

# Aliteracy Among Teachers? Investigating the Reading Habits of Elementary and Early Childhood Educators

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**Abstract:** Since the reading habits of both preservice and inservice teachers have been linked to their abilities as reading teachers, aliteracy among teachers is particularly distressing. The purpose of this study was to investigate the amount of leisure time elementary teachers spend reading literature for pleasure. Prekindergarten through sixth grade teachers (N=24) enrolled in a graduate education course logged the minutes they spent engaged in various leisure activities during one week of the summer. Reading literature, defined as the reading of novels, short stories, plays, or poetry in one's spare time, ranged from 0 to 845 minutes. Of the 13 activities investigated, the highest average amount of time was spent watching movies (M=552.92). Reading literature for pleasure had the eighth highest mean (M=123.13). Pairwise comparisons revealed no significant difference ( $t = -.795$ ,  $p < .435$ ) between time spent reading literature and time spent in other non-literature leisure activities. Results or paired samples t-tests indicated that participants spent significantly less time reading newspapers/magazines ( $t = 2.696$ ,  $p < .013$ ) and reading blogs ( $t = 2.783$ ,  $p < .011$ ) and significantly more time watching movies ( $t = -3.287$ ,  $p < .003$ ) than reading literature for pleasure. It appears that lack of motivation may be a factor in participants' decision to read literature for pleasure as opposed to either lack of time or technological distractions.

**Keywords:** *aliteracy, reading, elementary teachers, literacy*

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## 0 Introduction

Early in the 21st century, the world youth literacy rates

rose from 83% to 92% making it higher now than ever before<sup>[1]</sup>. Although literacy is on the rise, a decline in the amount of time adolescence<sup>[2,3]</sup> and adults<sup>[4,5,6]</sup> read for pleasure has become a noted trend in recent years. Aliteracy, merely choosing not to read<sup>[7]</sup>, is particularly distressing among those responsible for promoting the reading abilities and attitudes of future generations. The reading habits of both preservice<sup>[8]</sup> and inservice<sup>[9]</sup> teachers have been linked to their abilities as reading teachers. Teachers who read for pleasure are more likely to implement positive literacy practices in their classroom when compared to those who do not read for pleasure<sup>[10]</sup>. Further, reading motivation has been found to be fostered in classrooms where the teacher serves as a reading model to his or her students<sup>[11]</sup>. Thus, it seems logical that teachers charged with both teaching and motivating youngsters to read should be readers themselves. In fact, Turner, Applegate, and Applegate<sup>[12]</sup> identified a "profound love and respect for the printed word" as one of the crucial qualities for teachers who are to be literacy leaders. The purpose of this study was to investigate the amount of leisure time elementary teachers spend reading literature for pleasure.

## 1 Theoretical framework

### 1.1 Aliteracy defined

In 1978, Mikulecky<sup>[13]</sup> first brought attention to what he believed was an emerging concern among American children and in so doing coined the term "aliteracy." Simply defined, aliteracy refers to an able reader who choose not to read<sup>[5]</sup> creating a form of self-determined illiteracy<sup>[6]</sup>. Good<sup>[7]</sup> notes that it is the exercise of choice that makes the current situation regarding aliteracy different from previous eras of mass illiteracy, when the vast majority of people not reading for pleasure

couldn't do so. In his book *The Dumbest Generation*, Bauerlein<sup>[14]</sup> concludes that many individuals today have adopted an attitude of brazen disregard of books and reading. Schultz<sup>[15]</sup> posits that in an age of information overload with an ever-increasing number of books being published annually the only way to cope is to not read them. Cohen<sup>[5]</sup> cites an increasing amount of screen time devoted to any number of technological devices as contributing to aliteracy today.

Despite these new theories regarding the possible causes of aliteracy, Milulecky's<sup>[13]</sup> initial identification of literacy instruction that presents reading as being mainly about skills as contributing to aliteracy is still being endorsed. The National Reading Research Center (NRRC), which was charged with conducting research on reading instruction appropriate for prekindergarten through 12th grade, emphasizes the "engagement perspective" as a foundational principle of reading instruction designed to develop motivated and strategic readers who use literacy for pleasure and learning<sup>[16]</sup>. Nikolajeva<sup>[17]</sup> clearly distinguishes between teaching a child to read and encouraging the child's appreciation of reading. She states that as opposed to simply becoming a reader that a true reader must be shaped.

## 1.2 Reading for pleasure

Reading serves different purposes, and there is a distinction between academic reading and pleasure reading<sup>[18]</sup>. Reading for pleasure refers to reading that is done of one's own free will anticipating the satisfaction that will be gained from the act of reading. It also refers to reading that having begun at someone else's request is continued as a result of intrinsic interest. Reading for pleasure typically involves materials that reflect individual choice and occurs at a time and place that personally suits<sup>[2]</sup>.

"Pleasure reading helps students to communicate, listen and, most importantly, to express themselves freely"<sup>[19]</sup>. Sullivan<sup>[20,21]</sup> argues that reading is a distinctive activity that develops linguistic ability and wider knowledge to a far greater extent than other cultural activities such as music or going to galleries and museums. Reading for pleasure has been positively linked with favorable reading attitudes and greater self-confidence as a reader<sup>[22]</sup>.

Cunningham and Stanovich<sup>[23]</sup> suggest that the volume of reading is a critical factor in promoting vocabulary acquisition and verbal skills. Spending ample time reading is more fruitful than the time spent learning vocabulary by rote memorization and more motivational

than learning vocabulary in isolation<sup>[24]</sup>. Sullivan and Brown<sup>[25]</sup> found that childhood reading is linked to substantial cognitive progress between the ages of 10 and 16. Children's reading behavior was strongly linked to test scores in mathematics and vocabulary, with the most significant link to vocabulary acquisition. Reading for pleasure is especially beneficial for non-native English speakers, who learn new words and grammar structures in a natural and holistic context when pleasure reading that enhances their personal growth as readers as well as listeners, speakers, and writers<sup>[19]</sup>. Overall, when individuals read for pleasure frequently, "they experience the value of reading as an efferent and aesthetic processes. Thus, they are more likely to read with a sense of purpose, which further supports their developing reading habit"<sup>[26]</sup>.

## 1.3 Purpose and significance

Given the need for teachers who can motivate their students to read for pleasure by doing so themselves, findings from research investigating teachers' reading habits can increase awareness of aliteracy's negative influence and serve as the impetus for effecting change regarding reading literature for pleasure. This study investigated how teachers reported spending their time during one week of their summer. Specifically, prekindergarten through sixth grade teachers enrolled in a graduate education course were asked to log the minutes they spent engaged in various leisure-type activities. The following research questions were investigated:

1. How much leisure time do early childhood and elementary teachers spend reading literature for pleasure?
2. On what leisure activities do early childhood and elementary teachers spend their time?
3. Is there a significant difference between the amount of time early childhood and elementary teachers read literature and engage in other activities?

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Participants

Twenty-four teachers enrolled as graduate students at a large public university in the southeast United States were participants in this study. The university is classified by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools as a Level VI institution and by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as a Doctoral/Research Intensive University. The

participants were all enrolled in a graduate Language Arts methods course required in both the Elementary (Kindergarten-6th grade) and Early Childhood (Preschool-3rd grade) Education Master's degree programs. The participants were selected as a convenience sample of teachers enrolled in the course over two consecutive summer semesters (first summer n=11 and second summer n=13). The participants included 22 females and 2 males. Seventeen (71%) were White; 6 (25%) were Black; and 1 was self-identified as being of Lebanese decent. Seventeen participants (71%) were pursuing a Master's degree in Elementary Education, and 7 participants (29%) were pursuing a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education. Two participants were also pursuing certification as Reading Specialist (Preschool-12th grade). Participants' years of teaching experience ranged from 0 to 13 with the average being 2.40 years [Table 1].

**Table 1 Participant Demographics**

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Experience</b>
1	Female	Lebanese	Elementary	0
2	Female	White	Early Childhood	0
3	Female	White	Elementary	11
4	Female	White	Early Childhood	0
5	Female	White	Early Childhood	3
6	Female	White	Elementary	0
7	Female	White	Elementary	2
8	Female	Black	Elementary	3
9	Female	White	Elementary	0
10	Female	Black	Early Childhood	0
11*	Female	White	Elementary	3
12	Female	White	Elementary	0
13	Female	Black	Elementary	5
14	Female	Black	Elementary	0
15	Female	Black	Elementary	0
16	Male	White	Early Childhood	0
17	Female	White	Elementary	1
18*	Female	White	Elementary	9
19	Male	White	Elementary	4
20	Female	White	Elementary	13
21	Female	White	Early Childhood	0
22	Female	White	Elementary	0
23	Female	Black	Early Childhood	3
24	Female	Black	Elementary	0.5

\*Pursuing Reading Specialist Certification

## 2.2 Data collection and analysis

A survey research design was used to investigate and describe the pleasure reading behaviors of a sample (n=24) of early childhood and elementary teachers. Quantitative data were obtained from a reading log (see Appendix), in which participants recorded the number of minutes they spent on leisure-type activities for a week while enrolled in a summer graduate course. The log was completed during the first week of the course because it was presumed students would have more free time to engage in leisure activities earlier rather than later in the semester. Participants were asked to report the amount of time in minutes spent on identified leisure-type activities over six consecutive days, keeping their logs with them throughout the day to record events as they occurred. The list of leisure-type activities was based on a similar study conducted with preservice teachers<sup>[27]</sup>. The list included: reading literature, reading magazines or newspapers, reading blogs, reading/sending email, Facebook, Twitter/Instagram, Internet search, talking on phone, texting, watching television, watching movies, engaged in a hobby, and other.

For this study, reading literature was defined as the reading of novels, short stories, plays, or poetry in one's spare time that is not for school or work purposes<sup>[27,28]</sup>. There was no distinction made in the level or quality of literature read, and all formats including books, e-readers, and online versions were included. Participants did not record any time spent reading literature that was associated with work, school or other responsibilities, since the purpose was to identify how much time was voluntarily spent reading literature for pleasure. Students totaled the number of minutes spent in leisure-type activities each day and the number of minutes spent on each category for the duration.

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze quantitative data. Descriptive statistics were used to answer the first and second research questions. Pairwise comparisons were conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the amount of time early childhood and elementary teachers read literature for pleasure and engage in other leisure activities, which was the third research question. Since conducting multiple paired-sample t-tests increases the risk of Type I error -- claiming a significant effect when none exists<sup>[29,30]</sup>. While adjusting the alpha significance level is a well-established practice for reducing the risk of committing a Type I error on any individual hypothesis test, this

practice is sometimes criticized for the fact that it also creates an increase in the risk of Type II error - failing to identify an effect when one does exist<sup>[29,30]</sup>. For the current study, in which sets of 12 hypothesis tests were conducted to examine mean differences, the advice of Perneger<sup>[30]</sup> who suggests “simply describing what was done and why, and discussing the possible interpretations of each result, should enable the reader to reach a reasonable conclusion” was followed. An adjusted alpha level of .025 was applied to individual tests of significance, but the results of individual tests are reported with specific values of alpha included so that readers may consider the results based on their own desired level of scrutiny.

### 3 Results

Completed reading logs and participant’s responses were read and analyzed based on the three research questions.

#### 3.1 Research question 1

To determine how much leisure time teachers spent reading for pleasure, the total number of minutes each participant spent reading literature for pleasure was calculated [Table 2]. The time spent reading literature for pleasure ranged from 0 to 845 minutes, with 7 participants reporting that they did not spend any time reading literature for pleasure. Twelve (50%) of the participants reported reading literature for pleasure for at least 1 hour during the week, while 3 participants (13%) reported reading literature for 5 hours or more. The most time (17860 minutes and 13270 minutes) was spent on other activities and watching television, respectively. Specific activities reported in the “other” category included going to the beach, cooking, playing with children or grandchildren, traveling, exercising, and shopping. The least amount of time was spent reading blogs (313 minutes) and reading magazines or newspapers (392 minutes). Participants reported spending approximately 5 hours with blogs and magazines/newspapers, which were the only categories where the total time reported was less than 22 hours.

**Table 2 Time Spent on Leisure-Type Activities**

Activities	Minutes	
	Total	Mean
Watching Movies	3814	552.92
Watching Television	13270	262.71
Texting	6307	233.96
Other Activity	17860	184.79
Facebook	4408	183.67
Hobby	4437	158.92
Talking on Phone	5617	138.75
Reading Literature for Pleasure	2955	123.13
Reading Email	1667	69.46
Instagram/Twitter	1357	56.97
Internet	3334	50.00
Reading Newspaper/Magazines	392	16.33
Reading Blogs	313	13.04

#### 3.2 Research question 2

The average amount of time spent on identified leisure-type activities was calculated, and activity means were ranked to identify how much time was spent in each leisure-type activity (see Table 2). Of the 13 activities investigated, the highest average amount of time was spent watching movies. Reading literature for pleasure had the eighth highest mean.

#### 3.3 Research question 3

Pairwise comparisons were conducted to answer question three, “Is there a significant difference between the amount of time early childhood and elementary teachers read literature for pleasure and engage in other leisure-type activities?” As shown in Table 3, there is no significant difference ( $t = -.795, p < .435$ ) between the amount of time participants spent reading literature

for pleasure and the amount of time they participated in other non-literature leisure activities [Table 3].

**Table 3 Comparison of Minutes Spent Reading Literature for Pleasure and Minutes Spent in Non-Literature Leisure Activities**

	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>95% Confidence of Difference</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>P</b>
Reading Literature for Pleasure	123.13	189.79	24	-133.28, 59.28	-7.95	23	.435
Non-Literature Activities	160.13	90.09	24				

Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to determine whether a significant difference existed between time early childhood and elementary teachers spent reading literature for pleasure and each of the remaining 12 leisure-type activities [Table 4]. Results indicated a significant difference in the time teachers spent reading literature for pleasure and the time spent engaged

in 3 other leisure-type activities. Participants spent significantly less time reading newspapers/magazines ( $t = 2.696, p < .013$ ) and reading blogs ( $t = 2.783, p < .011$ ) than they spent reading literature for pleasure. Participants spent significantly more time watching movies ( $t = -3.287, p < .003$ ) than reading literature for pleasure.

**Table 4 Comparison of Minutes Spent Reading Literature for Pleasure and Minutes Spent in Individual Categories of Non-Literature Leisure Activities**

	<b>Paired Differences</b>			<b>T</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>
	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>95% CI of the Difference</b>			
Reading Magazines/Newspapers	106.79	194.04	24.85, 188.73	2.696	23	.013*
Reading Blogs	110.08	193.77	28.26, 191.90	2.783	23	.011*
Reading Email	53.67	219.38	-38.98, 146.30	1.198	23	.243
Facebook	-60.54	266.82	-173.21, 52.13	-1.112	23	.278
Instagram/Twitter	66.17	221.54	-27.38, 159.71	1.463	23	.157
Internet	73.13	209.03	-15.14, 161.39	1.714	23	.100
Talking on Phone	-15.63	287.93	-131.21, 105.96	-.266	23	.793
Texting	-110.83	447.31	91.31, -299.72	-1.214	23	.237
Watching Television	-139.58	394.02	-305.96, 26.78	-1.735	23	.096
Watching Movies	-429.79	640.58	-700.29, -159.30	-3.287	23	.003*
Hobby	-35.79	239.516	-136.93, 65.38	-.732	23	.472
Other Activity	-61.67	251.80	-167.96, 44.66	-1.200	23	.242

\* $p < .025$

## 4 Discussion

Not reading due to lack of time has been identified by researchers as having a serious impact on teenagers' engagement with literacy<sup>[31,32]</sup>. Lack of time does not seem to be an issue for the participants in this study. Even those participants who reported not spending any time reading literature for pleasure logged an ample amount of time spent in a variety of other leisure activities. Similarly, participants in this study did not spend significantly more time engaged with social media activities, such as texting, Instagram/Twitter, Facebook and email, than reading literature for pleasure. It appears, therefore, that lack of motivation may be a factor in participants' decision to read

literature for pleasure as opposed to either lack of time or technological distractions.

## 5 Limitations

Certain limitations in this study should be noted. First, the low number of participants from a convenience sample of teachers enrolled in graduate school at a single university may limit the ability to generalize results. Also, the data collection occurred over a relatively short period of time during the summer semester. Perhaps the results would vary if data were collected over an extended period or during a different part of the year. In addition, the self-reporting nature of survey research is a limitation.

## 6 Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the results of this study show that there is great variation among the reading habits of early childhood and elementary teachers with some reading no or very little literature for pleasure. This finding is relevant to teacher educators, since “a teacher who is a reader may have a greater range of motivating experiences from which to teach reading”<sup>[27]</sup>. Additionally, findings from research that children of parents who believed that reading is a source of pleasure had greater reading motivation scores in primary school<sup>[33]</sup> suggest that students of teachers who believe that reading is a source of pleasure might also show greater reading motivation. Thus, teacher educators should examine their instructional practices to increase opportunities for both inservice and preservice teachers to engage with literature during coursework for the purpose of increasing their own personal reading motivation. Further, teacher educators should make an effort to serve as reading role models for those teachers with whom they interact in effort to positively impact their habits of reading literature for pleasure.

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**Appendix  
READING LOG**

**Report the amount of time (in minutes) spent in the following leisure activities.  
At the end of six days, total the minutes spent each day and total minutes spent in each activity.**

Leisure Time Activity	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	TOTAL Minutes
Read literature (novels, biographies, short stories, plays, and poetry)							
Read magazines or newspapers							
Read blogs							
Read/send email							
View/post on Facebook							
View/post on Instagram/Twitter							
Search Internet							
Talk on phone							
Text							
Watch television							
Watch movies							
Hobby (specify)							
Other (specify)							
<b>TOTAL MINUTES</b>							