



Early Reading Habits and their Impact on the Reading Literacy
of Qatari Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This article discusses a study on the roles of family involvement and school influence in the formation of reading habits of Qatari secondary education students. Information for the study was gathered from surveys of Qatari high school graduates entering North American colleges in Doha, Qatar. The data showed links between reading extensively and confidence in reading, between being read to and forming the habit of free voluntary reading, and between parental recreational reading and that of their children. Based on their findings, the authors propose practical solutions for educators and education policy makers that would improve the reading literacy of Qataris and contribute to building a knowledge-based economy in their country.

Keywords: Literacy, reading habits, fluent reading

Introduction

Literacy is fundamental for the construction of a knowledge-based society that strives for economic development and social harmony. The practice of reading and writing enables students to learn about themselves, their local community, and the world; as stated by Koda (2005), reading is also the principal method of acquiring knowledge and expanding one's academic context. At the same time, reading is a complex process and reading habits take time to develop. Literature confirms a lack of reading culture or habitual reading in the Gulf Arab society due to oral traditions (Shannon, 2003; Synovate Market Research Agency, 2007). Even though literacy rates have increased dramatically, a survey conducted by Synovate Market Research Agency in 2007 reports that the typical ages at which Arabs stop reading or read less is 19-25 years. Researchers frequently cite diglossia and late exposure to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as some of the reasons why Arab children find it difficult to develop reading competence (Ayari, 1996; Fender, 2008); in addition, lack of critical reading skills and little support for extensive reading at home and at school seem to play an equally important role.

The first important obstacle to developing strong reading comprehension skills in Arab students is linguistic in nature. According to Yorkey (1974), Classical Arabic can be divided into three dialectal forms. The first one is the language of classical Arabic, which Arab children grow up learning in schools or mosques. This form of Arabic, the language of classical Arabic literature, has remained unchanged for more than 1,500 years since the time of the prophet Muhammad and is considered the sacred language of the Holy Koran. Known for its exceptional richness of vocabulary and complex syntactic structure, it is used only on very formal occasions such as public speeches and formal addresses. As Yorkey (1974) put it, "An Arab learning this language is roughly in the same position as an American learning to speak, read, and write Chaucer's Middle English, or at least the Early Modern English of the King James Bible" (p. 3). The second form of Arabic is Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). It represents a modified form of Classical Arabic, has a less grammatically complex structure, and is different from the

colloquial regional varieties of Classical Arabic and their country-specific dialectal variations. Because MSA is the language found in publications such as books and newspapers and used in media programs, Arab children require instruction in reading and writing it. The third form is the regional dialect of Arabic, which is the common language of everyday use. It is mainly spoken but never taught, written or read. Thus, while Arab children grow up speaking their local or national dialect of Arabic, any L1 text they encounter is written either in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or Classical Arabic. Consequently, when Arab children are read to in Arabic and when they themselves start learning to read in school, their experience is not different from that of anyone trying to read in a second language (Ayari, 1996; Fender, 2008).

Secondly, coming from an oral culture, Arab children do not read enough to develop strong literacy skills. As emphasized by experts in the field, the keys to building reading comprehension are exposure, practice, frequency of repetitions, and automaticity; while explicit instruction is helpful, text structure knowledge, indispensable for reading fluency, is an outgrowth of extensive reading experience (Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005). Acknowledging a strong link between extensive reading and college readiness, the present study aims to explore the role of parental involvement and school instruction in building confident, strategic and fluent Qatari readers who can become successful students.

Literature Review

There is extensive research on the positive role that the home environment plays in forming long-lasting reading habits and positive attitudes towards reading. According to Bus, van Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini (1995), the home environment, defined as the frequency of joint book reading, had a .59 positive effect on child literacy and language skills, indicating a high medium effect size. In addition, studies found that all children, regardless of socio-economic status, developed academic competencies thanks to the

acquisition of language and literacy abilities during experiences of parent-child book reading in an emotionally stable family environment (Griffin & Morrison, 1997; McMullen & Darling, 1996).

The effects of parental reading socialization and early school engagement on the academic achievement of children were confirmed by Beals & De Temple (1993), Bennett et al. (2002) as well as more recently by Kloosterman et al. (2011) and Kamhieh et al. (2011). Kamhieh's (2011) *Becoming readers: Our stories* is of interest in this context since it reports the results of a qualitative study of six female Emirati university students' leisure reading habits. The study participants wrote their stories of how they became readers, chronicling their earliest memories of books and reading. Among the most significant factors that emerged from their reports was parental encouragement (especially of fathers) at an early age, followed by the influence of teachers who promoted reading.

An extensive search for sources on the reading habits and attitudes of college bound Qatari students yielded very few results. According to the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (2006), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) data examined early literacy experiences and revealed interesting facts about students in Qatari elementary schools. The first question the study asked was if parents or anyone else in the home engaged in reading-related activities with the children before they started elementary school. The definition of reading related activities included reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with alphabet toys, playing word games, and reading aloud signs and labels. On the three-level (high, medium, and low) index of Early Home Literacy Activities (EHLA) that assessed 45 countries and regions, Qatari students averaged 36 % with a 372 average reading achievement in the high EHLA, 45 % with a 357 average reading achievement in the medium EHLA, and 18 % with a 340 average reading achievement in the low EHLA. The international average was 55 % and 515 for high EHLA, 33 % and 494 for medium EHLA, and 13 % and 475 for low EHLA.

The second question that PIRLS asked was what literacy resources students had in their homes. To quote, “PIRLS developed an index of Home Educational Resources (HER) based on parents’ and students’ reports of the number of books, the number of children’s books, and the presence of four educational aids (computer, study desk for own use, books of their own, and access to a daily newspaper) in the home and on parents’ education” (p.110). A high level was defined as more than 100 books in the home, more than 25 children’s books, at least three of four educational aids, and at least one parent who graduated from university. On the other hand, a low level indicated 25 or fewer books in the home, 25 or fewer children’s books, no more than two educational aids, and parents that did not complete secondary education. Medium level included all other combinations of responses.

The average across countries yielded 11 % of students and 563 average reading achievement at the high level of the index, 80 % and 503 average achievement at the medium level, and 9 % along with 426 achievement at the low level. Qatari students were at 7 % and 402 average reading achievement at high HER, 85 % and 363 achievement at medium HER, and 8 % with 321 average reading achievement at low HER. It is important to note that the Qatar data were available for 50-69% of the students.

According to PIRLS, countries with relatively high proportions of students from well-resourced homes scored 20% or more at the high level of the index. Therefore, at 7% Qatar had an average achievement below the international scale average and significantly below the high-scoring countries like Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Scotland, and the Netherlands. Furthermore, the PIRLS results indicated that more than 25% of students in Qatar were from homes with no more than 10 children’s books.

Finally, another PIRLS important question relevant to the present study measured trends in the amount of time parents reported reading for themselves at home. Self-reading included books, magazines, newspapers, and work materials. PIRLS used an index of Parents’ Attitudes Toward Reading that yielded a score of 21% of Qatari

students whose parents read more than five hours a week with an average reading achievement of 376 compared to an international average of 37% and 516 achievement. The index also resulted in 43% Qatari students whose parents reported reading one to five hours a week with a 364 average achievement compared to 43% and 502 internationally. The last category on the index showed the *lowest levels* of parental reading in Qatar, where 36% of students had parents reading for less than one hour per week with a 338 average achievement, compared to an international average of 20% and 477 average achievement.

Objectives

To expand on the information gleaned from the PIRLS 2006 study and provide a more recent picture of the development of literacy in Qatar, the present study aimed at gathering and analyzing information about the early reading habits of Qatari undergraduate students and their attitudes toward reading. Members of this group represent the segment of the population that is perhaps best prepared academically and invested in achieving high professional goals. Consequently, it was felt important to investigate their attitudes to reading and the extent to which they were influenced by the home and school environments.

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What was the role of family interaction and involvement in building students' reading habits and forming their perceptions of the value of extensive reading?
- To what extent were strategic and extensive reading encouraged in pre-college education?

Methodology

A total of 72 Qatari university-level students (30 male, 42 female) participated in the study. They ranged in age from 18 to 24 and attended tertiary level schools in Qatar such as Weill Cornell Medical College, Virginia Commonwealth University, College of the North Atlantic, and Qatar Foundation’s Academic Bridge Program. The participants were enrolled in a variety of degree programs such as medicine, health sciences, information technology, business studies, engineering technology, design studies, and pre-university academic preparation courses (see Table 1).

Institution	Male	Female	Total
Weill Cornell Medical College	14	27	41
Virginia Commonwealth University	0	7	7
College of North Atlantic	6	1	7
Academic Bridge Program	9	8	17
Total	29	43	72

Table 1 Main study participants (N = 72)

A questionnaire was developed to collect information on participants’ reading habits and attitudes during childhood, the role of parents and schools in encouraging reading, students’ current reading habits, development of reading strategies before and after secondary school, and biographical data. Questions were rated on a five-point scale ranging from ‘never’, ‘rarely’, ‘sometimes’, to ‘often’ and ‘always’.

Data was collected in the spring and fall semesters of 2011. After obtaining the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the researchers asked faculty in the participating institutions to distribute the survey. Students had the option to complete a paper or online questionnaire; a consent form was provided to assure them of confidentiality and their right not to participate. A protocol of instrument was designed to ensure procedures were standard among the four institutions in data collection.

Results

In answer to the survey question, “When you were a child, did anyone *tell* you stories?”, 29 % chose the answer “Always”, 25% chose the answer “Often” and only 3% chose the answer “Never.” However, in answer to the question, “When you were a child, did anyone *read* you stories?”, 17% of respondents chose the answer “Always”, 21% “Often” and 24% chose “Never.” Table 2 shows the difference in responses to the two questions.

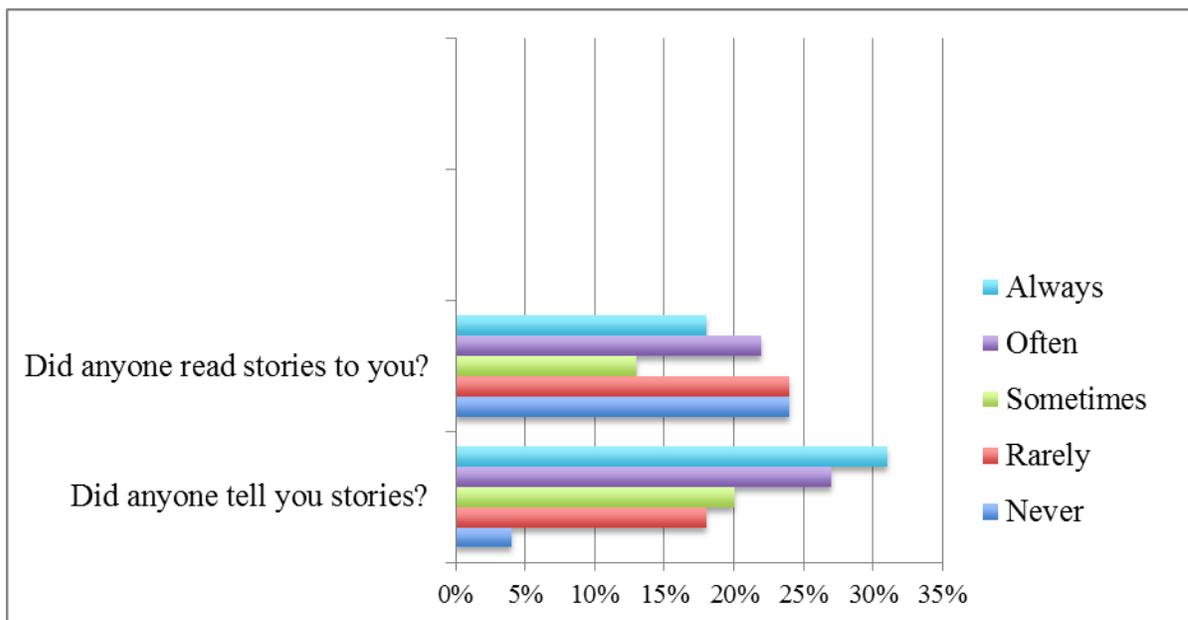


Table 2 Comparison between telling and reading stories to Qatari students

The choice of texts by parents was not surprising, with 82% of the respondents being read children’s books and 13% being exposed to religious books. Furthermore, 57% of the respondents reported they often or always enjoyed the activity of reading. As to the language in which the reading took place, 50% of the respondents reported being read to in Arabic, 7% in English, 18% in English and Arabic, and 4% in other languages (Urdu, Farsi, and Pashtu); 20% of respondents did not answer this question.

Asked if they saw their parents engage in voluntary reading, 52% of the respondents reported that they had never, rarely or only sometimes seen their parents read for pleasure (see Table 3).

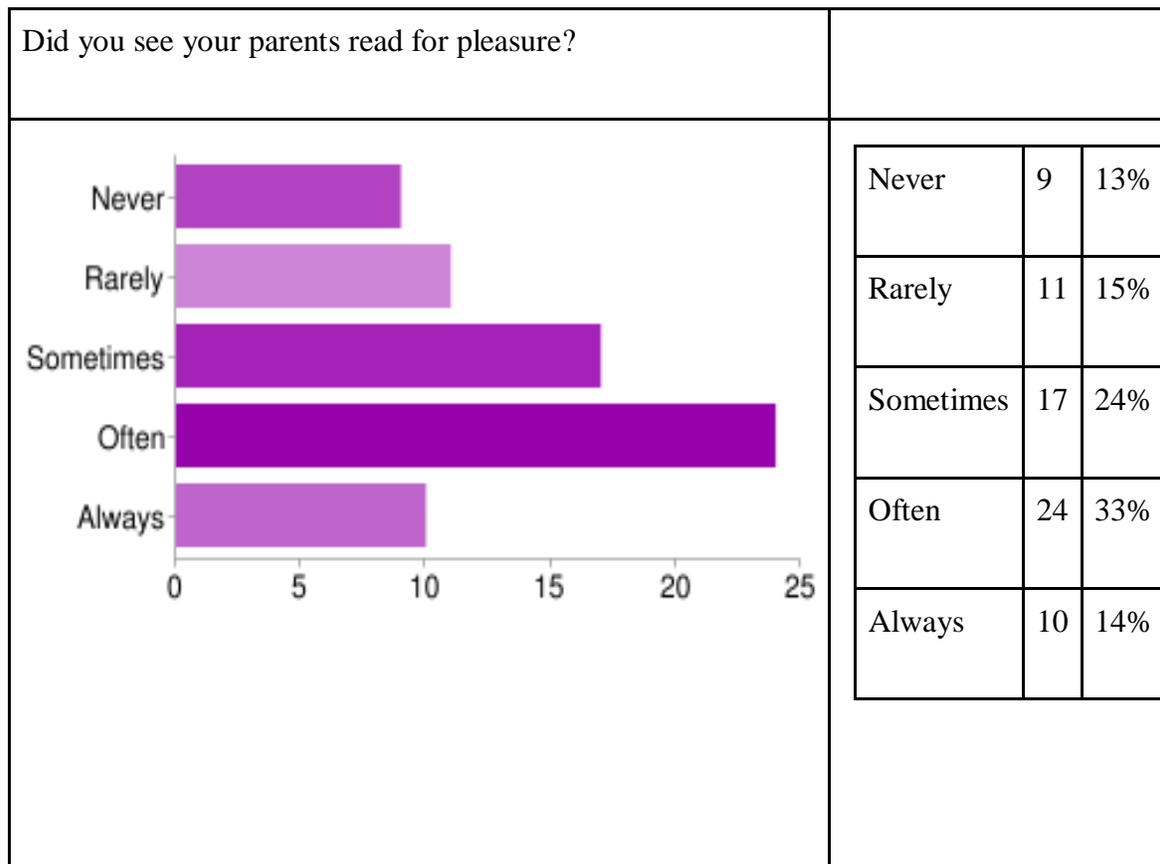


Table 3 Participants’ responses to the question of parental free voluntary reading

With regard to the second research question, it was established that the respondents received more encouragement to read extensively from their families than from their schools. Only 41% reported that reading for pleasure was often or always encouraged at school versus 59% who stated it was never, rarely, or sometimes encouraged. At the same time, 54% of the participants said that reading for pleasure was often or always encouraged at home, and only 45% reported that their parents never or rarely encouraged it (see Table 4).

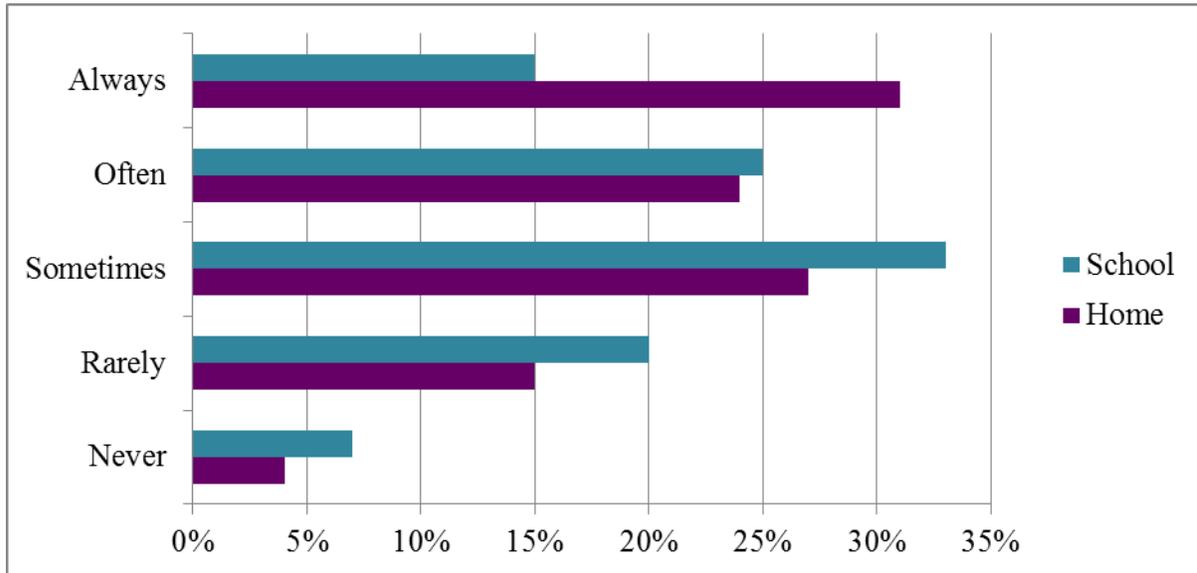


Table 4 Comparison of home and school in encouraging free voluntary reading

In response to the question whether they read narrative texts as homework, 72% of the study participants stated they never, rarely, or sometimes were asked to do so. Only 28% responded they were often or always assigned to read such texts (see Table 5).

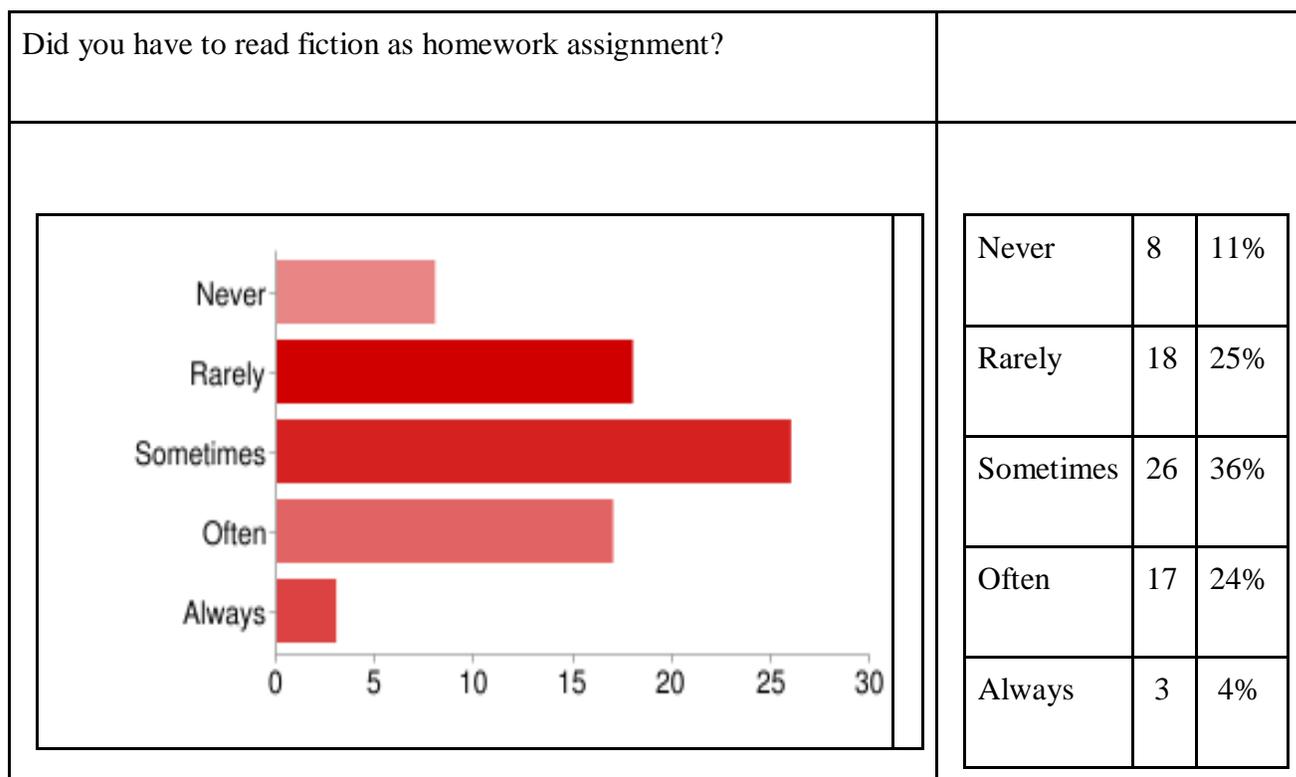


Table 5 Reading fiction as homework assignment

With reference to reading strategies, fewer respondents than expected were taught how to read actively and analytically. In response to the survey question whether they were taught reading strategies before enrolling in their first year of college, 43% of respondents chose the answer “Yes”, 47% said “No”, and 10% did not know what reading strategies meant. Asked if they were learning reading strategies in college, 53% said “Yes” and 22% said “No”. When the participants in the study were also asked how often they read books of their choice for pleasure, 46% reported reading often or always,

but 54% responded that they never, rarely, or sometimes engaged in free voluntary reading.

Not surprisingly, the respondents considered themselves more confident readers in Arabic than in English. In answer to the survey question “ Do you consider yourself a confident reader in English?”, 68% answered in the affirmative and 32% chose the answer “No”. For Arabic, the percentages were 79% and 21% respectively.

It is encouraging that as many as 93% of respondents considered pleasure reading important and saw its benefits in increasing knowledge about the world beyond academic fields, developing vocabulary, exercising their brains and imagination, and escaping from everyday stress. A closer look at the data revealed a clear link between being read to, home encouragement to read and becoming a confident reader. As shown in Table 6, the respondents whose parents promoted reading became more confident readers; at the same time, the number of respondents evaluating their reading skills as strong dropped dramatically among those who were never or rarely asked to read or read to.

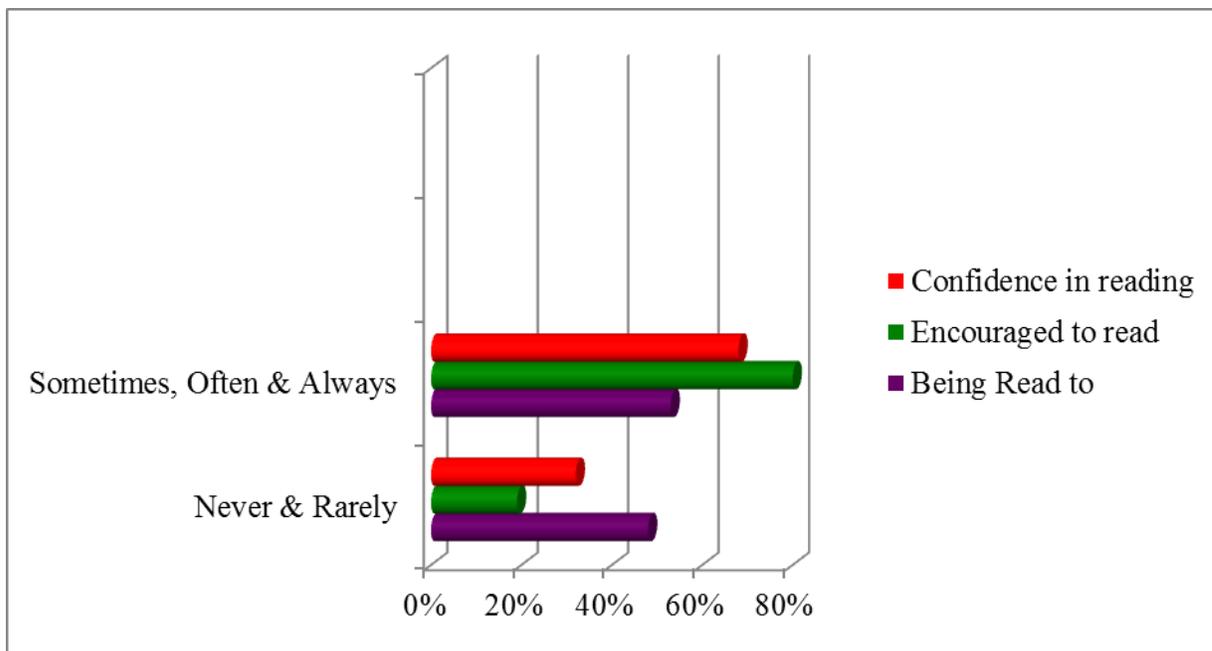


Table 6 Being read to, home encouragement to read, and becoming a confident reader

Similarly, there was also a noticeable link between being read to and forming the habit of reading for pleasure, as shown in Table 7.

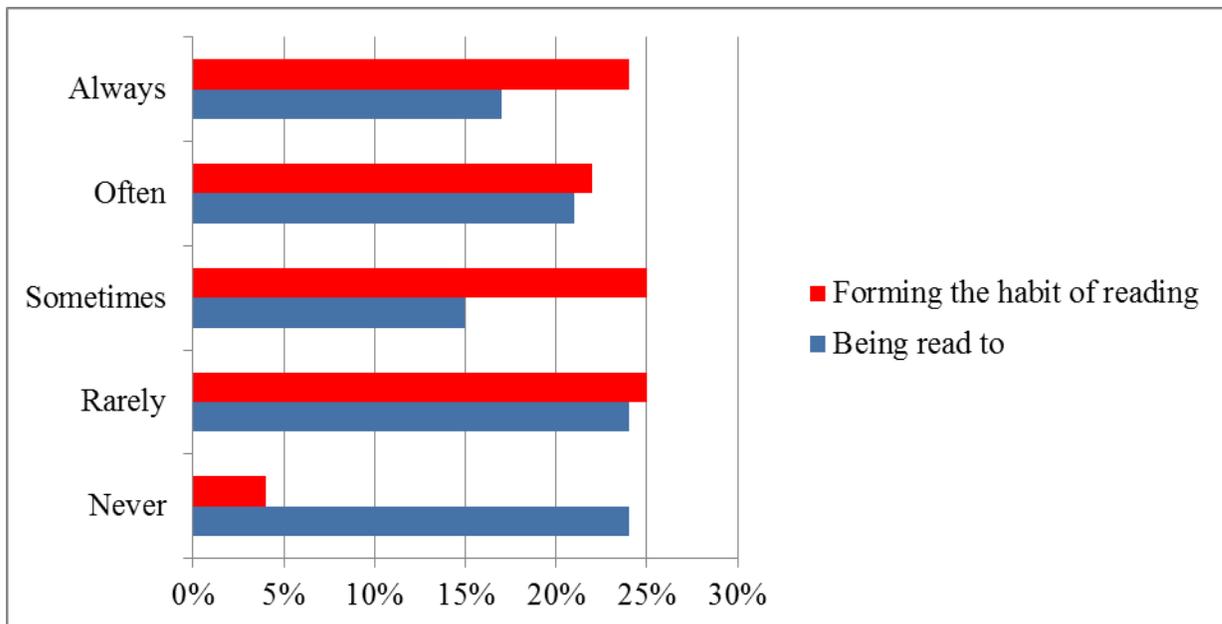


Table 7 Being read to and the formation of reading habits

Discussion

The study aimed to explore the role of parental involvement in building Qatari students’ reading habits and to establish if strategic and extensive reading were encouraged in their pre-college education. The findings confirmed the researchers’ initial

hypothesis as well as exposed unexpected patterns related to the respondents' educational experience.

Based on the literature review and anecdotal evidence, it was hypothesized that Qatari children would be *told* rather than *read* stories. The survey confirmed parental preference for oral narrative; however, it also indicated that the number of respondents who were frequently told stories was relatively low. Furthermore, the percentage of children being read to was even lower. Since exposure to narrative, both oral and written, is very important in developing literacy skills, these findings point to a need for an awareness raising campaign among parents.

As expected, the study corroborated that Qatari parents reading extensively became role models for their children. At the same time, the levels of parental reading reported by the respondents were overall quite low. This observation, not unexpected in view of other studies, especially PIRLS, again emphasizes the importance of improving parental reading socialization in Qatar.

What came as a surprise to the researchers was the discovery that in the case of the respondents, reading extensively was encouraged more at home than at school. The results of the study suggest that many primary and secondary students do not read narrative texts, are not taught reading strategies, and are not supported in developing reading habits.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this pilot study is the fact that it surveyed only a small sample of the population and one that cannot be seen as representative of the Qatari community. The participants are college students accepted by prestigious colleges in Education City, Qatar; in order to form any conclusions about reading habits in the state of Qatar one would need to reach out to more families and more institutions. There are

many types of primary and secondary schools in Doha, and differences between their curricula and methods of teaching are enormous; since these differences were not fully accounted for in the study, it would be premature to try to generalize the findings or reach any definitive conclusions. Moreover, the focus on narrative, whether in print or on-line, excluded other types of reading that can contribute to reading fluency. Nevertheless, despite its limitations, the study not only reveals an interesting pattern, but also signals the need for immediate action in several areas.

Implications

Like everywhere else, children in Qatar need a print rich home environment and parental encouragement to develop literacy skills. As emphasized by Baker, Kanan and Al-Misnad (2008), the number of culturally enriching items found in the home and parental involvement in the school influence student motivation to achieve academically. According to the researchers, some Qatari parents are not sufficiently involved in their children's education; this indirectly demotivates the children and impacts their academic achievement. One can see a similar type of correlation when it comes forming reading habits. Parents who create a print rich environment and who read extensively establish and foster their children's appreciation for literacy. Thus, what seems to be needed is a two-prong approach: government sponsored programs for parents reinforcing the message that reading is important and needs to be supported as early as possible, and teacher training in the areas of strategic reading skills and building reading fluency.

It is also noteworthy that the participants in the study expressed desire for more interesting books to read. A public library system in Qatar, more bookstores, and events promoting children's literature or "Read to me " campaigns would help raise public awareness and facilitate book circulation. Creating reading incentive programs such as

mass distribution of e-readers for children and book clubs for parents would also encourage free voluntary reading. In schools the choice of reading materials should be guided by criteria such as relevance to students' experience and ability to engage them intellectually and affectively.

Reading fluency is the foundation for learning in all subjects related to student success. As the PIRLS report and other studies show, Qatari students' reading literacy levels are too low for the country's ambitious vision for building a knowledge-based economy, hence the urgency of finding practical solutions.

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