


Fostering reading-culture of pre-teen community friends via reading play dates

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Background: Partly because of the lack of a culture of reading in many households, poor reading achievement remains a pressing, worsening problem in South Africa, which this study addresses.

Objectives: Fostering reading appreciation at home has been positively associated with reading achievement. This study aimed to evaluate the practicality and usefulness of reading-focused play dates at home as a fun way to cultivate reading in children and tackle reading literacy deficiencies.

Method: This qualitative study embraced children-parents-initiated reading play dates in developing a reading culture among 9–12-year-olds. Five children, buddies from school, in a Johannesburg suburb, were brought together in a reading-play date investigation. In sociocultural theory, children learn through play. The ethnographic study tracked progress and used fun play date activities, for example, storytelling, quizzes, and games, to promote reading-culture development. The home-based, fun-oriented reading intervention of play dates ignited reading enjoyment and culture. The study's interpretivist paradigm comprised interviews and the researcher's observation using content/thematic analysis.

Results: The study demonstrates the viability and value of reading play dates for developing reading cultures. Participants joined library sources, read books consistently, developed a reading passion, and had fun reading in an everyday, fun-oriented reading development initiative.

Conclusion: The study concludes that play dates involving reading activities, entwined in everyday home experiences such as play and friendships that children naturally enjoy as part of growing up, can offer workable strategies at home in early Literacy Learning, fostering reading love and culture with educational benefits.

Contribution: Developing a reading culture for better reading success earlier in childhood.

Keywords: reading culture development; parental literacy champions; children literacy development; reading play dates; experimental ethnographic qualitative research; sociocultural play theory.

Introduction

According to the World Bank Report 2021, the inability to read or write is a worldwide obstacle that affects almost 15% of the global population and impedes socio-economic progress (Murray 2021:1). In South Africa, the literacy problem is typified by shortfalls in reading and writing achievement (Fleisch 2008; Mojapelo 2023; Spaul & Pretorius 2019; Yafele 2021, 2024). According to a Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study report, less than one in five (19%) of South Africa's Grade 4 learners were able to read for sense in any language in 2021; reading and literacy scores fell to 288 in 2021 from 320 points in 2016 (Roux, Van Staden & Tshele 2023). The global average is 500 points.

Reading is, nonetheless, the cornerstone of learning and a pathway to knowledge acquisition with benefits beyond acquiring text content knowledge, developing reading ability and a positive reading attitude. Spaul, Pretorius and Mohohlwane (2020:1) argue that reading is the mother of all other skills, with many rewards. It stimulates thinking creatively, feeds inquiring minds and betters individuals' learning abilities, sharpening critical thinking, problem-solving skills, intellectual development, and academic excellence. Reading competence catalyses nations' sustainable social and economic development (Wema 2018). Literacy for success requires children

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to form good book-reading habits and practices – or a *reading culture* – which many households in South Africa lack, and which Ferreira (2017) claims is extremely low in South Africa. This intervention addresses this lack of *reading culture* (a contested term in South African literacy discussions, elaborated on and explained in the literature review) by developing it for pre-teens using reading play dates.

Poor reading culture is often linked to low literacy performance (Ferreira 2017). A fragile or non-existent reading culture has many interrelated causes, from increased teacher workloads to overcrowded classrooms (Van Tonder & Fourie 2015). Some previous research (e.g. Jabbar, Mahmood & Warraich 2021; Mojapelo 2023; Wema 2018) shows that reading culture is important for national development, but it tends to be hampered by poor infrastructure, higher illiteracy rates, and meagre resources, including a lack of reading materials common in African countries (Maja & Motseke 2022; Naidoo, Reddy & Dorasamy 2014). Other researchers have pinpointed language barriers, highlighting that many multilingual students of Africa find reading and comprehending texts in English complex and not so pleasurable, and they fail to read well (Makalela 2015; Yafele 2021).

Significantly, the ‘Matthew Effect’, a social science concept that can apply to literacy, explains the regression in reading achievement and the associated poor reading culture that haunts South Africa. The Matthew Effect (see Hoover & Tunmer 2022; Locher & Pfof 2020; Pretorius & Currin 2010) refers to the conception that children who do poorly in reading and writing early on in life will dislike reading, adversely affecting their reading ability, culture and achievement, unlike those who start well. Hence, the downward trend persists until or unless intervention is implemented. When children learn to read well early, they have better general knowledge, expand their vocabulary and become more fluent, ensuring reading strength and a reading life. This study tries to reduce regressive Matthew Effects by addressing reading culture deficiencies early through a home-based, fun, reading-oriented play date intervention.

Research on cultivating reading habits early for success in South Africa is broad (e.g. Fleisch 2008; Meiklejohn et al. 2021; Pretorius et al. 2016; Spaul & Pretorius 2019) and addresses the country’s literacy crisis by focusing on early childhood reading exposure, interventions, parental involvement, culturally relevant materials, teacher training, and community-based initiatives to make reading accessible and engaging, particularly in disadvantaged areas. However, this research has focused mainly on the role of educators, schools, and other stakeholders, leaving a gap in understanding the impact of play and friendships intertwined with home contexts, parents, or communities on reading practices.

The current study addresses this gap, focusing on intervention harnessing play and relationship dynamics in home spaces to foster reading culture. The study postulates that play dates are viable and suitable for cultivating a healthy reading

culture, motivating pre-teens to read, achieving reading success, and fostering a reading culture. After investigating the efficacy and value of play-dating strategies in reading development within home spaces, the enquiry hoped to prove this postulation. The study consolidates reading literacy research seeking solutions to the reading crisis in South Africa, seeking answers as to whether play dates enhance reading and its culture.

The research questions were:

- How can play dates aid pre-teen children in developing a healthy reading culture for reading success?
- To what extent is play-dating a practical approach for developing the reading culture of pre-teen children?

Theoretical framework

The research embraced play forms of reading play date activities involving parents to cultivate reading among 9–12-year-olds. The notion of play within friendships framed around sociocultural theory guided the study. Sociocultural scholarship argues that children yearn for learning opportunities that may provide precious friendships. This study employs play-social-fun strategies to foster a reading culture among friends and offers the participants opportunities to learn and appreciate reading within joyful, friendly, unconstrained, and safe surroundings (Loizou & Trawick-Smith 2022).

Play dates became avenues for developing reading culture among pre-teens, embedding play and sociocultural theories within reading-nurturing activities. According to sociocultural theory (Hedges 2021; Rogoff 1993; Vygotsky 1978), children play and learn by means of their exchanges and experiences with other people and sources in their natural environment. They learn through play, interactions, and contact, discover the world, and grow. According to Vygotsky (1978), the Zone of Proximal Development is created during play, wherein children participate actively in social contacts (Henricks 2020), resolve reading difficulties with friends and peers (as in play dates), and create fresh knowledge by means of help from others in the Zone of Proximal Development. Play and fun in the study aid in learning reading culture or habits via social interaction and engagement with society partners. Play date reading activities comprised fun storytelling, quizzes and games. They catalysed, ignited, and promoted reading culture development by means of children’s social interaction, scaffolding reading practices and habits. Engaging in fun literacy activities facilitated reading development among peers. International play date research emphasises the holistic growth of children but hardly reading or literacy development as attempted in the current study.

Literature review

Reading culture

Reading culture and what it means are problematic in South Africa. Biesman-Simons (2021:2) claims that government officials have used the term’s vagueness as a subterfuge to

cover up their inability to address literacy problems. She argues that the government conveniently hides behind the term's nebulosity to escape reading failure accountability and avoid addressing the debacle, hiding behind deliberately obscure terminologies like reading culture.

Other scholars (e.g. Morse, Polzer & Huston 2024:3) challenge the conventional understanding of reading culture as traditional book-based reading, arguing that various reading cultures intersect and are multiple, covering traditional books, digital, and other resources. Multilingualism, the digitalisation of communication among youth, and everyday practices such as work, study, income, and even religion are also said to influence reading cultures, viewed as multifaceted, with varied overlaps of reading purpose, habits, volumes, depth, motivation, identity, and access. Reading cultures become complex social practices that differ depending on the context and drivers for reading and text interactions.

In the current study, reading culture is associated with exposure to physical texts to improve vocabulary, comprehension, and writing skills. The intervention involves home-based and book-based reading and children's interactions with physical texts, championing home environments where physical books are actively supported and valued as sources of printed joy and learning. The research involves a reading culture of friends and family, library visits, and book-club-like play dates, bringing children together to review and share their encounters with physical books. It entails ongoing, pleasurable, regular book-based reading, book access, book modelling, talk, and enjoyment, with consistent, intentional, and conscious reading patterns as part of an individual's life activity (Bharuthram 2017). It refers to book-reading habits, practices, and values within families supporting learning. Wema (2018) asserts that reading culture strengthens if cultivated at a young age at home.

South African research on home-reading environments stresses the importance of parental involvement and support in home-developed literacy, nurturing reading, engaging in reading activities with children, and providing reading materials and books. The research (e.g. Combrinck, Van Staden & Roux 2014; Cozett & Condy 2016; Sibanda & Kajee 2019; Le Roux 2020) links early home literacy activities with reading development and achievement and identifies the home as a space where book literacies develop. It highlights that a solid reading foundation provided by the immediate family of the children is crucial for reading success (Cozett & Condy 2016). A cultural background or family that values and assists with the written word is seen as important for reading success. According to Lukhele (2013), families who support reading habits critically cultivate positive reading mindsets. However, the literature is thin on identifying and promoting practical home strategies that meaningfully expose children to texts and a healthy reading culture in home contexts.

Literacy experts internationally have underscored the significance of book and home-based reading culture since the eighties. Collier (1989) maintained that extensive reading positively affects reading ability and academic performance. The consensus is that the lack of a home-grown, parent-involved reading culture correlates with deteriorating reading, literacy, and academic rates. Such primarily Western research (e.g. Henderson & Berla 1994; Shute et al. 2011) has demonstrated proof of solid links between parental involvement and increased academic and literacy success. Henderson and Berla (1994) argue that a home context that aids literacy is more significant to student education and literacy development and success than the education level of a family, income or other factors. This study postulated that if children develop reading and reading culture in home spaces, they have more prospects of successfully reading well in school and other contexts.

Most local and global south research has thus far focused on reading culture's connectedness to high school and university academic achievement. Additionally, library infrastructure versus reading culture is a topic that has also attracted researchers on the African continent, spanning countries such as Nigeria, Uganda and Tanzania (e.g. Appiah, Kwaah & Yebowaah 2023; Moyi & Galadima 2020; Wema 2018), and also in Asia (e.g. Abang Yusof 2021).

Several non-governmental organisations and initiatives have been promoting reading literacy and getting stories into South African homes. Book Dash is an example. According to its website, it creates and distributes free, high-quality young children's books. Partner organisations such as Read to Rise, Nal'ibali, Room to Read, LITASA, The Shine Centre, Wordworks, and more have focused on home literacy, providing access to books, fostering a love of reading, and supporting early childhood literacy development. The current study shares a similar agenda for a thriving book and home-reading culture in South Africa but uses play dates guided by parental literacy champions. Cekiso et al. (2022) have advocated empowering parental figures to support early childhood literacy. This study experiments with play dates to develop a framework for parents to support household reading cultures. Fleisch (2008) recommends creating positive reading habits and attitudes in children, promoting reading intent and persistence. This study follows that recommendation and what Mathewson (2004) refers to as generating the 'intention to read or continue reading'.

Play-oriented learning harnessed for reading culture development

The study harnessed play-inclined strategies for reading. Research supports play's educational and developmental advantages. Various studies (e.g. Pyle & Danniels 2017; Taylor & Boyer 2020) increasingly acknowledge that the lack of play in learning contexts presents challenges and that play needs to be supported using developmentally appropriate practices. Garvis, Keary and McCallum (2024), Pyle and Danniels (2017), and Vogt et al. (2018) emphasise the benefits

of educational, socio-fun play for children, indicating that a rigid teacher/adult-authority-oriented learning approach is undesirable, depriving children of social fun in an educational setting, which harms their development. The play-to-learn scholarship identifies two forms of play-based learning: guided and unrestrained. In unrestrained play, children pilot play activity (Pyle & Danniels 2017). Guided play, conversely, happens when a grown-up organises or leads the play-based learning activity to achieve a particular learning goal. Zosh et al. (2018) and Skene et al. (2022) explain play as ranging from guided to free play. The current research was influenced by literature on guided play forms, but the children participated in planning and activity content.

According to the literature (e.g. Garvis et al. 2024; Nilsson, Ferholt & Lecusay 2018), substantial emotional and social growth affords pre-teens an ever-increasing sense of independence. It propels them to prioritise friendships and the play world outside their family. They yearn for greater involvement in friendships and extra-curricular activities (Dos Reis Livero et al. 2021), all of which fed into the concept of reading play dates.

Play dates

Little is known about the value of play in play date literacy development, guided by parents within home contexts. International (mainly global north) literature on play dates and child development involves youngsters in self-directed free play with peers while learning. Such scholarship is almost missing in South Africa. Play dates, defined by Lacey, Banerjee and Lester (2023) as pre-planned social interaction in home settings, have become important learning and playing environments for Western children. Lacey et al. (2023) contend that play dates positively influence children's social and emotional development. For Raulston, Ousley and Gilhuber (2023), play dates are essential for socio-emotional development. They present prospects for discussion, understanding, friendship growth, relationship rehearsals and play in home locations (Raulston et al. 2023:1; eds. Nicholson & Wisneski 2019). The current study intertwines play dates and reading development; hence, the term reading play date.

Exploratory interactions

Exploratory interactions in collaborative text appreciation during reading sessions tackled text understanding for full book enjoyment. They encouraged critical thinking, increasing intrinsic motivation for reading. The paper examines how peer interaction in fun reading activities could promote reading learning and literacy culture growth. For Boyd, Vasquez and Monaco (2024), 'exploratory' interaction depicts how children go into or explore ideas via chat, for example, to resolve specific issues in peer discussion and explore ideas themselves. The concept is applied to reading-related discussions in the research. Boyd et al. (2024) show how young learners, through interactions and discussions,

are rewriting their thinking and aiding each other. Majorano et al. (2022) describe how, in chatting, children explore '...questioning, encouraging, surmising, challenging, extending and so on', which were encouraged during the reading play dates.

Research methods and design

The qualitative research explores the workability of play activities for cultivating a reading culture in home contexts and stimulating interest in reading among community children. It uses ethnographic fieldnotes, observation, and individual and focus-group interviews to evaluate the viability of using reading play dates to develop healthy reading cultures and habits for reading success in children. The postulation was that play dates built around play and fun activities were a viable strategy to inculcate reading culture in home-community contexts.

Population and sampling

A sample is a subgroup that typifies or represents the research's intended population (Polit & Beck 2004). The study's sample typified still impressionable pre-teens who had met at the local community school and knew each other. Nine- to 12-year-old primary school children were purposively sampled because, at this age, children are still growing cognitively and are absorbing knowledge, experiences, and emotions at a high rate (Güroğlu 2022; Jiang et al. 2023). It is when their personalities, values, and abilities are receptive to reading culture.

The participants comprised five girls and their parent volunteers from a middle-class community. Participant-parents, including the researcher, were conveniently members of the same community whose children met at school (See Tables 1a and 1b). This convenience allowed for ethnographic research, as they all stayed in one community and were accessible to each other.

Strauss and Bipath (2020) state that home literacy practices link to reading development; children learn reading as modelled and mirrored in their everyday lives by parents' reading and writing. The parents and children participants were not probed about their home literacy practices. It is unknown whether the parents read for enjoyment and modelled it. No conscious or deliberate reading modelling was reported. The current reading culture intervention hoped to initiate or further nurture home literacy practices,

TABLE 1a: Child-participant's information and home literacy practices.

Identifier (Child)	Gender	Age	Grade	Reading library and/or book source
C-A	F	10	5	Local library or school library
C-B	F	10	5	Local library or school library
C-C	F	10	5	Family-cousin library and/or school library
C-D	F	12	6	Local library and/or school library
C-E	F	9	4	Local library

F, female.

wherein parents participated, read for pleasure, and modelled this to their children.

Roles of research participants

The researcher conducted the research as a participant observer and was acutely aware of potential researcher bias limitations throughout the study, but needed to play the role of a literacy champion. Apart from being a parent and the overall literacy champion (Moreillon 2018) in the project, he was also an observing researcher. Literacy champions are self-led community or family literacy leaders (Moreillon 2018) and advocates of early literacy and increased literacy skills awareness. The researcher identified as a literacy champion and immersed himself in a literacy-fostering community project while observing the participants' behaviours, interactions, and practices. This research method (despite the mentioned inescapable limitations) was valuable for the study, as it aimed to understand the

experiences of children and their parents or groups in reading literacy and cultural development in social contexts (eds. Denzin & Lincoln 2011). The researcher's flexible participation levels ranged from non-participatory (the weakest participation) to complete participation, chairing reading sessions – as a literacy champion – and leading some group activities (the most powerful, intensive participation). The aim, at the expense of researcher bias, was to gain early literacy understanding from an 'insider' perspective (eds. Denzin & Lincoln 2011).

Parent and host-parent's role: The parents in the study served as reading champions, too, in their families and the intervention, helping grow the children as avid readers and lifelong inquirers (Moreillon 2018). They collaborated with the researcher (a literacy expert) to infuse opportunities for their children to develop and improve literacies they needed to be successful readers (see Table 2). They played leader and instructional partner roles in the reading intervention, bringing and sharing their unique reading experiences and skills. They became 'literacy learning leaders' (Moreillon 2021:22–23) – champions who promote reading culture. They supported the 'integration of the children into independent reading' (Moreillon 2021:23). The parents needed only to tap into their children's creative capital and allow exploratory interactions in reading tasks (Majorano et al. 2022). They also had to enrol their children in a local library.

TABLE 1b: Parent-participant's socio-demographic information.

Identifier (Parent)	Gender	Age	Occupation
P-A	F	40	Primary caregiver is stay-at-home-parent
P-B	F	55	Working parent
P-C	M	49	Working parent
P-D	M	47	Working parent
P-E	F	45	Working parent

F, female; M, male.

TABLE 2: Summary of the specific roles of research participants.

Parent role – activities	Child role	Researcher and/or parent role
Enrol children at the local library – apply for a library card for the child. The parent is also a reading champion apprentice or trainee.	Get books from the library (of their choice) and read them. Report back on their readings in book and/or reading discussions.	The researcher was a parent and played the parent role, but ultimately, was the reading champion and trainer for the reading project. The researchers' role does not conflict with other parents, but all share the goal of improving the community and their children's reading.
Facilitate library visits to return and borrow books every three weeks. Buy books if they can or start building and maintaining a home library. Visit bookshops. Talk to their children about their reading journeys – what children are reading in preparation for our reading dates – whenever they can. Attend 'play date' sessions arranged by others, where possible, and participate in Group debates, discussions and feedback sessions on activities.	Partake in planned activities, for example, quizzes, reading games, storytelling around books read, worksheet fun exercises on themes, main ideas, and inferences of texts. Reading activities are geared for children to love reading. Material is age-appropriate, fun and sourced from reading and literacy education websites, for example, Education.com. The researcher has already compiled tasks and worksheets from which hosting parents can choose.	Apart from being a parent and the overall literacy champion mentoring, guiding and fuelling all participants in literacy culture development, he is also a participant observer. Hence, the researcher immerses himself in this particular community of parents and/or children in a literacy-fostering research project, observing the participants' behaviours, interactions, and practices. This research method is valuable for the research project that seeks to understand the experiences of children and their parents or groups in a reading literacy and culture development social context.
Co-reading and discussing books. Participate equally in all children's reading activities, tasks, and exercises. They become reading partners and talk about their reading experiences, too.	Examples of some of the worksheet activities (sourced from educational sites) to improve reading understanding, joy and confidence and foster reading culture include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading between-the-lines exercises sourced from Education.com • Book casting call exercises (education.com) • Quizzes on themes and main ideas in fiction texts (Education.com) 	Monitor and track the child's reading progress, consistency, and regularity. Ask the child to record every book read every three weeks (keep a reading log).
Host reading play date on behalf of their child (only one play date event for each parent). The researcher provided them with age-appropriate worksheets from which to choose. These were sourced from: homeschooling and reading literacy websites. (e.g. Education.com). Parents consulted with the researcher for hosting ideas.	-	-
As a host: prepare activities with the assistance of local literacy champions, where available, provide lunch, and refreshments and venue.	-	-
Chair, moderate, and partake in discussions during feedback sessions on reading worksheets. Play teacher and/or pupil role during sessions.	-	-

Children's role: The children proposed and participated in planned activities, for example, quizzes, reading games, storytelling around books they had read, worksheet fun exercises on themes, main ideas, and inferences of texts. Reading activities were geared to get children to practise pleasure reading. The material was age-appropriate, suggested by participants, fun and sourced from reading and literacy education websites, such as Education.com. The researcher compiled tasks and worksheets for hosting parents, which were meant to improve reading comprehension, joy, confidence, and culture.

Participatory research approach

The researcher adopted the children's play-dating concept for reading intervention, and the children helped with project development and implementation, allowing them to propose reading activities aligned with their needs. They provided input on what specific reading fun, gamely activities they believed were most effective and relevant. In the initial meeting and during the intervention, all participants discussed as a team and decided on activities that would be fun while incorporating book reading. This participatory research approach (Hall, Gaved & Sargent 2021; Vaughn & Jacquez 2020) helped to establish trust and rapport, increased the children's motivation to participate actively, and provided them with a voice and agency to influence the direction of the research, increasing their engagement, ownership and empowerment in the research project.

Devising a play date reading model

In collaboration with participants, the researcher conceived a play date reading enculturation model for literacy development within home environments, harnessing friendship ties and play in home contexts (see Figure 1).

The model could work with any partnership of families. It needs play date space and discursive use of opportunities offered by friendship affinities, in a parent-led in-home setting.

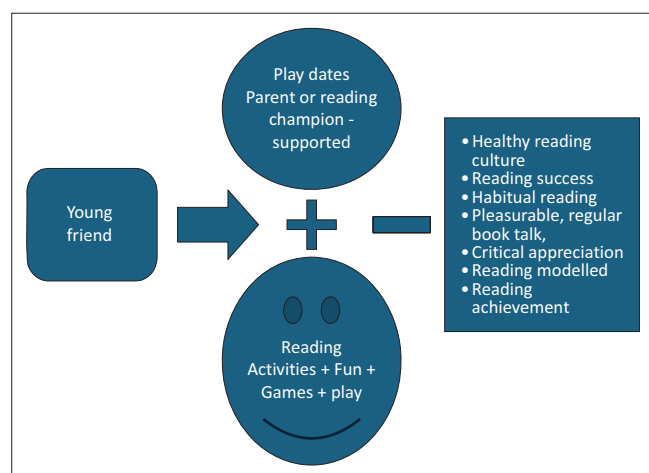


FIGURE 1: Play date reading enculturation model.

Qualitative data collection techniques: Play date strategies and activities

Play-based strategies and activities for play dates to foster reading culture included the following:

- Inferencing game quizzes: fun challenges based on fiction and non-fiction texts. Participants attempted quizzes individually, and responses were discussed communally. Group feedback using exploratory interactions. Readers became detectives of texts in *read-between-the-lines* exercises. Role-played a sleuth and worked out hidden parts of the story or texts. The quiz exercises challenged the children to interpret, understand and enjoy both fictional and non-fictional texts.
- Exercises and activities were selected with fun in mind and for fun value, too, or the potential to create a fun experience.
- Drawing and writing about the story.
- Getting questions about a book that was read.
- Doing a speech about a story and/or non-fiction text that was read.
- Reading selected (most exciting parts) of texts or stories to each other.
- Giving a speech based on the lessons or morals of the story.
- Character casting: children pretend to make a movie or play of the book they have read, and need to cast actors for it. They write and talk about what the actors should look like, their personalities and give character descriptions.
- Reading texts and sharing (retelling dramatically) the text content.
- Explaining the content of the text.

These activities were proposed by and came from the participants themselves at the beginning of the project.

All the play date activities ran over six weekends and were hosted at one of the children's homes. Host-parents, assisted by the researcher, took charge of the programme. Participants met on Saturdays between 11:00 and 16:00 for six weekends and followed a pre-planned programme. The methodological aspiration was for the reading-oriented play date strategies to be replicated within the same framework, possibly using different techniques by other willing parent sets.

Ethnographic field notes, observation and interviews

Reading-oriented play date aspects were captured in ethnographic field notes, observation, interviews, and reflective reports. These enabled the researcher to concentrate precisely on participants and research relevant activities and, therefore, to conduct a deep and detailed inquiry. Play date sessions were recorded surreptitiously to maintain a natural feel, reducing the Hawthorne effect, or observer bias (Perera 2023) – a noted research limitation. Play is an innate competence for children (Zosh et al. 2018) and a naturally

'wired' norm captured in text-reading activities of the ethnographic 'field' notes (Lankshear & Knobel 2004). The methods explored the reading play date experiences to evaluate 'what participants say and do' (Gillham 2000:10), allowing one to understand the meaning of any happenings.

Data analysis

The observation, interview data transcripts and reflective reports were coded inductively (Vears & Gillam 2022). All participants were South African. The children (represented as C-A, C-B, C-C, C-D and C-E, cf Table 1) were directly involved in the reading play dates for reading and culture intervention. All participants are African middle-class attending an English-medium, former Model C school. English was the preferred language of the participants during the intervention. Thematic analysis was used to identify emerging trends, themes, and sub-themes supported by data.

Ethical considerations

The respondents signed a consent form to voluntarily participate in the research. The parents permitted their children to participate and filled in consent forms for the minors. The minors were 9 to 12 years old and cognitively able, therefore they also gave assent. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg, Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee on 18 November 2024. The ethical clearance number is REC-01-784-2024.

Results and discussion

The study reveals the viability and value of reading play dates for fostering a reading culture. Five themes (and sub-themes) from the investigation are presented, demonstrated, analysed, interpreted and discussed:

- Interactive activities for comprehension, confidence, and sustained reading.
- Scaffolding interactions in the Zone of Proximal Development for mutual reading socialisation.
- New beginnings: Reading pleasure, critical thinking, book-talk, analysis.
- The parental factor.
- Reading play date accomplishments: reading enjoyment that emerged from the data included *positive spinoffs* (a parent's ethnographic field notes, and *positive reviews* in the study's aftermath).

Interactive activities for comprehension, confidence, and sustained reading

The intervention administered various fun-induced reading exercises and quizzes to develop text-reading and text-theme understanding, inference skills, reading joy, and confidence. The aim was for participants to enjoy reading. Quizzes generated robust feedback discussions where participants aided peers with text appreciation.

Excerpts 1 and 2 (see Figure 2 and 3) are prototypical examples of the participants' collated written responses to inference quizzes meant to help readers understand the implications of texts and to improve analytical thinking and literacy competencies.

Excerpt 1 (Figure 2) is a collage of participants C-A, C-B, C-D, and C-E's written responses to two inference quizzes on text characters *Mary-Ellen* and *Lucy*.

Participants C-C and C-D's responses inferring *Mary Ellen* is a 'dog' are spot-on and later justified during interactive feedback discussions:

'Only a dog sniffs and wags its tail in excitement.' (C-D)

Participant C-E wrongly identifies the text character *Mary-Ellen* as not a 'dog' as expected, but a 'girl' and concedes their misinterpretations in interactions with their play friends:

'I can see now. You guys are correct and have the best and correct answers.' (C-E)

Exemplified interactions in inferencing-skills activities lead to greater text comprehension and confidence to continue reading – a finding supported by Mitra (2019) and Gani, Yusuf and Susiani (2016). Peer interactions and discussions encouraged active reading engagement, text appreciation, and the development of reading friendships.

In the *Lucy* character inference quiz, Participants C-B and C-D correctly infer that *Lucy* is a 'cat' because, as justified in

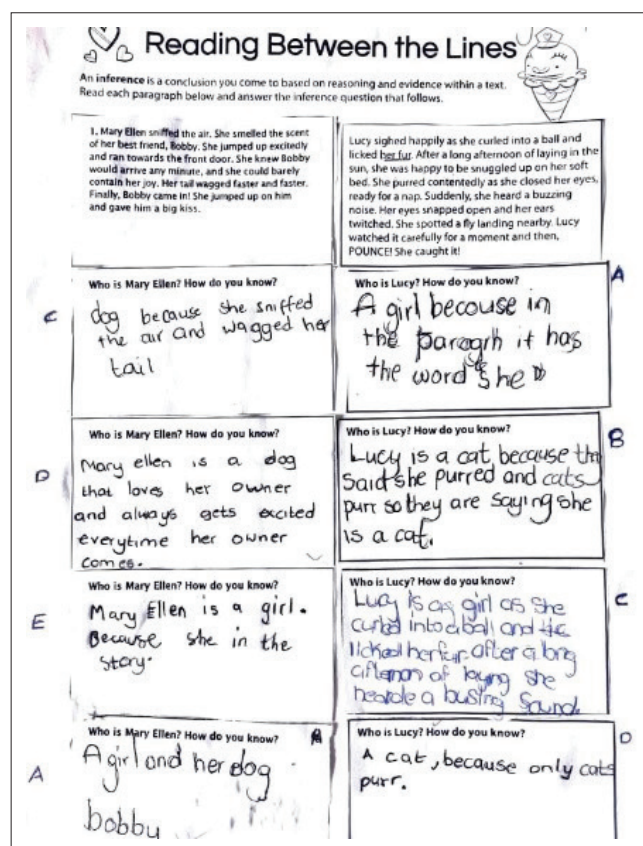


FIGURE 2: Excerpt 1 Collage.

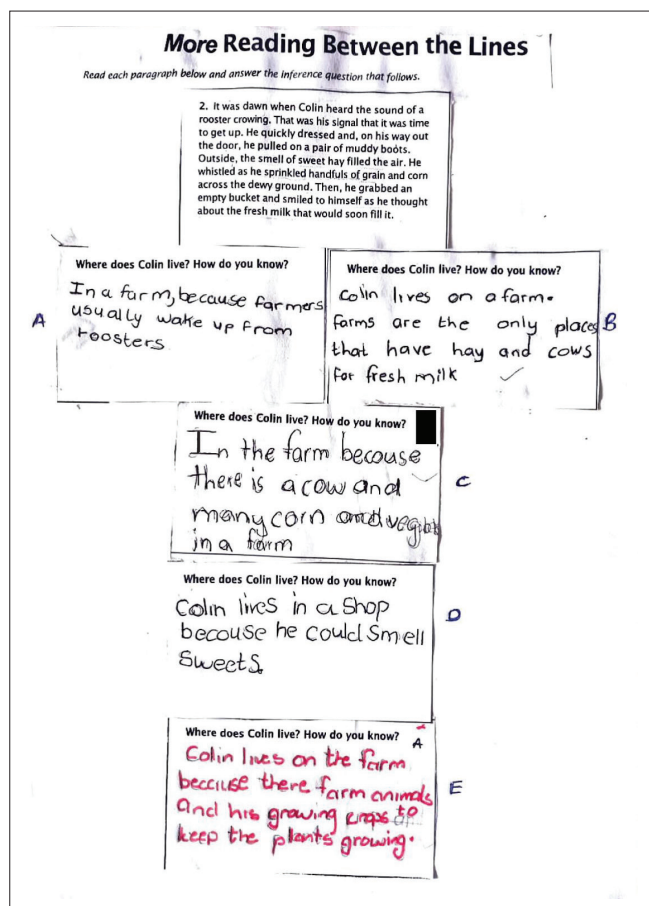


FIGURE 3: Excerpt 2 Collage.

lively debate later, 'a cat purrs'. Participants C-A and C-C self-correct their misunderstandings during discussions:

'I did not know the meaning of purr. Now I know and agree. Lucy is a cat!' (C-A)

The participants had fun interrelating and evaluating text meanings, interpretations and inferences as friends on a play date. It promoted deep collective socialisation into reading skills, confidence and pleasure. Expressive exchanges and probing chat indexed intense reading engagements.

Scaffolding interactions in the zone of proximal development for shared reading socialisation

In Excerpt 2, another collage of written inference responses on where text character *Colin* lives, most participants correctly identified the place of residence as a *farm*. Participant C-D gets it wrong. She gets mediated to the correct interpretation by the other participants in the discussion's zone of proximal development.

The participants enjoy the mental gymnastics in peer rationalisations of these collage-based responses. They justify that 'only at a farm' do we find 'roosters', 'cows', 'plants', and 'hay', as indicated in their texts. Participant C-D's incorrect 'sweets shop' inference is modified in discussions:

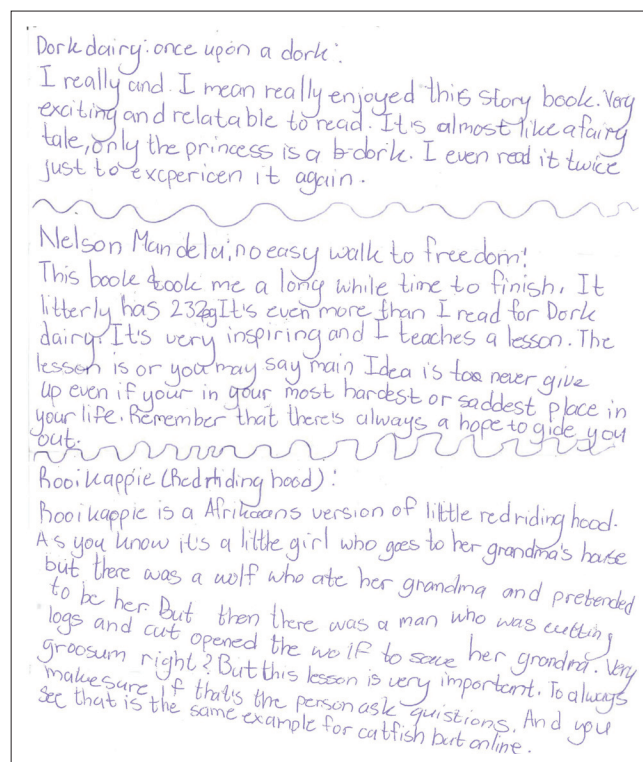


FIGURE 4: Excerpt 3 reflective book review.

'I now realise I was reading, not paying proper attention to all the words. I only paid attention to the word "sweet" and thought it's a sweets shop. It is a farm! I now understand!' (C-D)

Interactive and enjoyable text debates among friends in the zone of proximal development increased the children's motivation and confidence, improving reading skills, for example, inferencing, for a sustainable reading culture and continued independent reading for pleasure and learning. This finding is consistent with the studies by Mustakimah (2023) and Zhang (2023) that show that children's interactions in the zone of proximal development help scaffold collective learning. Child affiliates utilised mediational interaction to scaffold the acquisition of reading approaches as a socially constructed process (Mustakimah 2023). The participants guided each other through fun reading socialisation; no one was left behind. They visibly laughed and smiled. Their nonverbal communication indicated reading excitement, engagement and learning (Chaudhry 2024).

New beginnings: Reading pleasure, critical thinking, book-talk, analysis

Excerpt 3 (see Figure 4) is a reflective book review activity by Participant C-A:

The participants reviewed books they had read, actively engaging with the information by evaluating, summarising, paraphrasing and sharing storybook information.

The result is confident young readers, capable of writing salient book reviews and engaging in personal book-talk, for example:

'I really, and I mean really, enjoyed this book...I even read it twice just to experience it again.' (C-A)

Play dates allowed book discussion, promoting reading for pleasure and shared reading encounters, which, according to Parkes (2000), is essential in any literacy programme. The critical reviews align with Oxley and McGeown's (2023) understanding of enacting and optimising children's reading experiences and outcomes. The children demonstrated critical reading mastery and the intrinsic motivation to continue reading (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt 2021). Their reviews indicate critical information digestion (Mori 2018) and growing confidence in reading.

The parental factor

Another emerging theme is that parents' involvement as literacy champions is crucial. Participants C-A and C-B credit their parents as vital in making their reading journeys practical, routine and enjoyable and acknowledges:

'... [M]y parents supported me by taking me to the library to get books ... and making a book club.' (C-A)

A similar response was uttered:

'I have received support from my parents, who are taking me to get and return the books.' (C-B)

This finding confirms Breeze and Halbach's (2024:693) conclusions that parents contribute primarily to children's literacy development, stimulating literacy competencies during their early years. Children depend on parental support. Goodall and Montgomery (2023) add that action-oriented, parent-driven reading support is desirable. Mojapelo (2023:9) also reminds us that teachers alone cannot teach learners to read and write; parents have a role.

Reading play date accomplishments

The children valued the play date literacy enculturation intervention and developed strategies for appreciating fictional stories while having fun.

One child declared:

'The book club was a success. I've read fascinating books. I got to see my friends, and it was educational. I want it. I wish it never ended.' (C-C)

Play-dating reading enculturation modalities proved convenient and child-centred, and the children became self-directed in reading with positive evaluations:

'It went well because we enjoyed ourselves. We read and answered questions and had lots of fun while doing it.' (C-A)

'I now have a better understanding of books that I read than before.' (C-D)

'It was exciting and funny. I enjoyed the fun activities and answering all the fun questions on the worksheets.' (C-B)

James (2020) also endorses play-centred learning among friends. One host parent corroborates:

'The children had fun. They want it again next week. They have learnt to read correctly with understanding and should be able to apply this to all future readings of storybooks. They looked happy!.' (C-A)

The interview data confirms Schmidt (2020), who stresses reading as pleasure and fun. Play dates present reading as fun and play to children, not as a chore or duty.

Reading enjoyment emerging in the data

The theme of developing reading joy emerges in ethnographic field notes and reflective reports during and in the aftermath of the initiative. Figure 5 shows parent-participants' field notes on Participant C-A's reading progress during the final week of the reading play dates.

The initiative's reading experiences here transformed the reading personality of the young reader under discussion. She becomes a self-assured and self-reliant reader, taking personal responsibility and agency for her reading and is conscious of library deadlines. She has established a reading routine (on 'Tuesday... and... Thursday') and is 'animated', excited, and keen about the reading experiences. She shows her parent her capability to continue her reading journey independently. Play dates, it seems, can model literacy practice in playful, informal manners (Berns 2016:138). Participant C-A's parent ethnographic fieldnotes on their reading progress indicate that the child exerts agency in home-based book-reading situations initiated by play dates:

'She does not have specific times to read but makes sure she finishes reading all the books before the due return date.' (P-A)

This manifestation of volitional reading – done of one's free will – is consistent with Gavora's (2022) findings of children developing agency in shared-book-reading scenarios by means of partnership activities (McNulty 2014:494). She appears excited, reads regularly, and gradually makes these practices part of her life. The evidence indexes beginnings and reinforcements of reading practices or 'emergent' literacy (Wasik & Hermann 2004:6).

Monday morning - 9 Aug – I started a conversation with my daughter about her reading and asked her questions about her reading this week. She says she is reading an **exciting** storybook about a superhero flying owl with magical powers who flies around helping people, fighting evil, and doing good for helping. She started reading the book on Tuesday, then again on Thursday, and she is almost finished. She has five pages to go. She says she **does not have specific times** to read but makes sure she finishes reading all the books before the due date. She reads the three borrowed books in three weeks. She thinks the main themes are that helping people is a good thing and that there is a fight between good and evil. (She was **very animated** when narrating a summary of **her exciting** magical story with a superhero) She is looking forward to returning the book next week **on THURSDAY** (she **knows when to return books**, so I do not need to remember anymore. **She constantly reminds me when it is time to revisit the library**).

FIGURE 5: Positive spinoffs: A parent's ethnographic field notes.

Positive reviews in the study's aftermath

What began in the six week stint continued in homes. Almost a year later, participant-children were probed about play date enduring takeaways. They wrote reflectively and positively about the continuing effect of the intervention and their continuing reading journeys.

In both reflective reports (Figures 6 and 7), library visits continued. Participant C-A reports her takeaway as 'reading more' and 'liking to read'. She now finds, 'reading [interesting] and [entertaining]' and reads for pleasure during her free time. Participant C-B now understands the purpose of her reading and has been 'enjoying' it. For her, pleasure reading means 'understanding the moral of the story', 'story', 'main characters', and 'main idea'. Neaum (2012:116) regards such home-based instances when children understand the purposes of literacy as beginning reading journeys. Wasik and Hermann (2004:6) describe it as 'early literacy'. For le Roux (2020), it is the beginning of literacy knowledge and habits, including awareness of the purposes of literacy.

Limitations

This article acknowledges limitations. Firstly, the researcher was a participant, raising possible researcher bias issues. There are generalisability limitations because of the small sample size and its homogeneity. There may be weak

triangulation in data collection or interpretation, and scantiness of information about the social context of this community, including the school and library, and how that might influence reading practices in these families, as expected from ethnographic research. The sample could have been broader; not only girls who were school friends. However, play dates in small-scale experimental explorations work best with friends or familiar individuals, not strangers (Raulston et al. 2020).

There may also be criticisms that the parent-led reading group ended after only six weeks, which is a limited time to develop a culture of reading for pleasure. Still, this was a small-scale study in both participants and duration. It was more of a pilot study aimed at rehearsing and gathering initial insights into the feasibility, protocol and design of a larger, more comprehensive study and providing proof of concept (Molway et al. 2019:25) of reading play dates for promoting reading culture. The project seemingly initiated participants into reading practices or encouraged further reading development. It placed participants on progressive and positive reading trajectories, showing that parents can also play a role in addressing South African reading problems. Therefore, irrespective of the discussed limitations, the small-scale study yielded valuable data (Molway et al. 2019:25). It confirmed original postulations and captured significant insights on supporting a reading culture in early childhood using play in home contexts.

Conclusion

This study intertwines parents developing reading literacy in childhood and fun-play-oriented reading strategies in home contexts. This combination can promote the development of a healthy early reading culture. The markers of literacy enculturation in this study entail home-based and parent-involved, consistent, enjoyable, regular book-based reading, book access, and book modelling. Additionally, book-talk and pleasure,

Date 4 April 2025 Name: A

1. The habits that came from reading club were liking to read books more and now I find reading interesting and interesting when I have nothing to do or when I'm finished doing some homework/work I read

2. Reading has been really good since then and really fun reading like the previous books I read

Books
 The with on black berry hill
 The investigators
 The food
 Lily's pecky plant - (reading now)
 Beast Quest - (reading now)

3. The playdates for reading were great and help me gain new vocabulary in the books

and I continued taking books at the library

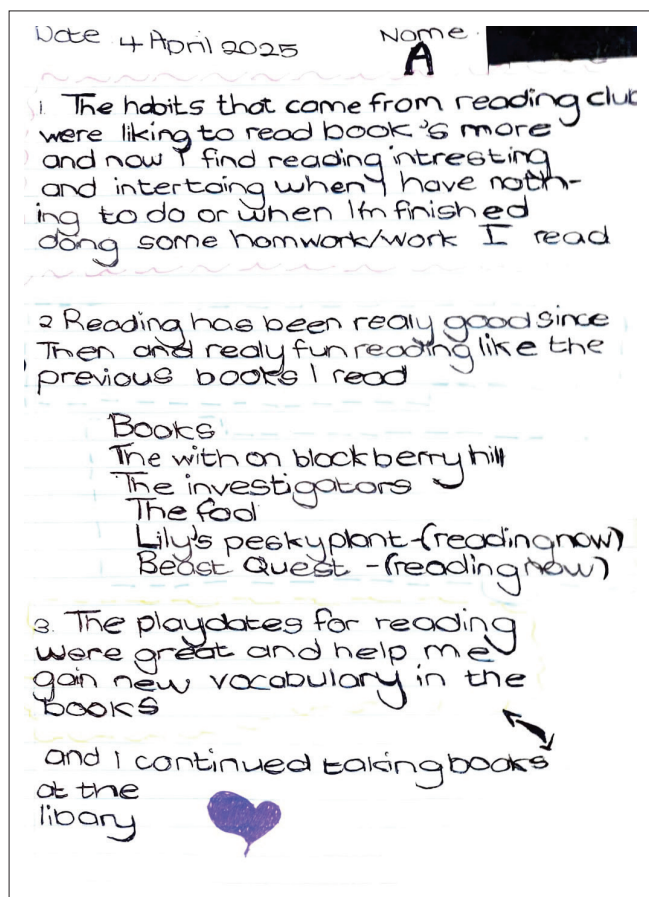


FIGURE 6: Reflective report A.

B

The habits that I have continued from the previous reading club, is that I've aimed to understand the moral of the story, and the main characters in the story, also the main idea.

My reading has been going well so far I've been enjoying it.

date club

- The reading play have been really helpful. It has helped me with my reading and spelling and I have continued getting books from the library.

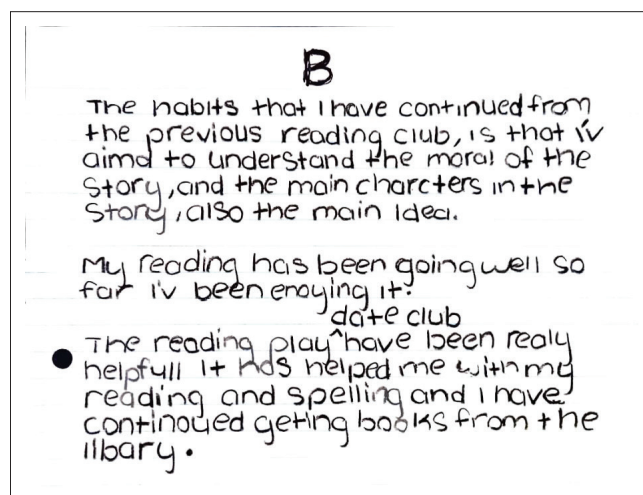


FIGURE 7: Reflective report B.

with constant, planned, and willful reading patterns as part of a child's life activity, are all evident in participants at the end of the intervention. Thus, the study shows gains in enculturation through the reading play date intervention guided by parents. Reading-oriented play dates connected literacy learning and development to everyday home contexts. Reading play dates prove workable and beneficial strategies for fostering lifelong reading joy with educational benefits. These results confirm studies by Raulston et al. (2020, 2023), which asserted that parents can and should support reading literacy development at home.

This study shows the potential of home environments, play, and friendships to positively shape and impact early literacy practices and learning and contribute to educational growth. Future early literacy research needs to be complementary and more extensive in scale, with larger samples. It must explore more possibilities and practical home ways for children to learn and imbibe literacy practices and cultures informally to support the school literacy pedagogies. Further exploration of avenues for family literacy programmes is needed to corroborate literacy learning at school.

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The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contribution

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Data availability

Raw data for the dataset are not publicly or openly available to preserve individuals' privacy under the South African POPIA (*The Protection of Personal Information Act [POPI], Act 4 of 2013*).

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