the remaining 572 students were downloaded from the learning and management system. To make the data more manageable, the 572 remaining submissions were downloaded and saved in Microsoft Word in eight batches.

Of these, 72 responses were rejected. Sixty-one students who permitted their submissions to be used had not submitted Assessment 2. Another five students submitted responses that were not related to the 2023 Assessment 2 forum discussion assessment; they had responded to a 2022 forum discussion question. In addition, six students submitted plagiarised assessments. Only the data from the 500 remaining submissions were analysed and are discussed below.

Data analysis

Self-reflection was used to allow every student to assess their reading habits and reader identities. In the actual assessment,

students had to respond to three questions; however, for this purpose, I only reported on Question 1, which prompted students to reflect on their reader identity. Question 1 asked: 'Do you see yourself as a reader? Motivate your answer based on a short critical evaluation of your reading habits'.

Most of the 500 students evaluated themselves as being readers. Only 54 students did not regard themselves as readers.

After coding the responses in Atlas.ti, I relied on the components presented in Figure 1 to analyse and report on the themes that emerged. I followed the analysis method recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) to reduce the quantity of the data through coding, and the complexity of displaying the data through graphs, charts, or tables. Discursive accounts of student experiences describe the qualitatively different ways, in which individuals' experiences shaped their reading habits.

Students who do not see themselves as readers

Figure 2 provides a summary of the reasons the 54 students provided for not regarding themselves as readers.

Theme 1: Reading ability

The first theme, reading ability, impacts on reading motivation. Ten students indicated that they do not see themselves as readers because they have difficulties in reading (cf. Table 1). Ten more students indicated that they experience a lack of focus and concentration, which impacts greatly on their reading experience, as can be seen from the response below.

> 'No, in terms of reading for the enjoyment of reading, I do not consider myself a reader. In terms of being able to read and interpret and make sense of the text, yes, I am a reader. I, however, am not someone who can pick up a book and get lost in the story; I struggle to maintain the focus needed to read.' (Batch 2, no 100, female, white)

A lack of focus suggests a negative impact on the joy of reading.

Theme 2: Access to reading material

The second theme is access to books. Ten students indicated that they do not see themselves as readers because of a lack
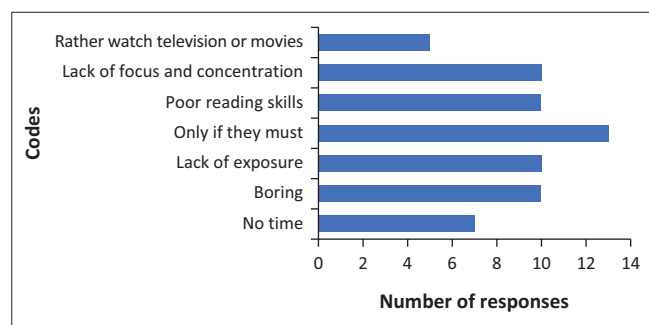
Note: Codes that emerged from the responses of students who do not see themselves as readers. Table 1 provides a visual overview of the codes presented in Figure 2, once they had been organised according to the themes identified in Figure 1.
FIGURE 2: Codes explaining why students do not see themselves as readers.

of experience with books during childhood (cf. Table 1). The response below is one example of this.

> 'I honestly don't see myself as a reader, because I can go years and years without reading a book. I am 28 years old, but I have never taken time to enter a bookshop and purchase a new book. Growing up, I was not exposed to such habits and now as a young adult, I don't see the need to buy books.' (Batch 1, no 61, female, African)

Responses such as these confirm the importance of childhood experiences with books, as such experiences impact adult reading behaviour.

Theme 3: Purpose

The third theme is the purpose of reading. Thirteen students indicated that they only read when they just had to (cf. Table 1), as can be seen from the following response.

> 'Looking at my reading habits objectively, I can say that I read more of what I have to, than what I want to.' (Batch 1, no 26, female, African)

Seven students indicated that they had no time to read, while another 10 students indicated that they found reading boring. Five students indicated that they would rather watch a movie than read something. Below is an example of such a response.

> 'Every time I read books, I find myself thinking about something else and get bored. I prefer watching movies or videos to social media or something outdoorsy.' (Batch 1, no 34, female, African)

One of these five students indicated that she would, first watch the movie, and then read the book.

> 'I do not consider myself much of a reader. I am more of a visual kind of person. I prefer to see things, [rather] than to create an image myself in my head from reading words. Therefore, I prefer to watch movies or play games rather than to read a book. I, however, do enjoy reading books of particular series or sagas. I have read the Harry Potter books, The Host, The Maze Runner, The Girl on the Train and my favourite trilogy, The Hunger Games. I read these books after I had watched the movies, which is a trend I seem to stick to when it comes to reading.' (Batch 1, no 17, female, African)
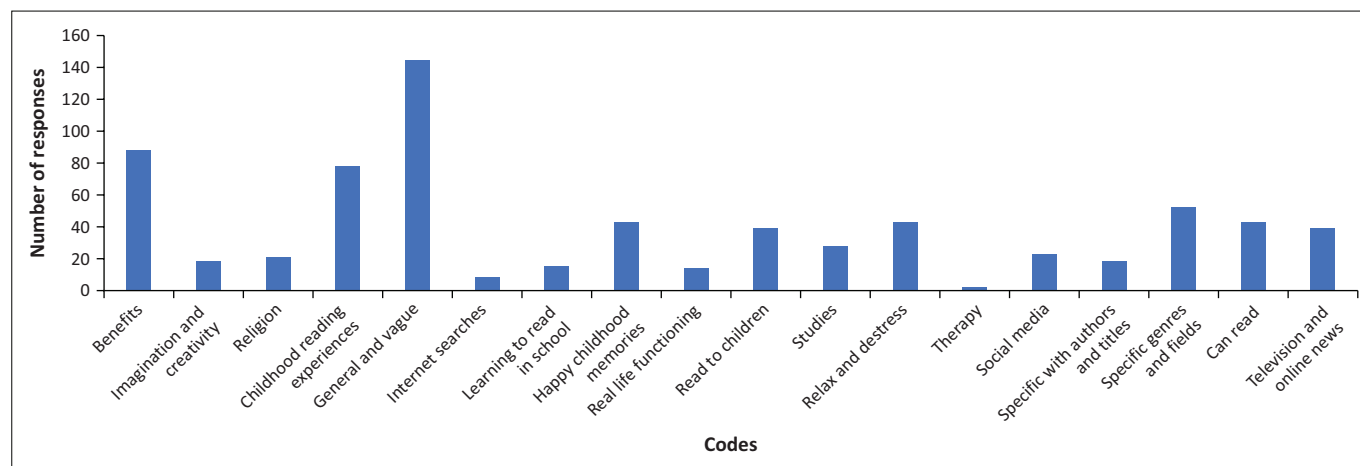
Students who see themselves as readers

Figure 3 provides a summary of the reasons offered by students who see themselves as readers.

The 145 responses that were coded 'general and vague' (displayed in Figure 3, but not in Table 2), require clarification.

TABLE 1: Thematised codes for the students who do not see themselves as readers.

Themes	Codes	Codes total	Themes total
Reading ability	Poor reading skills	10	20
	Lack of focus and concentration	10	
Access	Lack of exposure	10	10
Purpose	Only if they must	13	35
	No time	7	
	Boring	10	
	Rather watch television or movies	5	

Note: Codes that emerged from the responses of students who see themselves as readers organised according to the three themes that contribute to reading motivation, and subsequently, to an individual's view of their reading identity, the codes from Figure 3 are summarised in Table 2.

FIGURE 3: Codes explaining why students see themselves as readers.

TABLE 2: Themes and codes for students who see themselves as readers.

Themes	Codes	Code total	Theme total
Reading ability	Can read	43	
	Learning to read in school	17	139
	Childhood reading experiences	79	
Access	Television and online news	40	
	Internet searches	9	114
	Religion	22	
	Happy childhood memories	43	
Purpose	Benefits	89	
	Imagination and creativity	19	
	Relax and destress	44	
	Therapy	2	
	Social media	23	404
	Real life functioning	15	
	Studies	28	
	Read to children	39	
	General and vague	145	

In general, these students responded with 'textbook' answers. There was nothing personal or contextualised in their responses, as can be seen from the examples below.

> 'Yes, I do see myself as a reader. I read every night before bed as well as whenever I get the chance. I love to explore varieties of different genres of novels and set goals as to how many books to read every year.' (Batch 2, no 108, female, white)

> 'I have enjoyed reading since my childhood days.'

> 'I have always grabbed any piece of material I could lay my hands on to read when I need to relax or out of curiosity for the different content.' (Batch 5, no 285, female, African)

These students may have thought to say that they see themselves as readers because that was the response that was expected (response bias). Yet, when their motivations are analysed, they are so vague and general that it is difficult to determine any connection with books, or any personal experience related to books and reading.

In addition, where students indicated that they see themselves as readers only because they read fiction or non-fiction, I also

coded these responses as general and vague, because they lack evidence of a personal connection with books or reading, as can be seen from the two responses below.

> 'I do see myself as a reader because I have always enjoyed reading as there are so many different things you gain from books – not only books, but newspapers and magazines help in improving your vocabulary. What I like to read mostly are fiction books because the outcomes and possibilities are endless.' (Batch 3, no 145, female, African)

> 'I do see myself as a reader. I enjoy reading novels and I often imagine myself as a character in the story I'm reading at the time. I don't read as often as I used to though; I'm employed full-time, and I'm a mother, so I don't get time to read, though my love for reading remains.' (Batch 4, no 217, female, African)

Theme 1: Reading ability

Within the first theme, the ability to read, 43 students indicated that they see themselves as readers simply because they can read, as may be seen from the responses below.

> 'Yes: I see myself as a reader because every time I read, I learn something new and gain knowledge. Due to the fact that I can read, I consider myself a reader.' (Batch 7, 422, female, African)

> 'Yes, because reading motivates me to construct information which I didn't know; we know that reading is a constructive process. I am a fluent reader and I construct my reading with different reading strategies. Through reading, I construct meaning for different texts and words which I didn't know the meaning. Reading has helped me a lot to understand meaning from printed texts and the message that is trying to reach us.' (Batch 2, no 111, female, African)

Seventeen students indicated that they see themselves as readers because they learned to read in school, while 79 could only describe their childhood literacy experiences and did not provide any motivation for why they would see themselves as readers now. Below is one such response.

> 'Yes, I do see myself as a reader. Through my years of growing up, I used to spend a lot of time reading short stories. I used to enjoy reading more than writing; reading made more sense to me. In Grade R, we did a lot of picture reading and that

developed my love for reading. As the years went by and I got to other grades, I enjoyed reading big books that had a lot of illustrations. Sometimes, I would gather some of my friends together from school to come over to my house on weekends so that we could all read together. Reading is very important because it enhances a child's vocabulary. I am proof of that because I could tell how me and some of my former classmates who didn't love reading differ. I was more fluent in speaking than them as I made reading a daily habit and enjoyed it a lot.' (Batch 2, no 114, female, African)

Theme 2: Access to reading material
Many students reflected on reading magazines in general but failed to indicate the focus of the magazine (such as gardening, beauty, sports, a hobby, or people). Responses also mentioned having access to online sources of reading material, such as online news. Some students even indicated that they read the sub-titles of television programmes or 'read' documentaries.

Twenty-two students indicated that they read books related to their religious practices, whether it be the Bible for Christians or the Koran for Muslim students.

'Yes, I see myself as a reader because I like to read novels and my Bible almost every day.' (Batch 3, no 142, female, African)

Nine students mentioned searching the Internet as a form of digital reading. The reading of religious material and online searches as digital reading may also be seen to overlap with the next theme, namely a purpose for reading.

Theme 3: Purpose
More than half of the total number of coded responses of those students who considered themselves readers pertain to the third theme, namely, a purpose for reading. Eighty-nine students offered the general benefits of reading as a motivation for why they saw themselves as readers, while 19 referred to creativity and imagination specifically. Forty-four students indicated that reading helped them to relax and destress, while two mentioned that reading was a form of therapy.

'Yes, I do see myself as a reader because I am one person who likes reading; it can be a magazine, storybook, or anything. I do love reading because it helps to exercise my brain, strengthens connections in the brain, and it also helps reduce stress, improves a person's mental health and lets them learn new things. I also believe that I love reading because reading is good for me as it improves one's focus, memory, and empathy, as well as communication skills. It helps me to sleep better as well.' (Batch 5, no 279, female, African)

'Yes, I see myself as a reader. Reading is good for me because it refreshes my mind, improves my focus and memory and helps me with empathy and good communication skills. It also reduces stress, improves mental health, and helps you live longer. Reading allows me to learn new things to help me succeed in my studies and in relationships.' (Batch 4, no 240, female, African)

'Yes, I see myself as a reader because it helps to develop a child's brain, the ability to focus, concentration, social skills, and communication skills. And it helps a child to learn about the world, their culture, and other cultures.' (Batch 4, no 242, female, African)

Forty-three students saw themselves as readers because of happy childhood memories and offered this as a reason for continuing to read.

'Yes, I do see myself as a reader. From an early age, I have always thoroughly enjoyed reading books. I was lucky enough to have my own library of books growing up. At age 4, my preschool teacher said she always used to find me in the book corner during free choice playtime. At the age of 6, I received a book prize at school. To this day, I still enjoy reading and spend most of my free time reading books that stimulate the mind and are motivational and encouraging. Reading books allows me to relax and take my attention away from everyday routine and thoughts.' (Batch 5, 294, female, white)

Twenty-three students mentioned the use of social media as a motivation to read. Many students saw themselves as readers because their reading had real life applications, such as for their studies (28 responses) and for answering emails or writing notes (15 responses).

'During my day, I usually read activity books, theme books, and research books to equip myself for a lesson I am preparing to teach as a Grade R educator. During daily routines like shopping, I read leaflets and pamphlets, and during doctor visits and hairdresser appointments, I read magazines and especially enjoy the comedy section. When putting my daughter to bed, I read her a bedtime story that we never get to complete because she is asleep by the third page. These moments I treasure as I'm discovering the storybook with her. Then I end my day off reading through study guides, tutorials, and textbooks to assist me with my studies.' (Batch 4, no 232, female, white)

Thirty-nine students offered reading to children – their own, or children of family members, or learners in their classrooms – as a motivation for considering themselves readers.

'Yes, I do see myself as a reader because reading improves and adds to my vocabulary. As a person, if you like reading you get to explore a lot of things. I read magazines, newspapers, and I always read to my niece short story books for children, and she enjoys it a lot.' (Batch 6, no 356, female, African)

There are two codes, namely 'Specific genres and fields' and 'Specific authors and titles' which are included in Figure 3, but not in Table 2 because they do not neatly fit any one theme – or perhaps they fit more than one theme. These are perhaps also the kinds of responses one would expect as typical motivations for a reader's identity, as they provide specific information on genres, titles, and authors. Surprisingly, only 53 students were very specific about the kinds of genres they like to read (in other words, not merely responding with fiction, non-fiction, or magazines), while another 19 students mentioned specific titles or authors they like to read, or have recently read.

'I really enjoy indulging in romance novels, autobiographies, and motivational books when I'm off work or before bed – it's a good substitute for screen time and relaxation.' (Batch 5, no 296, female, African)

'Yes, I do see myself as a reader. Growing up, I always loved reading, and I find reading a great way of learning about new things. I enjoy reading novels about adventure and mysteries. Reading is one of my hobbies. One of my favourite novels would be The Book Thief. Apart from novels, I also enjoy reading cookbooks and books about baking. I usually spend time in the

evening reading after finishing all my work and studies for the day. For me, reading is a great way of relaxing and taking a break from our busy lives. I also find online articles very interesting to read because I like to be aware of what is happening around the world. I read daily articles from News24 about current affairs and topics such as sports, business, health, and fashion.' (Batch 2, no 109, female, Indian)

Findings and discussion of the findings

Self-reports are particularly prone to response bias, in that participants answer the question in the way they think the researcher would have wanted them to respond. This may distort the findings and even threaten the validity of the study (Ming et al. 2021). As this study concerns the assessment responses of students who were registered for the Children's Literature module, and the students are aware of the importance of literature and reading, they may have been prone to response bias. This may be due to a desire to conform to perceived social norms; considering this, social desirability bias also must be considered. However, students were requested to participate in the research study only after they had submitted their Assessment 2 responses, and they could not draft their responses in a way that would allow them to perform in line with the research objectives (corresponding to the Hawthorne effect) (Sujatha, Mayurnath & Pathak 2019).

The findings presented here confirm the view of Huston et al. (2023) and Kirca and Glover (2021) that the classification of reader-identity is a nuanced matter. This becomes evident in how the students positioned themselves as certain types of readers. In addition, the reasons that some students offered for not seeing themselves as readers (a lack of time) were for others in fact a reason to see themselves as readers (that they are busy with studies, read to apply it in real life, or read to children).

It is thus evident that the findings confirm a move away from the classical, authoritative view of what constitutes a reader, towards the ideological model of reader identity (Wortham 2006:30). Although only about 10.8% of the participants described themselves as non-readers, a significant percentage of the students (31%) are merely functional readers (Huston et al. 2023) or adopt a neutral reading identity (Thomas & Osment 2018).

What also becomes evident from the findings is that most students appreciate the benefits of reading, regardless of whether they are non-readers or readers. This confirms the findings of the national reading survey (Huston et al. 2023) that many individuals are aware of the benefits of reading, but that their actions to improve their reading ability themselves are inadequate.

Based on the motivations that the students offered, many may be classified as occasional readers or introjected readers. If reading longer texts and reading for enjoyment were considered, very few students would fall into the category of committed readers or would be classified as having a manifest reader identity.

The findings have important implications for how South African teachers can respond to poor reading outcomes. To promote a love of reading, children need to have access to a variety of reading material from a very young age. Secondly, the teaching of reading skills in the Foundation Phase needs to improve, as poor reading outcomes most certainly impact the motivation to read. Lastly, reading needs to be presented in a manner that motivates children to be willing to read with meaning for the fun and beyond the confines of the classroom (Khasu & Henning 2024). Reading instruction needs to move beyond an authoritative model of identity, towards the ideological model of identity (Wortham 2006:30). This implies that the teaching of reading skills in isolation (the authoritative model of identity) is not sufficient to cultivate a love of reading. Reading instruction needs to be rooted in real life applications. The findings agree with those of Hall (2012:241), who cautions against certain types of reading instruction in school, where many learner's reader identities are created solely based on skills, with little attention being paid to the social and cultural factors that shape their reading habits (Wortham 2006:30). All adults, mothers and fathers, grandparents and caregivers, and teachers should understand the significant role they have to play as reading role models. This is an important task that requires collaboration between all stakeholders. It is not somebody's job or one person's job, but everybody's job.

Conclusion

Over the last two decades, there have been many calls to promote a reading culture. However, strategies to achieve this, have not been successful, largely because of a lack of understanding of what a reader-identity and what a reading culture constitutes. A second reason for the lack of success is that many see the promotion of reading as somebody else's job. In conclusion, this study calls for the development of, and further insight into, our understanding of what constitutes a reader identity and a reading culture. If our understanding of reader identity does not improve, I would concur with Biesman-Simons (2021:8) to the effect that all discussions about how to promote reader identity and establish a reading culture, will remain empty rhetoric.

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Data availability

The data are not publicly available due to information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Disclaimer

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