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Leisure Reading: Impacting the Affective Domain Across Borders

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Introduction

In a recent email from South Korea, ten-year old Miso compares her school experiences in both the United States and her home country of South Korea. Miso's grammar demonstrates that English is not her native tongue, but her message is clear:

In Korea before school the students read books and the teacher sometimes said to write the feelings about it unlike America. The teachers gives out summer homeworks such as art (drawing), jump roping and reading and writing their feelings and the students can pick some of the homework unlike America. Schools usually have a Library and they don't have a school librarian unlike America. There are a public Library and just like America in these day we can browse through and borrow books except only five and for a week. There are not many books for children in a public Library.

Comparison of literacy in South Korea and the United States through the lens of a ten-year old exemplifies a comparative survey study conducted in both the United States and South Korea. The ongoing study measures students' reading habits and their perceptions of the adults in their lives as readers over a seven-year period. Some questions that have driven the study include, "What affective filters influence development of students' reading skills? Do teachers model leisure reading interests and habits through example? Do teachers share books with students or parts of books they are reading? Do teachers generate frequent discourse with their student's about books read outside of assigned material?"

The results of the study are intended to make classroom teachers more sensitive to the classroom practice of promoting leisure reading and strengthen affective relationships critical for success. Time spent reading leisurely at the independent level has been shown to increase reading levels and fluency in young readers (Allington, 2001). However, as students get older they tend to develop negative attitudes about reading and are resistant towards reading in general (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). Krashen asserts that all varieties of performers will be helped by a learning environment where intake of acquisition is available in a low anxiety situation (Krashen, 1988). Teachers and other adults who share their own personal interest in reading, and who read with their students, may be a critical link between required reading material in school and reading for enjoyment in and out of school. Findings to date from the study suggest interventions that might increase student leisure reading and positively affect reading levels and fluency. "Is it important for teachers to view themselves as readers, writers, and responders if they are to be effective in teaching literature-based reading" (Harris, 1993, p. 291). Can teachers promote the act of leisure reading with students if they are not leisure readers themselves? Effective classroom teachers support the importance of leisure reading, but what teachers do to encourage leisure reading is vital. As researchers and teachers we believe that teacher discourse about personal interests in leisure reading in and out of the classroom can have a major impact on students' leisure reading habits, lower affective filters, and results to date from this study support our belief.

The increasing number of non-native English speakers and English Language Learners signals a crucial need to establish strategies to strengthen literacy skills. The richness of resources these students contribute should be emphasized and education must be sensitive to the multitude of learning styles and ways students perceive and interpret role models consistent with their homes and communities. Teachers and other adults can positively

influence language acquisition and literacy skills by encouraging educators to implement proven strategies and share their own personal interest in leisure reading by talking about their own reading, favorite books, authors and passages.

In order to bridge the gap and address effective as well as cognitive theories of learning, it is crucial to create a positive and secure environment that will increase motivation and lower affective filters. Brown points out that “if we were to devise theories of second language acquisition on teaching methods based only on cognitive considerations, we would be omitting the most fundamental side of human behavior (Brown, 1980). When teachers promote leisure reading habits by modeling this behavior, it positively impacts students and strengthens literacy skills. Krashen and Terrell supported this with the development of the natural approach as a method of language learning in which students move through three overlapping stages of comprehension, early speech production, and speech emergence (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Literacy skills and leisure reading are valuable components as this approach evolves. Each stage will vary according to the comprehensible input students receive and the degree to which the affective filters have been lowered.

Research on Student Interest in Leisure Reading

A report issued by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2000), indicated that less than twenty-five percent of both eighth and twelfth graders engaged in daily leisure reading. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) found that student leisure reading peaked between third and fifth grade with a sharp decline thereafter. In a review of the NAEP studies since 1992, the International reading Association found little change in the reading performance of 4th through 8th grades over the last fifteen years (*Reading Today*, June/July 2001). There is also evidence that many teachers in successful early childhood classrooms surround children with good literature, read to students, and verbally demonstrate pleasure in reading (Cullinan & Galda, 1994; Eeds & Peterson, 1991). Such classrooms result in students who are interested and motivated to use their new found skills (Hansen, 1987). What happens to students who were excited about reading in the early grades? What factors nurture a lifelong love of reading and conversely, what factors eventually contribute to a decline in leisure reading?

Many external events such as television, athletics, socializing with friends, etc. compete for students’ time, thus becoming a possible cause for the decline of leisure reading (Blatt, 1981; Greaney, 1980; Heather, 1982). Despite the events that appear to distract children from leisure reading, the greater majority of children do become readers in the primary grades, but their interest does not always continue into adulthood. The tendency for students to become dissatisfied or turned off to reading as they enter the middle grades may be contributed to the following three factors (Ivey, 2001). First, the reading demands of middle level curriculum rarely consider the personal and developmental demands of students. Second, there is disparity between required content in coursework and student interest. Finally, young adolescents do not recognize the value on reading in school when their out of school reading is different. Out of school reading habits are not limited to the linear print of books, but often include multiple literacy that takes non-linear forms such as the Internet, video games, and cell phones (Kist, 2003).

Research on Teacher Interest in Leisure Reading

Another possible cause connected to the decline in reading habits may be connected to teachers’ resistance to and lack of knowledge of research on reading (Langer, Applebee, Mullis & Foertsch, 1990). Langer and associates further stress that this attitude among teachers has resulted in little improvement of literature instruction over the last twenty-five years. Other studies have also indicated that a considerable number of teachers spend little time engaged in leisure reading (Cogan & Anderson, 1977; Gray & Troy, 1986). These studies characterize increasing numbers of teachers who do not model or generate dialogue about their leisure reading in their classrooms at all levels.

Rationale for the Study

We have identified two characteristics that distinguish our longitudinal study from others in the research literature. First, as researchers we have extended leisure reading discourse and its impact on students beyond the classroom. Previous research has emphasized the importance of teachers talking about books they love through book talks in class and sustained silent reading. “Teachers who enjoy reading can generate a contagious excitement in their students by talking about the books they love, books they are currently reading, and books they read as children. This can be accomplished by allowing ample time for ‘book talks’ and sustained silent reading” (Kolloff, 2002). Our

study takes a look at the importance of teacher and adult discourse pertaining to all literacy both in and out of the classroom as having a major impact on the child's continued interest in finding leisure time to read and strengthening language and literacy acquisition.

Second, our study is unique because of its comparison of student and adult reading habits in both South Korea and the United States. By stretching beyond our national boundary we have the opportunity to compare and contrast leisure reading habits in two different cultures and the impact of adult interaction on both sets of students.

Method

Hypothesis

We hypothesize that one possible resolution to the decline in leisure reading habits might be the role leisure reading plays in the classroom. How many teachers model the enjoyment and value of free-time leisure reading? Do teachers model leisure reading through example by sharing books or parts of books they are reading or by generating frequent discourse with their students, particularly about material read outside of assigned material? Are there similarities between two industrialized nations? The purpose of our study is to find answers to the role leisure reading plays in a classroom. If our hypothesis is affirmed, the results of our study will be intended to sensitize teachers to the classroom practice of stimulating leisure reading among their students. It is our hope that findings from the study may suggest particular interventions that could be applied as a possible combatant to the decline in leisure reading after the early grades and strengthen the literacy skills of students learning a second or third language.

Data Sources

Semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2001) were conducted with 549 students in urban communities in northwest United States and in southwest South Korea. A set of questions (Appendix A) asked in a flexible interview format (Lofland & Lofland, 1984) was administered to students ranging in age from six to eighteen years in two urban settings. The study identifies students' perceptions of their teachers as leisure-reading role models.

The semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2001) were used due to the age range of participants and individuals' literal interpretations of the interview questions. For example, not all six year old students understand what is meant by "free time" so a rephrasing of the question, such as "What do you do when you are not in school?" was sometimes substituted. Questions that are specific to leisure reading were masked within a battery of reading-related questions to maintain a relaxed atmosphere for the interviewee and as a control for leading question bias (See Appendix A).

The project directors (Dong Ro Shin and Stan Steiner) trained interviewers through role modeling and practice with other adults. Sample questions and answers from actual interviews with children conducted by the project directors were used to discuss possible outcomes and concerns. To help control bias, their interviewers were informed that the purpose of the study was to gather information on students' reading habits, but not specifically told that the directors were most interested in students' perceptions of their teachers as leisure readers. In a further attempt to control bias, the interviewers were instructed not to interview their offspring, nor encourage in any way prompts from parents and teachers. While interviews were taking place, parents or other adults were asked to wait in a room away from the child and interviewer. The interviews took place in homes, schools, neighborhoods, shopping malls, and parks over the first year of the study, inclusive of all school grading periods.

Data Analysis

Students were asked a series of questions that focused on some aspect of reading. All questions required open-ended responses. Within the battery of questions were those directly related to teachers modeling and sharing leisure reading activities with their students, and to students' attitudes toward leisure reading (Appendix A). For every question in the survey, answers were recorded and tabulated by frequency and percentage of students who answered with similar responses, and by country. The following sections describe the data analysis results for the different types of items on the survey.

Results. When students were asked how they spent their free time, the initial response to the question was recorded prior to asking if students read in their free time. Twenty one percent of the Korean students versus fourteen percent of U.S. students responded that they read during their free time. How did students in the two cultures prefer to spend their free time? U.S. students were involved with sports (19%) and hanging out with friends (19%) while Korean students played video games (21%) equally as much as they preferred to read during their free time (21%). When students were directly asked if they read during their free time, 87% of U.S. students versus 95% of Korean students responded that yes, they do read in their free time.

When asked if anyone inquired about what students were reading, 59% of Korean students versus 58 % of U.S. students answered yes. When students were asked who asked them about what they are reading, a large majority of Korean students (50%) responded that their friends inquired about their reading whereas 31% of U.S. students responded that their teachers inquired and 21% said that their parents asked about what they were reading. Did the students in the study share the books they read? A majority of students in both countries responded that they share books (U.S. 76% and Korea 58%). Additionally, when asked who reads to them, students in both Korea (mother 49% and teacher 24%) and the U.S. (mother 32% and teacher 30%) were read to. How often were students read to? In the U.S. 41% of students responded that they were read to sometimes, or once in a while, but not often, whereas in Korea 38% of students were read to once a day or every day and 27% were read to once or twice a week. Seventy-three percent of Korean students and seventy-two percent of U.S. students had a favorite book, and fantasy was the favorite type of book for U.S. students, with chapter books and novels being the favorite types of books for Korean students.

Adults. How do students perceive the reading habits of significant adults? Eighty-four percent of Korean students and eighty-five percent of U.S. students responded that they see their parents reading. Korean students responded that parents read novels (56%) a majority of the time whereas U.S. students said that their parents read the newspaper (21%) and books of all kinds (18%). Students in both the U.S. (51%) and Korea (57%) reported that their teachers did not read outside of class. For those students who responded that their teachers were readers, 58% of U.S. students responded that they knew their teachers read because of teacher book talks, and 76% of Korean student knew that their teachers read because they saw them reading. However, it is interesting to note that the majority of teachers did not talk about books. Sixty percent of U.S. and fifty-five percent of Korean students responded that their teachers did not talk about books.

Is there a cultural difference as to where students acquire books? In Korea, 68% of students acquire their books from a parent, at home, or from a bookstore. None of the Korean students responded that they borrowed books from a public library, and only 22% of the students borrowed books from their school library or book mobile. In the U.S., 63% of students acquire their books from public and school libraries with only 25% of the students obtaining their books from a bookstore or home.

Both groups highly agreed that reading outside of class was important. Seventy-five percent of Korean students and 86% of U.S. students responded positively about reading outside of class. Both Korean and American students believed that reading outside of class was important so that they could “get ahead, improve in life or with grades, fill learning gaps in school, learn new ideas, create new ideas, increase their imaginations, or escape into another world.” Reading outside of class was not important to 14% of U.S. students and 25% of Korean students. Their reasons included statements that they “did not want to or like to read, preferred to be read to, believed that reading was a waste of time,” perceived themselves as being poor readers, or believed that reading should be done at school and not at home.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study is longitudinal and ongoing, with a fairly large N (549), the reader should consider several limitations of the study. First, a variety of students were surveyed in both Korea and the Pacific Northwest from a wide range of age, cultures, socioeconomic levels, and instructional experiences, but were limited to the students who were available to the trained graduate assistants conducting the interviews. Follow-up interviews would have been preferred by the project directors to explore unusual answers, but were not practical because of the anonymity provided to the students by the interviewers. Second, the interview questions and actual interviews were conducted in two languages, thus the possibility of translation errors. Overall, interviews for the study continue to provide valuable data on the impact of significant adults on the reading habits of young children.

Summary

Reflection on the results of the study to date produced the following areas that should be considered by adults who are involved in the lives of young and adolescent readers whether students are native or second language learners. According to the students who participated in the study to date, (a) there is a difference in the leisure reading habits of students in Korea from those students in the United States (b) there is limited evidence that teachers engage in leisure reading outside of school in either Korea or the United States; (c) Students have limited perceptions of adults as reading role models, and (d) students in both cultures perceive reading as important to their learning.

Leisure Reading Habits of Students

When students were asked if they shared what they were reading, a larger majority of U.S. students (76%) responded with “yes” than Korean students (58%). Of those students who flatly said no, the responses included: I never shared; if I have to. Reactions to this question by students were:

I don’t think that it will interest anyone; I would sound dumb and get laughed at (10 year old comic book reader who said he personally owned 213 comic books); that would be embarrassing; not many people read the stuff; unless I think my friend will like the book, then I tell her about it; only books I like; depends on how good the book is; if it’s dumb tell (classmates) not to read it; just with my close friends ‘cause I know what they like; yes, but most of the time I don’t; yes, anyone who asks; always!

A number of boys aged six or seven were hesitant about sharing what they read because they stated they “could not read” or “were poor readers.” High school-age students were ambivalent about sharing in school and were more likely to share with friends and their parents.

Teachers Engaged in Leisure Reading

Answers regarding students’ perceptions of their teachers’ reading habits resulted in a multitude of responses that ranged from: (a) students had no idea, (b) responses that cited positive evidence, (c) students who assumed that their teachers read, and respondents who shared their personal interpretation of what constitutes reading away from the parameters of school. Interviewees’ responses were numerous and beyond listing in their entirety.

- (a) I have no idea if my teacher reads; I don’t know because he never talks about them, but he must;
- (b) I see her at lunch time; she takes books home and reads them before the class does; he talks about hunting magazines; I saw her at the airport reading; talks about the book; I talk to them about different books we have read;
- (c) She says she does; she said reading was her favorite hobby; I think that most English teachers do; I don’t know, but she probably does; she told us the first day of class she likes to read; I assume they do;
- (d) Because she ordered a lot of books on the book order; probably when she’s doing her work because she has to read to get things done right; reads the newspaper; my teacher plays in the philharmonic; she takes magazines with her to lunch; and yes, everyone reads cereal boxes.
- (e)

Student responses reflect a variety of notions about teachers reading during their free time. The results reveal that less than half of the students thought of their teacher as a role model for leisure reading.

Adults as Role Models

The responses to the question of whether or not teachers talk about the books they read were alarming. The purpose of this question was to uncover clear evidence of teachers modeling leisure reading in the classroom. With 60% of U.S. and 55% of Korean students responding that their teachers do not talk about the books they read during their free time, it was apparent that in both Korea and the U.S. teachers are not modeling their love of reading with their students. Of the minority of students who shared that their teachers talked about the books they read, the responses ranged from, “occasionally in class” to “during reading workshop” or “at recess, when she is on duty.” Students’ comments that were not exposed to a teacher sharing books with them could be summarized into the following, “all I hear is the books she reads to us” and “No, she just tells us she reads a lot.” Teachers modeling discourse about books they read versus teachers telling students they read for pleasure reflected an increase in the number of

students who were uncertain about their teacher as a leisure reader. It appears that students merely assumed that their teacher was a leisure reader.

Additional evidence of characteristics related to leisure reading was sought. Students were asked if anyone read to them and more specifically if their teacher read to them; if anyone asked them (students) about what they read; if they (students) liked to share what they were reading, and if they (students) felt reading outside of class is important. It is surprising that in both countries mothers and teachers read most often to students, however, a majority of the students who are read to are under the age of twelve. Coincidentally, a large majority of twelve to eighteen year old students said that their English or reading teacher read to them. An interesting comment came from a student who identified a male social studies teacher who “reads part of the chapter (textbook) to us.”

It is interesting that those who most often asked about what students are reading in Korea were friends whereas in the U.S. it was mothers and teachers. It is important to note that in both countries there were some cases where students responded with multiple persons when asked who questioned them about what they were reading. Responses did not distinguish if the questioning of student was directed towards books read during free time or for an assignment.

Importance of Reading to Learning

Students’ responding to whether they felt reading outside of class was important proved to be highly positive with 75% of Korean students and 86% of U.S. students responding positively. Even though students felt that reading outside of school was important, only a small percentage mentioned reading as something they do during their free time (21% Korean and 14% U.S.). When asked directly if they read during their free time, the amount jumped to 95% for Korean students and 87% for U.S. students who said that they read to some degree (answers ranging from always to sometimes). The lower number of students who initially stated they read during free time would indicate that leisure reading among the overall sample size occurred infrequently and has limited significance in the students’ lives. Students attached the relevance of leisure reading with something you do “during the summer; when you are bored; totally on your own; before bed; to learn new things; to make you smarter; or to fill in the gaps.”

Conclusions

Our study was conducted to sensitize teachers to what students perceive about classroom practice related to leisure reading in two diverse cultures, lowering affective filters in connection to reading, and to provide baseline data to test the assumption that teachers are readers and that they model leisure reading through their actions. Merely verbally promoting leisure reading in the classroom has not provided a positive impact to curb alliteracy as research indicates. The findings of this study show limited evidence of teachers modeling the benefits of leisure reading. When asked to provide evidence, the greater majority of students in both cultures could not identify any time their teacher demonstrated leisure reading by talking about things they were reading. While some students could sight evidence of their teachers engaging in activities related to leisure reading, others only assumed that their teacher read outside of school. Determining if teachers truly engage in leisure reading outside of school was beyond the scope of this study, but prior studies indicate teachers do fall into the number of alliterate adults.

The vast majority of students were personally favorable toward the importance of reading outside of school. A surprising number said that they enjoyed sharing what they read at least occasionally and cited moms and teachers as the ones who most commonly asked about student reading. The small percentage of students in both cultures who initially stated that they read during their free time increased greatly in percentage when specifically asked if they read for pleasure. It is important to note that all students who indicated any amount of leisure reading were included in the percentages. This increase in students confirming their reading outside of school with a prompt indicated the limited relevance leisure reading play in their lives. A great number of students perceive leisure reading as something you do when you are bored.

Strong evidence of classroom teachers and parents that emphasized leisure reading was found to occur on a limited basis. The question of whether teachers and parents engaging students in a shared discourse about books they read outside of school and its impact on the problem of alliteracy needs further study. The simple question “What have you been reading lately?” asked by significant adults could have a great impact on the reading habits of students.

It is important to consider a variety of questions and critical issues that have arisen as a result of the study. How do teachers perceive themselves as leisure reading role models? To what extent does reading lower affective filters and increase literacy and language learning? Do teachers see any value in modeling their leisure reading habits? Will sensitizing teachers to students' perceptions of them as leisure reading role models have a positive effect on the increasing problem of alliteracy? Would an allocated classroom time for discussing unassigned books bring more validity to leisure reading in the lives of students and teachers? If creating life-long readers is a goal among many schools, then what kind and how much emphasis should be given toward leisure reading?

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Appendix A

Date _____ Gender ___M ___F Age _____ Grade _____

1. How do you spend your free time? Do you ever read in your free time? If Yes, when do you read, where do you do most of your reading? (e.g. Home Schools, Daycare, etc.)
2. Has anyone ever asked you about the things you read? If yes, who?
3. If given a choice, what are your favorite types of books to read?
4. Do you share the things you read with other people/ friends?
5. Does anyone read to you? If so, who? How often does this happen? What time(s) of the day does this usually occur? Where does this take place?
6. Does your teacher read to you? If yes, how often within a day/week? What time(s) of the day does this usually occur?
7. Do you ever see your parents reading? If yes, what are they reading?
8. Do you know if your teacher reads outside of school? If yes, how do you know that?
9. Does he/she ever talk with you about the books they are reading at home or in their free time?
10. Do you have a favorite book? If yes, what?
11. Where do you get the books you read? (e.g. book orders, public/school library, parents, bookstore, grocery store, etc.)
12. Do you think that reading outside of class is important? Why/Why not?
13. Is there anything more that you would like to tell me about your reading?