7-2018

Leisure Reading Behaviour of Young Children in Singapore

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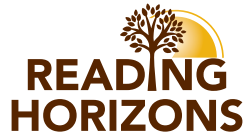Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons

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―――――――――――――― Abstract ――――――――――――――

Leisure reading is important for personality development and mental growth of children. Reading habits developed during early childhood are likely to continue for the rest of the person's life. The main purpose of this study was to investigate leisure reading habits and preferences of young children in Singapore. A questionnaire was used for data collection, and 254 children, aged between 6 to 12 years, participated in this study. It was found that reading was among the top five leisure-time activities of the surveyed children. Children were encouraged to read books, mostly by mothers, followed by fathers. The major reasons for leisure reading were to learn about new subjects, to improve language skills, and to get better grades on tests and examinations. The majority of the children preferred reading print books, and the most popular genres were adventure, mysteries, humor, and animal stories. This paper suggests that a multidimensional approach is required to promote leisure reading among young children.

Keywords: Leisure Reading Behavior; Barriers to Reading; Favorite Genres; Free-time Activities; Parental Encouragement; Singapore

Introduction

Encouragement and inculcation of love for books during early childhood can help children become avid readers. They are likely to start appreciating the value of leisure reading and the benefits associated with it. Leisure reading, or reading of one's own accord, allows children to relax, enjoy, learn, and reduce their study-related stress (Lee, 2014; McKool, 2007). It also allows children to improve their general knowledge and learn about new subjects and concepts, e.g. other countries, cultures, personalities, and inventions. Leisure reading plays a vital role in personality development and cognitive growth of children (Majid & Tan, 2007). It strengthens their thinking process by exposing them to different perspectives and diverse viewpoints (Hughes-Hassell & Lutz, 2006; Williams, 2018).

However, adequate support from parents, teachers, and siblings is necessary for children to become passionate readers (Charleston, 2016; Clark, 2012; Mansor et al., 2013). This encouragement could be in multiple forms, e.g. urging children to read (Bailey,

2012), reading aloud to them (Britt et al., 2016; Massaro, 2017; White & Voss, 2017), becoming a reading role model (Clark, 2012), using dialogic and interactive storytelling (Bojczyk, Davis & Rana, 2016; Duursma, 2016), giving book gifts (Mooney, Winter & Connolly, 2016), and taking children to libraries and bookstores. Such conscious efforts can gradually bring children close to books and ultimately convert them into lifelong, keen readers. Introducing books at an early age and offering continuous encouragement is particularly important, as young children are often exposed to various electronic gadgets and multimedia applications very early in life, which may distract their attention and reading focus (Clark, 2012; Dredge, 2013; Williams, 2018).

Despite many benefits associated with leisure reading, several studies suggest that reading is declining among children (Charleston, 2016; Dredge, 2013; Scholastic, 2016. The main purpose of this study was to investigate leisure reading habits and preferences of young children in Singapore. It is expected that findings of this study will help parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in understanding the reading behavior of young children and how to motivate them to sustain their reading habits during adolescence and beyond. In addition, publishers of children's literature can also learn about the reading interests of children, which may inspire them to reconsider their publishing focus and strategies. Similarly, children's librarians also can use these findings to review their existing children's collections as well as apply this knowledge for developing their future library resources and services.

Literature Review

This section provides a review of literature on different aspects of children's leisure reading. Some areas covered by this review are: benefits and motivation of leisure reading, favorite genres, decline in leisure reading, and inspiration sources such as parents, siblings, and other individuals who can encourage children to read. The literature review will be followed by a section on the problem statement that will highlight the motivations for this study as well as gaps in the existing body of knowledge on this topic.

Benefits and Motivations of Leisure Reading

Book reading contributes significantly in children's personality development and intellectual growth. Reading stimulates their thinking and reasoning skills, which can make them active learners (Hughes-Hassell & Lutz, 2006). Leisure reading also can expose children to different cultures and their unique characteristics and traditions, thus developing tolerance, respect, and a positive attitude toward other people and cultures (Majid, Kai-Jie & Ying, 2017).

Sustained reading also can help children perform better academically by improving their comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and reading fluency (Lee, 2014). Mansor et al. (2013) claim that reading avidity is one of the predictors of academic achievements. An international study conducted in 35 countries showed that children involved in leisure reading were more likely to obtain higher literacy scores (Ogle, Sen, & Pahlke, 2003). These findings were endorsed by another international study of 13 countries which concluded that enjoyment of reading is a predictor of better reading proficiency (Lee, 2014).

Although the main aim of leisure reading should be pleasure and relaxation, some studies suggest that several children read books for obtaining better grades. An international survey investigating students' reading motivations revealed that around 50% of the surveyed British students were reading for relaxation, while the majority of the students from 12 developing countries were reading either to pass examinations or to

achieve better academic performance (Book Aid International, 2003). A study investigating reading behavior of 440 upper-primary students in Singapore also found that the students were primarily reading books to improve their academic performance (Majid & Tan, 2007). Another study of 464 bilingual students in Singapore revealed that the students generally read English-language books for enjoyment and relaxation, while books in their mother tongue languages were for study-related purposes (Majid, Kai-Jie & Ying, 2017).

Favorite Genres

Some previous studies suggest that children enjoy reading books on diverse topics and their reading interests are ever-changing (Clark & Foster, 2005; Grant, 2012). A study on reading behavior of children in North Carolina showed that girls preferred reading books about arts and crafts, health, and fashion, whereas boys liked reading books about sports, transportation, and military topics (Sturm, 2003). A similar survey in Singapore revealed that the top three genres for both girls and boys were adventure, mysteries, and humor, with some variations in their preference levels (Majid & Tan, 2007). A study of 8,152 students in the United Kingdom revealed that adventure, humor, and horror were the most preferred genres (Clark & Foster, 2005). Kotaman and Tekin (2017) reported that children like informational books due to their diversity and fictional books for characters. A study of 300 primary school students in Pakistan showed that the most preferred genres were adventure, animal stories, humor, and fairy tales (Awais & Ameen, 2013). An earlier study, in which 8,000 primary and secondary students in England participated, showed that the most preferred fiction genres were adventure, humor, and horror/ghost stories (Clark & Foster, 2005). It can be concluded that although children like reading books on diverse topics, more popular genres were adventure, humor, and horror.

Decline in Leisure Reading

Despite many benefits associated with leisure reading, several studies suggest a decline in reading by children (Clark & Foster, 2005; Gander, 2013; Igbokwe & Obidike, 2012); Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004). One major reason given for this decline was an easy access to a wide range of electronic gadgets, using innovative designs, attractive colors, fascinating animations, and other attention-grabbing applications (Clark, 2012; Dredge, 2013; Williams, 2018). Ots (2006) investigated the reading habits of students in Estonia and found that they were more interested in Web surfing and computer games than in reading books. Igbokwe and Obidike (2012) found that school children in Nigeria were comparatively spending more time watching television, playing video games, listening to music, and engaging in online activities, thus resulting in decline in reading activity.

A study involving 2,200 students in Ireland, aged 7 to 16 years, revealed a considerable decline in book reading with increasing age (Haslett, 2002). A survey of 2,558 parents and children in the United States revealed that reading by children declined sharply with increase in their age (Flood, 2015). Clark and Foster (2005) reported that secondary school students enjoy reading much less than primary students in England. Another study of 1,174 middle school students in the United States showed that the students were not interested in reading, thus spending very little time on reading activities (Greenberg et al., 2006). McKenna et al. (2012) investigated reading attitudes of 4,491 middle school students in 23 states of the United States. Their study showed a gradual worsening of reading attitudes of students from 6th to 8th grades. Bokhorst-Heng and Pereira (2008) examined the reading behavior of secondary students in Singapore and found a decline in attitudes toward reading among both genders. On the whole, it appears that reading among children is declining due to multiple reasons, including lack of time, more interest

in electronic gadgets, expensive books, and limited availability of books in their areas of interest.

Inspiration for Leisure Reading

Support from loved ones can encourage children to read more because reading is a social activity and can be influenced by other people (Majid, Kai-Jie & Ying, 2017). Mansor et al. (2013) claimed that reading ability of children is greatly influenced by their parents. They also found that peers play an important role in shaping reading interest and preferences of teenage students. A survey of 21,000 children in the United Kingdom by the National Literacy Trust revealed that encouragement from parents, particularly from fathers, can help children enjoy leisure reading (Clark, 2012). Morton (2009) reported that family members can help develop positive attitudes toward reading among academically struggling students. Johnson (2016) found that reading to children can help develop their reading habits and, in addition to parents, teachers, cousins, and friends can influence their reading choices. It was concluded that parents' involvement and encouragement is necessary to develop a reading interest as children are now constantly surrounded by technology. Grant (2012) also reported a significant relationship between parents' knowledge of children's literature and their children's reading scores. A study by Ko and Chan (2009) revealed that although Chinese parents consider their children's early literacy skills important, they rarely get involved in their reading activities. They also reported that the number of children's books at home is an important predictor of children's reading attainment scores.

Reading Books to Children

Parents can play a vital role in creating reading interest among their young children by reading books to them. Duursma (2016) asserts that book reading benefits young children's language and literacy development. She stressed that parents' interaction with children during book reading is more important than reading complex text, and that dialogic and interactive reading strategies can promote reading. Her opinion is supported by Ganotice et al. (2017), who believe that dialogic reading has the potential for improving parent-child interaction during the reading sessions.

Bojczyk, Davis, and Rana (2016) highlighted that the quality of interaction during parent-child book reading sessions is important for vocabulary development. A study involving 100 Singaporean families investigated the reading practices of parents and other family members to children aged 5 years or younger (Majid, Wen, Choo & Kong, 2011). It was found that in 87% of the families either parents or other family members were reading books to their children. It was also reported that mostly mothers were selecting and reading books to children. A study by Clark and Foster (2005) in England showed that mothers, fathers, and teachers were reading to their children, although mothers were playing a more prominent role in developing reading skills. Some recent studies endorse these findings and suggest that fathers were involved in reading to children but less frequently than mothers (Duursma, 2016; Johnson, 2016; Mansor et al., 2013; Swain, Cara & Mallows, 2017). However, some parents may face difficulties in selecting appropriate books to read to their children (Robertson & Reese, 2017; Brown, Westerveld, & Gillon, 2017). On the whole, it appeared that reading books to children can help improve their interest and attitude towards reading.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

The literature review suggests that several factors contribute to declining interest in reading mong children. One major factor in this decline is easy access to attractive electronic gadgets and applications which can easily distract children. This factor could be particularly important for Singapore due to high rate of technology penetration in the country. According to the Global Information Technology Report, issued by World Economic Forum (WEF, 2016), Singapore ranked first in the world for information technology penetration. As a result, children are usually exposed to sophisticated devices and applications at an early age, which may affect their reading behavior. Only limited studies are available on children's leisure reading behavior in Singapore, and this study is an effort to bridge this gap. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

a. What are children's attitudes toward leisure reading, what is their reading frequency, and what is their preferred language?

b. What factors motivate or demotivate children to undertake leisure reading?

c. What are children's favorite genres for leisure reading?

d. What factors are considered by children for selecting their books?

e. What measures can help promote leisure reading among children?

Method

This section discusses the research methodology, design of the survey instrument, study setting and participants' attributes, and the data collection procedure.

Research Methodology

This study employed the quantitative approach and used a paper-based questionnaire to collect data. The quantitative approach was considered appropriate as it can help investigate perceptions, behaviors, preferences, and opinions of the sample population (Creswell, 2014; Fowler, 2002). A survey questionnaire is usually more flexible, economical, less time-consuming, and a fast way of collecting data from a large sample population (Engel and Schutt, 2012; Groves et al., 2009). The respondents also may feel more comfortable because their identities are not revealed. As the target population of this study was young children aged 6 to 12 years and located in different geographical zones of Singapore, the questionnaire method was considered appropriate to collect data from a scattered population.

Survey Instrument

As the participants were very young and possessed limited language skills, the survey instrument was kept short and simple language was used (Appendix A). In addition, wherever appropriate, pictures and emoticons were used to make the questionnaire interesting and engaging. For example, the question about favorite free-time activities used clip art for different activities such as sleeping, watching television, playing, and computer games. Similarly, emoticons were used for different measurements, i.e., a smiling face for the measurement "I really like"; a normal face for "I like a little"; and a sad face for "I do not like". In addition, the measurement scales for all questions were kept short and simple to avoid misinterpretation by the participating children.

The first section of the questionnaire collected demographic information on the participants. The next section was on children's attitudes toward and motivations for leisure reading. It was followed by sections collecting data pertaining to preferred genres, factors considered by children for selecting books, and the desired measures for promoting leisure reading. The questionnaire was pretested on six children in the same age group, and some minor adjustments were made based on their feedback.

Study Setting

The data was collected at various Kumon Learning Centres, located in different geographical zones of Singapore. In 1952, the Kumon concept of learning was introduced in Japan and now it has a network of centers in more than 50 countries (https://www.kumon.com/how-kumon-works). In addition to providing enrichment classes, the Kumon curriculum helps children to actively develop their critical thinking skills. Its flexible teaching approach allows individualized self-learning by students, according to their competence and comfort levels.

In Singapore, Kumon has 83 learning centers with around 14,000 active students. These students take full-time classes at public or private schools and attend Kumon classes to further improve their knowledge and academic performance. A unique feature of the Kumon learning approach is its reading programs, which help foster a love for reading among its students (https://www.kumon.com/reading-program). However, in order to effectively promote reading among the students, it is desirable to first understand their attitudes, perceptions, and reading preferences. This realization motivated the Kumon management in Singapore to participate in this study by facilitating the data collection work at its centers. Although all Kumon learning centers provide access to small, noncirculating libraries, the majority of students use resources of their regular school libraries or public libraries.

Data Collection and Participants' Attributes

The Kumon management provided a schedule for data collection at its learning centers. A student research assistant was engaged to visit the selected centers for administering the questionnaire. Although, considering young age of the children, simple language was used in the questionnaire, it was still possible that some children might not be able to completely understand the exact meanings of the questions. To overcome this problem, each question was read out and explained to the children. Thereafter, they were given sufficient time to select their responses in the questionnaire. After confirming that all students had recorded their responses, the next question was read out and explained to them. This procedure helped in getting more complete responses from the children. The participating children were also reminded several times to only provide responses pertaining to their leisure reading. A total of 268 questionnaires was returned, and out of these 254 were useable. Most of the rejected questionnaires had two or more responses for the same question. The data was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0.

Almost an equal ratio of male (50.8%) to female (49.2%) children participated in this survey. Children aged 6 to 12 years were entitled to participate. Only 11.8% were six years old; a majority of the children (79.1%) was in the age group of 7 to 9 years. The percentage of children aged 10 to 12 years was only 9.1%. Out of the 254 children, 61.0% were Chinese, 28.0% Indian, 3.5% Malays, and the remaining 7.5% represented other ethnicities living in Singapore.

Findings

This section presents findings of the survey, which are arranged under appropriate headings. A combination of tables and figures are used to present the quantitative data.

Favorite free-time activities

In order to understand how children spend their free time, they were asked about their top three favorite leisure-time activities. The purpose was to find out if reading was among the most preferred free-time activities or not. As shown in Table 1, the top three most popular leisure-time activities were playing games (59.9%), reading books/comics (50.8%), and watching television (43.7%). Comparatively less popular free-time activities included going out (e.g., for shopping, dining, or watching movies in cinemas) (25.6%), listening music (21.7%), and sleeping (19.7%).

The Chi-square tests showed that more girls than boys liked spending their time on reading books and comics ($x2= 4.37$, $df= 2$, $p= .04$), and on hobbies such as drawing and gardening ($x^2= 15.39$, $df= 2$, $p= .000$). While more boys than girls liked playing computer games ($x^2= 10.18$, $df= 2$, $p= .001$). There were no significant differences between boys and girls for the remaining free-time activities.

Table 1. Favorite leisure-time activities (N=254) (Multiple response)

Rank	Favorite activity	Count	%
1	Playing (e.g. toys, sports, etc.)	151	59.9
2	Reading books/comics	128	50.8
3	Watching television	110	43.7
4	Hobbies (e.g. drawing, music, etc.)	101	39.8
5	Computer games	100	39.5
6	Going out (e.g. shopping, movies, food, etc.)	65	25.6
7	Listening music	55	21.7
8	Sleeping	50	19.7

Frequency of leisure reading

The participating children were asked about how often they read books. The majority of the children (52.57%) were "sometimes" doing their leisure reading (Figure 1). Another 42.29% of the children were "often" reading books. Only a small percentage (5.14%) of the children said that they had never read a leisure book during their free time. It appeared that the majority of the surveyed children were actively involved in leisure reading. However, no significant difference between boys and girls was found for their frequency of reading books.
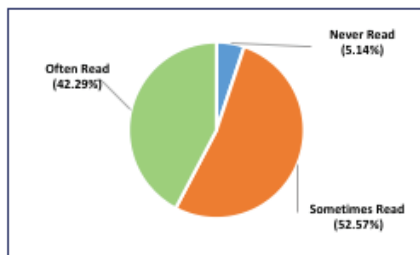

Figure 1. Frequency of leisure reading

The children were also asked about the average amount of time weekly they spent on leisure reading. It was found that 33.9% of the children were spending less than 30 minutes per week (4.1 minutes or less per day) reading books (Table 2). Another 33.4% of the children were spending 30 to 60 minutes (4.3 to 8.6 minutes per day), and only 10.3% of the children reported reading for more than three hours per week (25.7 minutes or more per day). Overall, slightly over half of the children were spending less than 8.6 minutes per day on leisure reading. Once again, no significant difference between boys and girls was found for the average amount of time spent on reading books.

Table 2. Weekly time spent on reading

Time	Count	%
Less than 30 minutes	85	33.9
30–60 minutes	84	33.4
1–1.5 hrs	28	11.2
1.5–2.0 hrs	12	4.8
2.0–2.5 hrs	7	2.8
2.5–3.0 hrs	9	3.6
More than 3 hrs	26	10.3
Total	251	100

Attitude towards reading

The children were asked about their level of preference for reading books. A majority (70.47%) of them said that they enjoy reading books "a lot" (Figure 2). This finding supports a previous finding of this study (Table 2) where reading was ranked second in the list. Another 27.16% of the children enjoyed reading books "a little". Only 2.36% of the participating children did not like reading books. It appeared that a considerable majority of the children liked leisure reading. However, no significant difference was found between boys and girls for their attitudes towards leisure reading.
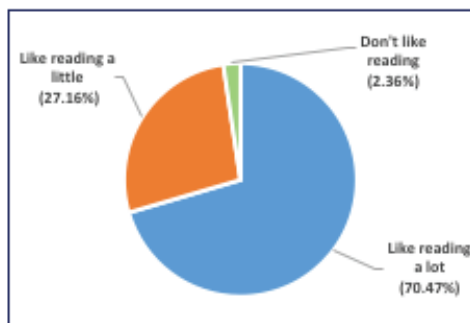

Figure 2. Attitudes towards leisure reading

A correlation analysis showed that children's attitudes towards reading books was positively correlated to their reading frequency ($r=.62$, $p<.01$). This means that children with positive attitudes toward reading were spending more time on leisure reading.

Encouragement to read

Adequate encouragement can play a vital role in promoting reading among children. The participating children were asked who usually encouraged them to read. A considerable percentage (37.5%) of the children said that they were encouraged by their mothers, followed by fathers (23.0%).

It was worth noting that less than one percent of the surveyed children were inspired by librarians to read. It was also a matter of concern that 19.4% of the children revealed that no one had encouraged them to read. On the whole it appeared that, except parents, other individuals expected to promote reading among children were not very influential.

Table 3. Who encouraged you to read?

Rank	Relationship	Count	%
1	Mother	93	37.5
2	Father	57	23
3	Teachers	29	11.7
4	Siblings	12	4.8
5	Friends	7	2.8
6	Librarians	2	0.8
	No one encourages me	48	19.4
	Total	248	100

The children were also asked if anyone in the family had read a book to them during the last three months. The purpose was to investigate who in the family was motivating children to read books. The highest percentage of the children (47.6%) said that, during the last three months, their mothers had at least read one book to them (Table 4). For fathers this figure was 30.3%. Once again, it was parents who were reading books to their children. It was, however, worth noting that around one-quarter of the children revealed that no one had read a book to them during the last three months.

Table 4. Book reading by relations (Multiple response)

Rank	Relationship	Count	%
1	Mother	121	47.6
2	Father	77	30.3
3	Siblings	31	12.2
4	Grandparents	37	14.6
5	Domestic Helper	25	9.8
	No one	62	24.4

A Chi-square test was run to investigate whether parents (mothers and fathers combined) reading books to children influenced their attitudes towards book reading. It was found that those children whose parents read books to them had a more positive attitude towards leisure reading (x^2= 6.25, *df*= 2, *p*= .04). It indicates the importance of parental involvement in developing love for reading among their children.

Reasons for leisure reading

Through a multiple-response question, the children were asked about their reasons for reading books. As shown in Table 5, the major reasons for leisure reading were: "to learn more things" (58.7%), "to improve language skills" (49.2%), 'to get better grades in tests and exams" (41.9%), and because "my parents asked me to read" (38.2%). It was worth noting that among the top four reasons for leisure reading, two were actually studies-related reasons.

There were some factors that had limited impact on children's reading behavior. Only 16.9% of the children said that they read because their best friends also like reading. Another 14.6% of the children revealed that they read because their parents read at home. This means reading behavior of friends and parents had only limited influence on the children's reading habits. Similarly, only 14.6% of the children were reading because they expected a gift from their parents after finishing a book. Finally, only 10.6% of the children said that they read because their friends want to read together with them. On the whole, it appeared that children were either reading books due to self-motivation or to perform better academically. Parents and friends had limited influence on their reading behavior.

Table 5. Reasons of undertaking leisure reading (Multiple response)

Rank	Reasons for reading	N	Count	%
1	To learn more things	252	148	58.7
2	To improve my language skills	252	124	49.2
3	To get better grades in my tests and exams	253	106	41.9
4	My parents ask me to read	254	97	38.2
5	My school library has a lot interesting books	253	87	34.4
6	My teachers ask me to read	254	76	29.9
7	To relax	253	72	28.5
8	Reading is my hobby	253	69	27.3
9	I have nothing else to do	254	67	26.4
10	My best friend loves reading; therefore, I also read	254	43	16.9
11	My parents often read at home and I also want to be like them	254	37	14.6
12	My parents give me a small gift after reading a book	254	37	14.6
13	My friend asks me to read with her/him	254	27	10.6

Barriers to leisure reading

Through another multiple-response question, the children were asked about the possible reasons for not undertaking leisure reading. The overall response rate for this question was low, reflecting that fewer children were facing reading problems. The top four reasons (Table 6) given for not undertaking enough leisure reading were: "too much homework" (37.9%); "I prefer other leisure activities" (24.4%); "reading is too boring" (22.4%); and "cannot find books of my interest" (20.1%). On the contrary, a very small percentage of the children felt that their nonreading friends (5.5%), parents (4.3%), and siblings (3.9%) were barriers to their leisure reading. On the whole, it appeared that parents, friends, and siblings had very limited negative influence on children's reading habits.

Table 6. Barriers to leisure reading

Rank	Barrier	N	Count	%
1	I have too much homework to do	253	96	37.9
2	I love other leisure activities (e.g., sports, games, televisions)	254	62	24.4
3	I feel reading is too boring	254	57	22.4
4	I cannot find books that I want to read	254	51	20.1
5	My parents ask me to spend more time on my studies	254	45	17.7
6	I feel reading is too difficult	253	39	15.4
7	My friends do not like reading	254	14	5.5
8	My parents do not read at home	254	11	4.3
9	My siblings do not like reading	254	10	3.9

Favorite genres

The children were asked about their favorite genres and for this purpose a list of 16 popular genres was provided in the questionnaire. As shown in Table 7, the top six genres liked by more than half of the children were: adventure (74.2%), mysteries and detective stories (61.8%), humor and jokes (57.1%), science (54.1%), animals (50.2%), and sports (50.2%). On the contrary, the genres the children did not like were religion (44.7%), UFOs and aliens (42.7%), food and cooking (39.6%), and horror stories (39.0%).

Table 7. Genres liked by children

S. No.	Topics	N	I really like	I like a little	I don't like
1	Adventures	236	74.2%	17.8%	8%
2	Mysteries/detective	225	61.8%	18.7%	19.5%
3	Humor/jokes	226	57.1%	24.3%	18.6%
4	Science	231	54.1%	22.5%	23.4%
5	Animal	239	50.2%	31.8%	18%
6	Sports	229	50.2%	30.6%	19.2%
7	Arts and crafts	229	43.7%	31.0%	25.3%
8	Music	224	43.8%	33.0%	23.2%
9	History	228	41.7%	24.6%	33.7%
10	Horror stories	226	36.7%	24.3%	39%
11	UFOs and aliens	225	36.4%	20.9%	42.7%
12	Fashion/beauty	224	34.4%	33.5%	32.1%
13	Languages	224	34.4%	33.5%	32.1%
14	Food and cooking	227	33.5%	26.9%	39.6%
15	People/culture	224	32.6%	36.6%	30.8%
16	Religion	219	27.9%	27.4%	44.7%

The Chi-square tests were run to investigate whether any significant differences existed between boys and girls for their preferred genres. It was found that more girls than boys liked reading books about arts and crafts ($x^2=7.06$, *df*= 2, *p*= .03), music ($x^2=10.99$, *df*= 2, *p*= .000), fashion and beauty ($x^2=56.75$, *df*= 2, *p*= .000), people and cultures ($x^2=16.35$, *df*= 2, *p* = .000), food and cooking ($x^2=7.34$, *df*= 2, *p*= .000), and languages ($x^2=9.25$, *df*= 2, *p*= .01). On the contrary, more boys preferred reading books about UFOs and aliens ($x^2=16.51$, *df*= 2, *p*= .000), and horror stories ($x^2=9.65$, *df*= 2, *p*= .008).

Preferred format for leisure reading

The children were asked about their preferred format for reading leisure books. They were given three choices, i.e. print books, e-books, and audiobooks. It was found that 61.8% of the children "really liked" reading print books (Figure 3). The percentage of children who "really liked" reading e-books and audiobooks were only 27.2% and 24.8% respectively.
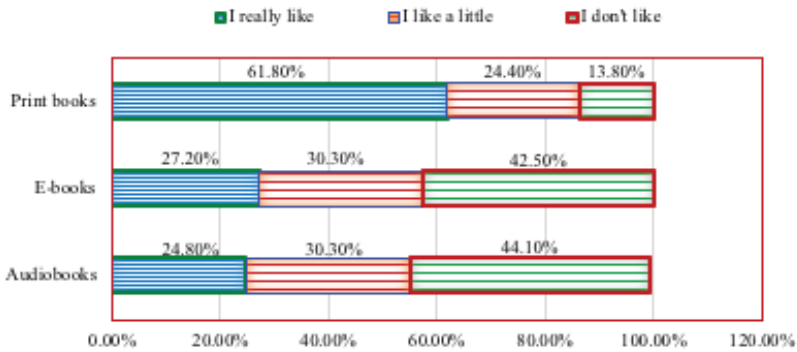
Figure 3. Preferred format for leisure reading

Preferred language for leisure reading

It was found that 70.5% of the children preferred reading books in English language, and only 25.2% preferred reading in their mother tongue languages (Figure 4). One-quarter of the children did not like reading books in their mother tongue languages.
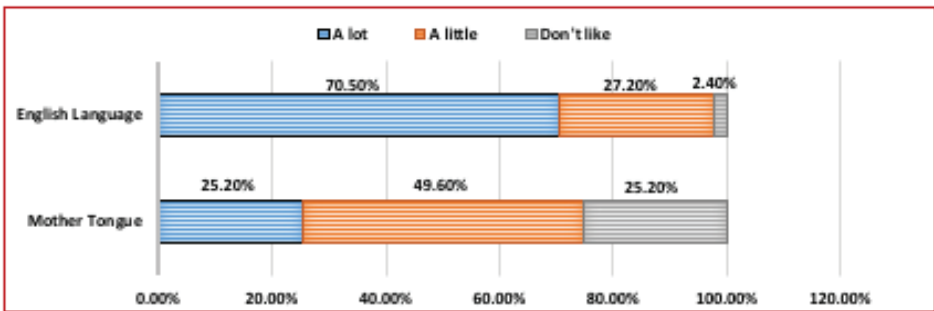
Figure 4. Preferred language for leisure reading

The Chi-square test was used to investigate if parents reading books to their children influenced the children's preference for books in mother tongue languages. It was found that those children whose parents read books to them were reading more books in their mother tongue languages ($x^2=13.82$, *df*= 2, *p*= .001).

Factors considered for selecting books

The children were asked about the factors they considered when selecting their leisure reading books. It was found that the four most important factors in the selection of books were: "interesting topic" (59.1%), "attractive book title" (41.9%), "easy to read" (33.5%), and "colorful pictures" (32.0%) (Table 8). The children selected books according to their interests and tastes. Even colorful pictures and attractive cover designs were given comparatively less importance by these young children.

It was also found that, though they were young children, they rarely selected books based on recommendations made by their parents, teachers, and friends. They also were not reading certain books because these were already read by their friends or siblings. On the whole, it appeared that the children were independently selecting books based on their own interests and preferences. This finding concurs with an earlier finding of this study (Table 5) where parents, friends and siblings had limited influence on children's reading habits.

Table 8. Factors considered while selecting books to read (N=254) (Multiple response)

Rank	Factors	Count	%
1	Interesting topic	150	59.1
2	Attractive book title	106	41.9
3	Easy to read	85	33.5
4	Colorful pictures	81	32
5	Nice book cover	69	27.2
6	Wacthed a movie made on the book	66	26
7	Short story	61	24
8	Familiar author	61	24
9	My parents asked me to read it	56	22
10	Topic related to my studies	53	20.9
11	My teachers asked me to read it	47	18.5
12	My friends suggested I read it	38	15
13	My school librarian suggested I read it	36	14.2
14	My friends have already read it	30	11.8
15	My siblings have already read it	23	9.1

Sources used for acquiring books

It was found that, among the libraries, public libraries (41.4%) were the most popular source for borrowing books (Table 9), followed by school libraries (25.1%). A considerable percentage (29.9%) of the children were also purchasing their books from bookstores. A very small percentage of the children (3.6%) were borrowing books from their siblings or friends. As reported in the previous section that, although quite young, the children were selecting books according to their own interest and taste, and they were rarely seeking advice or selecting books already read by their siblings or friends.

Table 9. Sources used for acquiring books (N=251)

S. No.	Acquisition Option	Count	%
1	Borrow from public library	104	41.4
2	Borrow from school library	63	25.1
3	Borrow from friends, siblings, relatives	9	3.6
4	Buy from bookstores	75	29.9

The children were also asked if they have visited a library during the past month. An overwhelming majority (82.7%) of the children replied in affirmative. Those children who had visited a library were further asked about the number of their library visits during the last month. As can be seen in Table 10, the majority of them reported visiting their libraries multiple times. It can be concluded that libraries have contributed positively in promoting leisure reading among the surveyed children.

Table 10. Number of library visits during last one month

Visit Frequency	Count	%
1–2 times	43	20.3
3–4 times	73	34.4
5–6 times	36	17
More than 6 times	60	28.3
Total	212	100

Motivating factors for reading books

The participating children were asked about the measures that would encourage them to read more books. As shown in Table 11, the majority of the children said that they would read more books if they had more time (58.7%) and less homework to do (54.5%). Interestingly 38.6% of the children said that they would read more if leisure reading could help them get better grades.

Table 11. Factors likely to encourage leisure reading (Multiple response)

Rank	I will read more if...	Count	%
1	I have more time	149	58.7
2	I have less homework	138	54.5
3	Reading helps me get better grades	98	38.6
4	More books are available about my interests	97	38.2
5	Books have more pictures	93	36.6
6	More books are available at home	84	33.1
7	My parents/siblings visit the library with me	61	24
8	My parents/siblings explain difficult words to me	50	19.7
9	My friends read with me	46	18.1
10	My parents/siblings read with me	45	17.7
11	My parents give me a gift after I finish reading a book	42	16.5
12	My parents/siblings help in selecting books	39	15.4
13	I see my parents/siblings reading at home	37	14.6

Some other motivating factors identified by the children were: availability of books in their area of interest (38.2%); books with more pictures (36.6%); and availability of more books at home (33.1%). Ko and Chan (2009) also reported that the number of books at home is an important predictor of children's reading attainment. It was noted that all factors pertaining to assistance or motivation from parents, siblings, and friends were ranked quite low. It appeared that young children felt that their family and friends were less likely to encourage them in reading more books. On the whole, it appeared that lack of time and too much homework were the major inhibiting factors for young children in undertaking more leisure reading.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore leisure reading behavior of children in the age group of 6 to 12 years. In response to a question on favorite free-time activities, it was satisfying to note that the young children were able to appreciate the value of reading as this activity ranked second among the listed leisure-time activities. It was interesting to note that computer games did not appear very high in the list although Singapore was ranked first in the world for technology penetration (WEF, 2016). These findings are different from several previous studies that suggest that leisure reading among children is declining due to multiple factors. The major reason often quoted for this decline is easy access to electronic gadgets and applications that use novel designs, charming colors, enthralling animations, effortless interactivity, and many other attractive features (Charleston, 2016; Dredge, 2013; Flood, 2015; Scholastic, 2016; Williams, 2018). Therefore, the general perception and concern that young children spend too much time on electronic gadgets that may distract their reading focus was not supported by this study.

It was also found that, although the majority of the children were reading books regularly, they were spending limited time on this activity. One possible explanation for this finding could be that young children usually possess low attention spans (Ruff & Lawson 1990; Villamor & Ressureccion, 2015), and as a result, may be unable to continue long reading sessions. Another related finding showed that more than 70% of the children liked reading books, and there was no significant difference between boys and girls for their attitude toward leisure reading. Nielsen et al. (2016) also found little difference between boys and girls in the Netherlands for their preference for leisure reading. However, this finding is different from some previous studies, which suggest that girls have a more positive attitude toward reading than boys do (Clark & Foster, 2005; Flood, 2015; Ozturk, Hill & Yates, 2016).

Adequate encouragement at young age can motivate children to become passionate readers. Data analysis showed that parents were playing a key role in promoting reading by reading books to their children. This finding endorsed several previous studies which suggest that parent can help inculcate good reading habits among their children (Clark, 2012; Grant, 2012; Johnson, 2016; Mansor et al., 2013; Morton, 2009). It was also found that mothers were reading more frequently to their children than fathers. A survey in the United States also reported that fathers less frequently read books to their children, which may affect their reading behavior (Clark, 2012). It is, therefore, desirable that both parents should regularly read books to their children to develop a positive attitude towards reading.

For promoting reading among children, it is necessary to understand their preference for different genres. This study found that the favorite genres were adventures, mysteries and detective stories, and humor. Several previous studies had also reported children's preference for these genres (Clark & Foster, 2005; Charleston, 2016; Grant, 2012; Majid & Tan, 2007). It was interesting to note that the two least popular genres were religion and stories of aliens and UFOs. Less interest in religious stories could be due to

family influence, as many individuals do not practice any religion. According to Singapore Census of 2010, 17% of the population did not practice any religion, and this figure was 21.8% for Chinese citizens (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2011). Probably children did not like reading books about UFOs and aliens because they considered these stories as less realistic. However, it will be interesting to investigate further that why children do not like certain genres.

Another issue under discussion among academics, librarians, and publishers is children's preferred format for leisure reading. This study found that 61.8% of the children preferred reading print books whereas only 27.2% children expressed preference for e-books. A previous study by Majid, Kai-Jie and Ying (2017) showed that 82.5% of the teenagers in Singapore preferred reading print books. Another study in Croatia by Pešut and Živković (2016) also revealed that students preferred reading print books over electronic books. Similarly, the Scholastic Kids and Family Reading Report revealed that 79% of the children preferred reading print books, even though e-books were available to them (Charleston, 2016).

Singapore is a multiethnic and multiracial society, mainly comprising Chinese, Malays and Indians. Although there are four official languages (English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil), English is the *lingua franca* of the country. In addition to studying English as their first language, students are also required to study their mother tongue language as a second language. It was, therefore, logical to ask the children about their favorite language for leisure reading. It was found that over 70% of the children preferred reading books in English, and only 25% preferred books in their mother tongue languages. It was a matter of concern that reading books in mother tongue languages was declining among bilingual children because it could actually connect them with their roots and native culture (Tötemeyer, Alexander, & Kirchner, 2015).

In response to a question about the factors that may encourage children to read more, the three most important factors identified were: availability of more time to read, less homework, and likelihood to get better grades. The problem of time constraint can be attributed to children's involvement in multiple activities, e.g. attending regular school; participation in extra-curricular activities such as sports, music, drama, and painting; taking additional enrichment classes at tuition centers; playing games; using mobile game applications; watching television; and other free-time activities (Charleston, 2016; Dredge, 2012; Flood, 2015; Williams, 2018). On the whole, this study showed that, despite of several barriers, the children were motivated to read and continuous support and encouragement from parents can help them become passionate readers.

Conclusion

The majority of the children in this study showed a positive attitude towards books and were reading quite regularly. However, it was a matter of concern that a considerable number of the children were doing leisure reading to improve their academic performance and not just to enjoy and relax. Although sustained reading can help improve vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, and reading fluency of children, it should not be used only as a tool to improve academic performance. Parents and teachers can play a vital role in stimulating reading interest among the children as well as creating an awareness about the benefits of leisure reading.

This study also revealed that parents play a key role in motivating and developing love for books among their children. However, there is a need for fathers to get more actively involved in children's reading activities to supplement mothers' efforts as well

as pass on a unified message to their children about the value and importance of reading books. The Singapore National Library Board, which manages the National Library as well as a network of 27 public libraries, offers regular workshops to motivate and provide basic skills to parents for promoting reading among their children (NLB, 2018). Such programs need extensive publicity and visibility to attract more participants. In addition, certain other public service agencies, such as family welfare, social work, and community development departments, can also organize campaigns to promote reading as a social and family activity.

It was also interesting to note that the young children were quite independent in their book selection and reading materials based on their own tastes and choices. They were rarely following the reading patterns of their friends or siblings. The Scholastic Kids and Family Reading Report also revealed that 90% of the children preferred selecting their own books (Charleston, 2016)

This study also revealed that, although children were regularly visiting and borrowing books from libraries, they were rarely seeking reading suggestions from librarians. As these children are very young, their parents, teachers, and librarians can help by introducing different children's genres as well as certain suitable titles to them. To help parents and teachers, librarians can come up with genre-specific recommended reading lists for children belonging to different age groups, considering their reading competency and intellectual levels.

Due to rapid migration and other factors, many societies are now becoming multicultural and multilingual. One common problem faced by such societies is the concern and struggle to keep mother tongue languages alive. One major issue in this respect is the lack of adequate and suitable literature for bilingual children in their respective mother tongue languages. Most of the existing literature is not very suitable for bilingual children due to their limited mother tongue language proficiency. There is a need for publishers of children's literature to produce materials that are appropriate for bilingual children. Such materials need to be short and easy to read, with a very basic vocabulary to make leisure reading in mother tongue languages more enjoyable and less stressful.

Methodologically, this study has some limitations and care should be exercised while interpreting its findings. Data were collected at the Kumon Learning Centres because developing reading skills is one of their priorities. Kumon provides enrichment programs to supplement education provided by public and private schools in Singapore. Usually students needing extra help or looking to enhance their academic performance join the Kumon learning programs. As a result, the profile of students who take supplementary classes at Kumon could be different from typical schoolchildren in Singapore. Therefore, findings of this study cannot be generalized to all public and private schools in Singapore.

Similarly, this study used a questionnaire to investigate reading behavior of the students. As reading is a complex social activity influenced by many factors, a triangulation approach can help collect more meaningful data. For future studies, in addition to questionnaire surveys, researchers can also consider using qualitative techniques such as interviews or observations to collect richer data. Moreover, a larger random sample could be useful in obtaining more reliable and generalizable findings.

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Appendix A

SURVEY ON LEISURE READING HABITS OF CHILDREN

- *Read each question carefully before answering.*
- **<u>DO NOT</u>** consider reading of **<u>school textbooks</u>** *when answering the questions.*

<u>Section A: General Information</u>

1: I am a:

        ☐ **Boy**   ☐ **Girl**

2: I am _____ **years old**

3: I am a:
        ☐ **Chinese**
        ☐ **Malay**
        ☐ **Indian**
        ☐ **Other races (please write _____)**

<u>Section B: Reading Attitudes and Motivations for Leisure Reading</u>

4: How often do you read in your free time? Tick only <u>ONE</u> box.

☹	😐	☺
☐ I **<u>never</u>** read	☐ I **<u>sometimes</u>** read	☐ I **<u>often</u>** read

5: How much do you like reading books? Tick only <u>ONE</u> box.

☹	😐	☺
☐ **Don't like**	☐ **A little**	☐ **Too much**

6: How many books have you read during the past month?

    a. In English language   _____
    b. In your mother tongue   _____

7: How much time do you spend weekly on reading books? Tick only ONE box.

    ☐ Less than 30 minutes
    ☐ 30–60 minutes
    ☐ 1–1.5 hours
    ☐ 1.5–2.0 hours
    ☐ 2.0–2.5 hours
    ☐ 2.5–3.0 hours
    ☐ More than 3 hours

8: Has anyone in your family read a book to you during the last 3 months? You can tick MORE THAN ONE box.

☐ Mother
☐ Father
☐ Siblings (brothers and sisters)
☐ Grandfather/Grandmother
☐ Domestic helper
☐ No one

9: Why do you read? You can tick MORE THAN ONE box.

☐ To learn more things
☐ To relax
☐ Reading is my hobby
☐ To improve my language skills
☐ To get better grades in my tests and exams
☐ My parents ask me to read
☐ My teachers ask me to read
☐ My best friend loves reading; therefore, I also read
☐ My friend asks me to read with her/him
☐ My parents often read at home and I also want to be like them
☐ My parents give me a small gift after I finish reading a book
☐ My school library has a lot interesting books
☐ I have nothing else to do
☐ Other reasons for reading: _____

10: Are there any reasons for NOT reading? You can tick MORE THAN ONE box.

☐ I feel reading is too boring
☐ I feel reading is too difficult
☐ I have too much homework to do
☐ I love other leisure activities (for example, sports, games, television, etc.)
☐ I cannot find books that I want to read
☐ My friends do not like reading
☐ My siblings do not like reading
☐ My parents do not read at home
☐ My parents ask me to spend more time on my studies
☐ Other reasons for not reading: _____

11: How much do you like reading English books? Tick only ONE box.

☺	☺	☹
☐ **A lot**	☐ **A little**	☐ **Don't like**

12: How much do you like reading books in your <u>mother tongue</u>? Tick only <u>ONE</u> box.

☺	☻	☹
☐ **A lot**	☐ **A little**	☐ **Don't like**

13: What activities do you like the most? Select only <u>THREE (3)</u> most favorite activities.

☐ **Sleeping**	☐ **Watching television**	☐ **Listening to music**
☐ **Playing**	☐ **Computer games**	☐ **Reading books/comics**
☐ **Hobbies (drawing, gardening)**	☐ **Going out (shopping, cinema, eating)**	☐ **Other leisure time activities, if any:** _____ _____ _____

Section C: Book Selection

14: Why do you pick a book to read? You can tick <u>MORE THAN ONE</u> box**.**

☐ Interesting **topic**
☐ **Easy** to read
☐ Short story
☐ Nice book **cover**
☐ Interesting book **title**
☐ Colorful **pictures**
☐ Familiar **author**
☐ Topic related to my studies
☐ My **friends** have already read it
☐ My **friends** suggested I read it
☐ My **parents** asked me to read it
☐ My **siblings** have already read it
☐ My **teachers** asked me to read it
☐ My **school librarian** suggested I read it
☐ Watched a movie made on the book
☐ Other reasons, if any: _____

15: How do you read most of your books? Tick only <u>ONE</u> box**.**

      □ I usually read the **whole** book
      □ I usually read **selected parts** of the books
      □ I usually look at the **pictures**
      □ I usually ignore **difficult words**
      □ I usually look meanings of difficult words in a **dictionary**
      □ I usually ask meanings of difficult words from my **parents/teachers**

Section D: Preference for Reading Materials

16: What type of books do you like? Tick only <u>ONE</u> box for <u>EACH TYPE</u>.

	I **really** like ☺	I like **a little** 😐	I **don't** like ☹
Electronic books	□	□	□
Printed books	□	□	□
Audio books	□	□	□

17: On what topics do you like reading books? Tick <u>ONE</u> box for <u>EACH TOPIC</u>.

Topics	I **really** like ☺	I like **a little** 😐	I **don't** like ☹
Animals	□	□	□
Arts and crafts	□	□	□
Science	□	□	□
Sports	□	□	□
History	□	□	□
Music	□	□	□
Food and Cooking	□	□	□
Fashion/Beauty	□	□	□
UFOs and aliens	□	□	□
Languages	□	□	□
People/cultures	□	□	□
Adventures	□	□	□
Mysteries/detective	□	□	□
Humor/ jokes	□	□	□
Horror stories	□	□	□
Religion	□	□	□
Other_____	□	□	□

18: How do you get <u>most</u> of your books? Tick only <u>ONE</u> box**.**
- ☐   Borrow from a public library
- ☐   Borrow from my school library
- ☐   Borrow from friends, siblings, relatives
- ☐   Buy from bookstores

19: Have you visited a library during the past month?
- ☐   No
- ☐   Yes

    If your answer is "<u>yes</u>," how many times have you visited your library during the past month?
- ☐   1–2 times
- ☐   3–4 times
- ☐   5–6 times
- ☐   More than 6 times

<u>Section E: Reading Improvement</u>

20: Who usually encourages you to read? Tick only <u>ONE</u> box**.**
- ☐   Father
- ☐   Mother
- ☐   Siblings
- ☐   Friends
- ☐   Teachers
- ☐   Librarians
- ☐   No one encourages me to read
- ☐   Other_____

21: I will read more if (You can tick **MORE THAN ONE** box**):**
- ☐   I have less homework
- ☐   I have more time
- ☐   More books are available at home
- ☐   More books are available about my interests
- ☐   Books with more pictures
- ☐   Reading helps me get better grades
- ☐   My friends read with me
- ☐   My parents/siblings read with me
- ☐   I see my parents/siblings reading at home
- ☐   My parents/siblings visit the library with me
- ☐   My parents/siblings explain difficult words to me
- ☐   My parents/siblings help in selecting books
- ☐   My parents give me a gift after I finish reading a book
- ☐   Other _____