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Children reading series books: ways into peer culture and reading development

Sally Ann Jones

Abstract

This article, drawing on research which aimed to explore how young children read English in Singapore, demonstrates how 9-year-old Singaporean children's voluntary reading of series books served the dual purposes of enabling their membership of the peer group through cultured reading and the independent development of their reading skills and motivation for reading. Using interviews to encourage conversation and reflection, the research examined children's book choices and their reasons for reading. This formed part of a topic-focussed ethnographic study in three primary schools. In addition, the article seeks to prove that Singaporean children's choice of series books makes them readers with potential for global, intra-generational, cultural connections rather than familial, intergenerational ones, and it is especially significant educationally for less well-off families where English is not the dominant home language.

Key words: reading English, peer culture, primary school children, series books, motivation, childhood studies, Singapore, postcolonial society,

Introduction

This article reports part of a research study which sought to explore how young children read English in postcolonial, multilingual Singapore. Ethnographic observations and interviews with 76 children aged 9 years in the top-streamed classes in three schools, their teachers and eight of their parents showed that children found great pleasure in reading English whatever their dominant home language. Although children chose to read a range of different types of material, for example, children's literature and comics, the focus of the article is on their reading of series books written in English, which were the most popular choices among all children in all three schools. Underpinning the research study is a theoretical perspective on reading development which takes it to be a socially and culturally situated practice (Heap, 1991), involving interaction of some kind, for instance, between reader and writer (Grabe, 2004), between expert and novice reader (Chen and Gregory, 2004) or among those in a reading community or readership (Moss, 2007). Furthermore, reading is also an individual, cognitive, linguistic process which is learnt over time and related to a reader's cognitive and emotional maturation (Chall, 1996). These theoretical concepts revealed the key findings of the research study that children were members of a generational readership through their reading and discussion of series books in the peer group. They were interested and motivated to read these books which gave them the opportunity to independently develop positive attitudes to reading and reading skills, such as fluency, through reading large numbers of books at similar levels of difficulty. Children's agency was clear, as research in childhood studies suggests (James and James, 2004; Corsaro, 1997). Importantly, by drawing on cultural studies and comments from the children, the study also evidenced that series books have particular features which can facilitate a great deal of this kind of reading at similar levels of difficulty.

The article therefore contributes to theories of young children's reading development, highlighting their agency in interaction with friends and making clear an important role for series books not usually recognised. The data shows children operate within a complex interplay of familial factors, for example, the home language, cultural affiliation and the importance placed on education. The article therefore contributes to understandings of the family in the fluid postcolonial context of Singapore because it demonstrates that Singaporean children's choice of series books makes them readers with potential for global,

intra-generational, cultural connections rather than familial, intergenerational ones. It also shows how children's reading of series books outside the formal curriculum is especially significant educationally for less well-off families where English is not the dominant home language. The article begins by putting forward the aims of the research, its questions and theoretical underlay. It moves on to present relevant contextual information about Singapore and the research method. Key findings are highlighted as the data is discussed.

Research questions and theoretical frameworks

The aim of this research was to explore how young children read English in multilingual, postcolonial Singapore. Two of the questions asked by the study are below.

1. What are children's accounts and experiences of their reading? What texts do children read and why?
2. What are adults' understandings of children's reading and how and why do they act in relation to these understandings?

In order to explore this topic in this context, I looked to theory from childhood studies, cultural studies and reading education. Consequently, in this section about conceptual frameworks, I consider links across these disciplines as they are productive and relevant to the questions of the research study.

A tradition of research and theory in childhood studies has shown how children are agentive in constructing cultures distinct from those of adults. While highlighting the important role of language, Corsaro (1997, p18-24) theorises how children creatively produce peer culture through common routines and practices. He suggests that children collectively construct their own cultures separate from adults', yet these become part of children's individual cultural biographies, potentially contributing to future cultural change in society.

Children may establish the common practices of the peer group through participation in the routines of playground games and rhymes (I. Opie and P. Opie, 1959) and sweet-eating (James 1998), for example. Indeed, James shows how children use their choice of sweets to oppose adult control. Through analysing parent/child conversations at home from the perspective of cultural studies, Boden (2006) demonstrates how children form their identities through

fashion and yet how they have to negotiate access to clothes and accessories with parents. Seiter's (1995) analysis of *My Little Pony* videos, marketed for young girls, also shows how childhood identities may be shaped, which could be gendered, but which, in fact, offer girls a choice of material other than that marketed for boys. Seiter agrees with Boden in deeming children critical and skillful consumers of popular products – a point that is echoed in much research on children in families.

In addition to their engagement in games and with toys and food, children also actively construct and negotiate peer culture through reading popular books and watching television. In interviews with children, Buckingham (1994; 1993) and Moss (2006; 2000) show how they talk about their engagement with popular media such as television programmes, videos and comics. Moss (2007), writing about the informal literacies of television, videos and comics books, shows how children's tastes developed and changed over the four years of her study. She calls these changes crazes, namely, expressions of a common group attitude to reading material and media, suggesting the production of peer cultures through collective practices in the way noted by Corsaro (1997). In her research, no class distinction was observed although, as in most other research on children's choice of reading materials, there were gender preferences. She and Buckingham show that talk in the peer group is a distinct feature of how children read texts of popular culture, thus exemplifying Corsaro's (1997) theories of cultural production. The researchers further illustrate how, through discussion, children create and demarcate relationships with each other and with adults, creating a separate cultural space.

This article focusses on young children's reading of series books, and although scholarship about the particular genre is scarce, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (1996), for example, note that often for children aged from 9 to 12 years, reading series books is a first phase in their independent reading. Thus, they suggest the potential of these books in children's reading development at a particular stage of maturation and reading experience. According to these researchers and others, such as Watson (2000) and Rudd (2000), the appeal of children's series books hinges on ideas of community and collectability, time, child/adult relations and language. For Watson, reader familiarity with a series' context and characters is an important feature of this type of reading because these are remembered from book to book. The spillover from text to text, also identified

by Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (1996), consequently makes reading less taxing and more comforting. Another attraction for readers is the 'fellowship' (Watson, 2000, p.19) they experience as they read and talk about their reading. In fact, Galda, Cullinan and Sipe (2010) and Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (1996) propose that the camaraderie children experience in reading these kinds of books is carried over into their own lives when they talk about their reading in the peer group, for it provides material for discussion and motivation for collection. In further developing this notion, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (1996, p.53) propose 'cultured' reading to be the way in which children bring cultural knowledge of other books in a series or other spin-off products to bear on their reading and conversation about the books, which helps them maintain membership of their peer group.

Another feature of series books which makes reading easier, according to Watson (2000), is the slow pace at which time appears to pass because it reflects childhood experience. He explains how authors achieve this pace through the technique of having characters in a series age slowly or not at all. Rudd (2000) agrees that series books are essentially about a state of being and lack any future orientation. Furthermore, according to Rudd (2000), children find the way in which child characters in Enid Blyton's series are empowered to act largely outside adult control particularly attractive. Often the setting reflects this autonomy because children's adventures take place in far-off lands, camping out or on deserted islands; as a result, the books offer both familiarity and fantasy, and Rudd (2000) suggests they are to be read as fantasy rather than contemporary realistic fiction. Another feature of Enid Blyton's writing, which is also evident in many contemporary series books, is the quality of spoken language in the writing which gives the impression that the author is talking to the reader in a rather equal, confidential way (Rudd, 2000). This, together with an emphasis on action, makes a series easier to read than more densely descriptive books.

While Watson (2000) and Rudd (2000) write about classic series, for example, those by Enid Blyton or Arthur Ransome, work by Buckingham and Scanlon (2003) on contemporary series identifies a particular genre of non-fiction series books, for instance, *Horrible Histories*. The researchers categorise these series as edutainment since they propose that the authors present facts and knowledge relevant to school subjects in an attractive mix of narrative and exposition with comic book illustrations. The adult authors directly address 8- to 12-year-old readers to whom the books are marketed, creating rapport through a

humorous, confiding tone, using slang and including many references to contemporary, international popular culture. Although the books are about school subjects, teachers are the butt of jokes; consequently, the books appear to take their readers outside the adult authority of school. Despite this, Buckingham and Scanlon (2003) note that parents in the UK do see these series books as educational and are prepared to buy them for their children.

Therefore, these commentators in the field of cultural studies argue that children's active engagement with the media of popular culture shows them constructing their generational culture (Seiter, 1995; Buckingham, 1994; 1993). Additionally, series books seem to have particular characteristics which appeal to children and which facilitate a great deal of reading in phases or crazes at this stage of reading (Moss, 2000; 2006; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 1996).

Consequently, while children are engaged in cultural production through this type of reading, they are also developing positive attitudes towards reading and improving their reading skills. It is necessary to present the argument about reading development in detail here because this function of reading series books is often unattributed or glossed. First, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh's (1996) notion of cultured reading of series books by communities of child readers overlaps with sociocultural perspectives on learning. For example, Rogoff, Baker-Sennet, Lacasa and Goldsmith et al (1995) describe learning as occurring through participation, as does Corsaro (1997). Lave and Wenger (1991, p.52) posit that learning is both cognitive and embodied participation in situated negotiation of meaning, enabled by the relationships in a community which, in this case, are those of the peer group. Children's reading and talking outside formal lessons, therefore, exemplify this type of learning, which is of knowledge, certainly, but also of how to participate appropriately. It thus involves children learning skills in the process of becoming identifiable members of the community in the effort of contributing to and understanding meaning, as described by Lave and Wenger:

Individuals transform their understanding of and responsibility for activities through their own participation, and in the process they become prepared to engage in similar subsequent activities. By functioning in the activity, participating in its meaning, people necessarily make on-going contributions, whether in concrete actions or in stretching to understand the actions and ideas of others (1991 p.53).

Additionally, and in particular, Heap (1991) conceptualises learning to read by in situ engagement in the types of reading valued by a community. These perspectives about context can be connected to Vygotsky's work (Hanfmann and Vakar, 1962) and the important role he ascribes to discourse in children's learning with others who are more experienced than they are. Although researching in school, Chen and Gregory (2004), nonetheless, evidence a reciprocal relationship among peers as they guide each other on reading tasks at the times when the teacher is not teaching. This furthers the argument that during children's actual reading of series books and in their ensuing discussion about the books and how they read them, they are learning some of the attitudes and skills necessary for successful reading. In sum, therefore, sociocultural and constructivist theory provide a view of learning to read as participation in a community with peers, broadening Mitchell and Reid Walsh's (1996) conception of cultured reading of series books. Moreover, the theory also suggests the place of individual cognitive activity in the effort of 'stretching' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.53) to understand others.

Theories from psycholinguistics provide us with the details about the individual mental activity and effort made during situated participation in reading. Cognitive psychology conceptualises reading in terms of memory, learning and the application of varied cognitive and metacognitive strategies through interaction between text and writer (Rumelhart, 1994; McLelland and Rumelhart, 1981). Learning to read, therefore, essentially consists of the application of these strategies and their practice, through participation in reading, to develop both control of the strategies and fluency in their deployment. At each stage of reading or level of language, skills have to be practised in order to become accurate, automatic and fluent in order to facilitate comprehension, as suggested by Kuhn, Schwanenflugel and Meisinger (2010). Chall (1996), among other reading researchers, notes the severe consequences if fluency in reading does not develop in children of about the age of those in this research study. In the USA, this is usually termed the 4th grade slump and results in children becoming demotivated because reading remains effortful rather than automatic and fluent. Researchers attribute this to a lack of practice. However, although voluntary, extensive reading has been shown to be important in the development of reading in English as a first and second language by, for example, Renandya (2007) Krashen (2004) and Bamford and Day (1997), it is argued that school reading lessons and programmes

cannot provide children with enough of such opportunities. Moreover, automaticity in reading may allow for deep engagement and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) because it enables immersion in the meaning of a book rather than a focus on decoding its language. Experiences of flow – successful, enjoyable reading – are likely to increase children’s intrinsic motivation to read (Baker and Wigfield, 1999; Schiefele, Schaffner, Moller and Wigfield, 2012), thus setting up a virtuous cycle.

Drawing on these disciplines of childhood studies, cultural studies and reading education allows for the useful extension of Mitchell and Reid-Walsh’s concept of cultured reading to include children’s engagement in the application and development of reading skills. In sum, the particular characteristics of series books, discussed above, offer young children reading at their level of skill and interest. This enables fluency (Kuhn et al, 2010; Chall, 1996) and flow on the part of the individual (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) and gives each child the currency necessary to be a member of the peer readership.

The context of Singapore

I offer some relevant notes about Singapore here to assist the reader in contextualising the study. The country has a British colonial past. Thus, in place now is a national, English-medium education system with a bilingual policy. After independence in 1965, the English language was seen as having a crucial role in the country’s development, and it is now viewed as a means to compete in a globalised economy (Shanmutgaratnam, 2002). English was designated a lingua franca, and the education system ensured its spread. Thus, the language has both global and local relevance (Pennycook, 1994). The languages of the majority ethnic groups – mother tongues – are supported educationally through the bilingual policy (Shanmugaratnam, 2002). In general, Singapore’s attitude to globalisation is selective as it negotiates a balance between international openness and local rootedness (Chong, 2006, p.266).

The education system is competitive and founded on the principle of meritocracy. In essence, this means the demonstration of academic talent in English through assessment (Wee, 1995). Familial self-sufficiency is important because state welfare is not comprehensive; instead, particular social groups are

supported as needful (Shanmugaratnan, 2009). In fact, the government views the family 'as foundation of society' (Balakrishnan, 2010). In addition to its colonial history, Singapore is also an immigrant nation; as a result, families are multilingual and English may or may not be the dominant home language, depending on family origin and length of stay in the country. Due to these historical, educational and economic characteristics, therefore, parents are concerned not merely that children learn to read but also that they learn to read English as part of a successful education for individual, familial and national advancement.

A brief description of their situation explains how, although the young readers of this study are Singaporean and of different language backgrounds, they have access to a wide selection of English reading material. Singapore is an open economy and has a range of international and local bookshops which stock the extensive variety of titles read by children world-wide. The government maintains a comprehensive library system with branches in all suburbs, usually located near public transport hubs. All primary schools have school and class libraries to support the English-medium education system funded by the government.

Method

I employed a topic-focussed ethnographic approach (Hymes, 1982) as the methodology of this study. Working in three case-study primary schools, I observed English lessons which served to contextualise children's school reading. Observations of full school days in and out of classrooms gave insight into additional aspects of children's reading, for instance, the books they chose to read for leisure and when they read them. Towards the end of the research, I interviewed 76 children, their teachers and eight parents about, among other topics, reading choices, access to books and reasons for reading. The children were in primary three at the time of the study and were all nine years old. Contrast and generation were principles of the research approach, enabling the comparison of reading practices and book choices among the schools and between the generations. All the children were interviewed twice as the principles of contrast, recursion and reflexivity built into the research method gave opportunities to revisit ideas and reflect on them with the participants.

The research is about children, about reading and about texts, I therefore drew on ideas about research methods from childhood studies, reading education and cultural studies. In particular, I took up notions of children as agentive, capable interviewees from childhood studies, for example, James and James (2004) and Corsaro (1997). The relatively recent recognition of children's agency among researchers has meant that interviewing them has gained acceptance as a reliable data-gathering technique in its potential to yield rich information. Difficulties arising from the unequal status of child and adult can be overcome, according to Brooker (2001), by the familiarity gained by time spent on site by the researcher. Other writers, for instance, Solberg (1996) and Westcott and Littleton (2005), suggest that any problems in the process of interviewing are, in likelihood, due to adults' expectations and assumptions about children's competence. Therefore, the methodology of the study included reflexivity on my part and opportunities to check data across the sites of homes and schools and among adults and children. In order to further validate the interview data about book choice, I invited children to write a list of the books they had read in the year, including their favourites and the reasons for reading them.

Following James' (2007) advice on conducting ethnographic research with children, this study sought to focus on the duality of children's individual experiences and their experiences of belonging to a childhood generation. This was achieved through attending to context and analysing common themes and patterns in the interview data. As a result, the study evidenced how children acted as individuals and as communities of readers in their reading of series books.

The three schools the children attended differed in socio-economic status, shown in the number of children on the government financial assistance scheme and on the support programmes for reading and mathematics in lower primary. Nevertheless, schools in Singapore do implement a national curriculum, and teaching and administrative practices in all schools originate from policies of meritocracy, bilingualism and English as the medium of instruction (Balakrishnan, 2010). The competitive education system results in most schools streaming their children based on examination results. The children of this study were all in the 'top' classes of their school grade level, indicating that they were successful academically. Moreover, their teachers described children's habitual reading of English books, in preference to those written in other languages,

outside lesson time, and this coincided with my own observations over five months.

Data and Discussion

Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (1996) highlight the perceived differences between books in the canon of children’s literature and series books, proposing that series books are on the margins of respectability due to criticisms of gender and class bias as well as of comparatively inferior writing. However, as they also point out, children are often habitual readers of these books and other popular culture, devouring them in phases (Rudd, 2000) or crazes (Moss, 2007). In this study, children reported choosing books and media from the complete range of children’s literature and series books written in English. However, across the three schools, every pupil interviewed spoke about reading and enjoying series books¹. Hence, this article focusses, in particular, on this type of reading. In total, children nominated 62 series in the age range of four to ten years and 54 in the age range of eight upwards. (The age ranges are given according to publishers’ information). Table 1 shows the total number of series mentioned by pupils at each school, and Table 2 the titles in common across the schools.

Table 1: The total number of series mentioned by children at each school

	Angsana School	Saga School	Tembusu School
series from 4 to 10 years	8	28	34
series from 8 years upwards	5	17	36
locally published series	3	4	2

I interviewed different numbers of children at each school, that is, 14 at Angsana School, 30 at Saga School and 33 at Tembusu School. This might explain the difference in the total numbers of titles given. Nevertheless,

¹ I judged books to be part of a series if they meet one of these criteria: they are marketed as such, the main character is consistent in all books and does not develop, or more than five books have been published about the same characters.

individuals nominated the number of books they read in a similar pattern, namely, at Angsana School, the total was, in the main, fewer for an individual than for someone at either Saga or Tembusu schools. Ms Anita, the teacher at Angsana School, noted that although library membership is free and she arranged library cards for all the children in the school, some parents were reluctant to allow their children to borrow books because they might have to pay fines for late or lost copies. Thus, the number of books read by children at the schools perhaps reflected the socio-economic status of their families.

Table 2: Series in common at the three schools

	Angsana School	Saga School	Tembusu School
series from 4 to 10 years	Enid Blyton <i>Geronimo Stilton</i> <i>Horrid Henry</i> <i>Rainbow Magic</i>	Enid Blyton <i>Encyclopaedia Brown</i> <i>Geronimo Stilton</i> <i>Go Girl</i> <i>The Pony Mad-Princess</i> <i>Rainbow Magic</i> <i>Secrets of Droon</i> <i>Stardust</i> <i>Tiara Club</i>	Enid Blyton ² <i>Encyclopaedia Brown</i> <i>Geronimo Stilton</i> <i>Go Girl</i> <i>Horrid Henry</i> <i>The Pony Mad-Princess</i> <i>Rainbow Magic</i> <i>Secrets of Droon</i> <i>Stardust</i> <i>Tiara Club</i>
series from 8 years upwards	<i>Astrosaurs</i>	<i>Horrible Science</i> <i>Murderous Maths</i> <i>Winnie the Horse</i> <i>Gentler</i>	<i>Astrosaurs</i> <i>Horrible Science</i> <i>Murderous Maths</i> <i>Winnie the Horse</i> <i>Gentler</i>
locally published series	<i>True Singapore Ghost Stories</i> <i>Mr Midnight</i>	<i>True Singapore Ghost Stories</i> <i>Mr Midnight</i>	<i>True Singapore Ghost Stories</i>

Admittedly, it may be that some children's idea of reading the books could have meant merely joining in the discussion about them. For example, Moss (2000) notes that the children in her research sometimes spoke very knowledgeably about films they could have seen the trailers for but could not have watched. However, while this may be the case for a few children, my participant observation and interviews with teachers and parents indicated that reading series books was a very important aspect of independent, voluntary reading for the vast majority and evidenced how children actively undertook extensive reading, providing the conditions necessary for their reading development (Krashen, 2004).

² In the table, standard font indicates a children's author and italics indicate the titles of series.

Although all children were reading series books, there were some distinctions evident among the three schools of the study. More children at Angsana School reported choosing locally produced books such as *Mr Midnight* and *True Singapore Ghost Stories* as well as international ones from the younger age range as shown on Table 1. This reflects the level of these children's English language which was lower than the children's at other two schools. Fewer children here claimed English as a dominant home language compared to those at the other two schools. The figures show 35.6% at Angsana School compared to 69.98% at Saga and 73.33% at Tembusu. The dominant home language is likely to be the one of children's primary socialisation and family cultural affiliation, according to Ochs and Schieffelin (2012) and Schieffelin and Ochs (1988). In support of the argument, a sociolinguistic survey of 716 children aged 11 (in primary five) by Vaish, Jamaludeen and Roslan (2006) shows that English is a dominant home language in high- to medium-income families. This article is consonant with the sociolinguistic survey, in that, the ranking of the three schools in terms of family socio-economic status is the same as that of English-dominance, from highest to lowest. Therefore, language competence and cultural propensity might have determined the selection of series books by children at Angsana School.

Conversely, children at Tembusu School did not much discuss local series. The fact that English was a dominant home language for the majority suggests that their language competence was high and their cultural inclination was towards international series, as shown in the tables above. In general, these children did more reading, naming the most books from the canon of children's literature as well as series. In addition, Table 1 shows how the books might demonstrate a progression in reading with higher numbers of series at both age ranges for children at this school, suggesting that movement over the series might have a part to play in phases of development in reading and language.

In accordance with most research on children's book choice, for example, Hall and Coles (1999) in the UK and Majid and Tan (2007) in Singapore, at Saga School, and somewhat similarly at Tembusu School, gender marked children's series book selection. This shows a group identification and stratification within the generation. Groups of girls spoke with great animation about series to do with animals, pets, fairies, princesses and magic, for example, *The Tiara Club*, *Rainbow Magic*, *Magic Kitten*, *My Magic Pony*, *The Fairies of Starshine*

Meadow, Pet Finders Club, and Stardust. By contrast, many of the boys were reading the *Murderous Maths* and the *Usborne Puzzle* series. The girls' reasons for liking these books about magic and animals centred on the fantasy worlds created, the plot twists, satisfactory resolution and the language similar to Seiter's (1995) observations about *My Little Pony*.

By contrast, the boys' reasons for choosing to read the *Murderous Maths* series, an example of contemporary edutainment (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003), were often not to do with feeling but more to do with learning and the group identity of being active, intelligent and daringly mischievous in a rather masculine way. In contrast to the girls' aesthetic stance, the boys adopted the efferent stance of reading for information (Rosenblatt, 1994). They commented on the comic book layout and said that the subjects of algebra, angles and percentages were in their maths syllabus. They said that because they enjoyed maths, they appreciated the series for what it could teach them beyond the school curriculum.

Children had strong opinions about their own choice of books in relation to those read in school. They mostly viewed school texts as being too short and as instrumental vehicles for teaching rather than enabling their personal involvement. Overall, only 11 children said they liked the school texts, while nine others valued their potential for learning, for instance, vocabulary or moral values. Other reasons for children's preferences were that their own books were not extracts but complete books. These children found them more interesting and they could enjoy the suspense and experience flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), as noted by Ramesh:

- SAJ³ Do you prefer to read the books you choose or the ones that are in your textbook in class?
- RAMESH Hmm, these, because the textbook stories are just like the blurbs. They just give you an idea of what's going to happen. But these you can read the full story and then you get the full idea and everything. So each time you turn a page, you get more interested rather than reading the textbook .. like if you want to read this page, you want to know what's going on on the next page.

³ SAJ refers to my part in the transcripts. Except for my own, all the participants' names have been anonymised. Initial letters of parents' and teachers' names link them to their children's schools. For example, Mrs Sheng is the parent of a child at Saga School.

These words illustrate how the opportunities to read at length afforded by series books motivated the children to read.

Teachers observed the children in their classes to be committed readers, with one saying, ‘they are just reading and reading and they just don’t want to put the books down’, providing further evidence of the flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) children experienced in reading. As children discussed their reading of series books, they also described their own immersion in reading. For example, when comparing *Murderous Maths* to school books, Ronald said:

- | | |
|--------|---|
| SAJ | Okay. And so can you tell me why you prefer those ones? |
| RONALD | Because the ones that I don’t like, when I read it, I only read a few pages and I fall asleep. |
| SAJ | Okay. How about these ones? |
| RONALD | Hmm? |
| SAJ | The <i>Murderous Maths</i> . |
| RONALD | Yes, once I get to read it, I read non-stop until the end of the day and I finish the entire book in a day. |

Ronald’s words vividly illustrate the working of a potential cycle of reading development. His deep interest and enjoyment motivate (Wigfield and Baker, 1999) ‘non-stop’ effortless extensive reading (Krashen, 2004), providing suitable conditions for the further development reading skills and fluency at particular levels of language and reading (Kuhn et al, 2010).

Table 2 shows that, despite the different attachment to local series, the *Geronimo Stilton* series was the common denominator across schools, no matter children’s gender, home finances, language competence, dominant home language or cultural affiliation. It seemed that this contemporary series was the craze of the moment. Briefly, the series, first published in 2000, is about a mouse character called Geronimo Stilton who works for *The Rodent Gazette*. Elisabetta Dami, who is the unacknowledged author, writes the series in Italian and it is translated into English for the international market. Similar to other contemporary series (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003), there is humour in language, character and situation as well as direct address by the ‘author’. A fantasy world is created (Rudd, 2000; Watson, 2000) through detailed descriptions of the settings of New Mouse City and Mouse Island, and the action takes place in various other locations.

Children expressed very clear reasons for the choice of this *Geronimo Stilton* series. Shi Ying described the main character, Geronimo, as ‘lovable’, Seng Kiak thought he was ‘clumsy’, Marcus described him as ‘careless’ and Kevin said he was ‘hilarious’. Thus, they appreciated his character and the humour it generated in different ways. The children saw the plots as exciting with Samuel, for example, acknowledging that twists and turns make ‘your mind wonder’. In all schools, children showed sensitivity to the language, Edwin said, for instance, that the series had ‘expression’ and Sudesna enjoyed ‘lots of adjectives’. They relished the creativity of the language and colourful pictures and fonts, similar technological innovations which attracted the children in Moss’ (2007) study of children’s reading in the UK. Kai Sheng commented:

It’s not like the other books. Maybe there’s a big picture inside. But the *Geronimo Stilton*, there is pictures inside but the pictures are colourful and the words are better and some of the important words, they will write them bigger and more interesting.

Children also liked the books for being informative, a nod to the non-fiction content, games, recipes and fun facts they contain. This series appealed to both girls and boys as they could appreciate the language use, emotionally engage with characters and situations and learn nuggets of information. As a result, children had confidence in the series, for as Megan said, ‘When we choose any of the *Geronimo Stilton* books, it’s still interesting’.

Reading series books and finding out about them took place in the peer group; 60% of the children said that they relied on friends as their main informants about books to read. One teacher also noted how, in addition to the gendered choices, there was a distinction in the way girls and boys assisted each other in sourcing and recommending books, exemplifying cultural routines in the peer group made distinct by gender. The extract below also suggests how children talked about the books, a practice shown to be important in constructing peer culture (Moss, 2006; 2000; Buckingham, 1994; 1993).

- MS STELLA The girls they usually exchange their princess books. But the boys, right, usually they will just show each other the interesting sections.
- SAJ Oh, okay.
- MS STELLA Yes, but the boys, they don’t really let their friends bring home their books.

SAJ Right.
MS STELLA The girls they do.

At Tembusu School, perhaps because of the higher household incomes, children talked too about the series' collectability, with some saying that they had read and collected the whole series of at least 25 books. Two boys, Edwin and Marcus, talked about their collections in the following manner:

SAJ And then *Geronimo Stilton*? What good about that?
EDWIN Oh, they are very funny, interesting and there's pictures and it's a very long book.
SAJ Mmm .. and the pictures, anything else you found good about *Geronimo Stilton*?
EDWIN Yes, there's a lot of episodes and you can collect them. When you collect all, you can get prizes.

MARCUS I group them in baskets.
SAJ You group them in?
MARCUS Something like order numbers, serial numbers.
SAJ Right. And how many have you read?
MARCUS I read all of them.

Therefore, in all schools, children enthusiastically engaged in reading series books, evidenced by the number and variety nominated at interview and in the survey. The teachers' comments and observations also show children deeply involved in their books. Ronald and Ramesh's individual descriptions of their experiences of reading these books, for example, and the detailed reasons for enjoying and sourcing them provided by others indicate how children were motivated to read widely at particular levels of language and reading difficulty (Kuhn et al, 2010; Krashen, 2004; Baker and Wigfield, 1999). This suggests, therefore, how through their own agency in participating in this common cultural activity, children could produce for themselves and others suitable materials and conditions for the advancement of their reading.

In sum, all children were reading series books but the clear craze at the time of the study was *Geronimo Stilton*, which all children said they were reading. Children read as members of their generation and in relation to their language competence, cultural affiliation, gender and home finances, as discussed above. Observation and interview data show children to be members of their peer communities agentively enjoying, discussing, collecting, recommending, and

reading series, providing the conditions for the development of fluent reading of English through practice. As a result, children were introduced to the international culture of the series books. Therefore, in the following section of the article, I examine the effects of this global, intra-generational openness on the Singaporean family.

As well as belonging to local peer cultures with potential membership of globalised communities of readers of English, children are members of Singaporean families. At times, tensions between family generations appeared. These came to light during the interviews with eight parents and further examination of what each of their children reported about reading. The tensions were not the result of mere parent/child conflicts; rather, they reflected the complex interplay of factors, already considered in relation to children's reading, such as language dominance, cultural affiliation and the value placed on education within each family, and now viewed in relation to the family. These pressures are perhaps also illustrative of wider social forces concerning national economic progress through global connectedness and local family rootedness.

In contrast to parents' dismissal of series books internationally (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 1996), hardly any of these Singaporean parents disapproved of them. This is with the exception of edutainment series, which most parents in a variety of countries regard positively (Rudd, 2000; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 1996). In this study, some children remarked that that it was, in fact, their parents who had introduced them to the Enid Blyton series, *Murderous Maths* and *Geronimo Stilton*. When asked about *Geronimo Stilton*, Marcus, for example, answered:

SAJ	When did you start reading it?
MARCUS	When my mother introduced it to me.
SAJ	Oh.
MARCUS	She went to a book store and saw one, this book. Then she bought it back home.
SAJ	So she bought you your first <i>Geronimo Stilton</i> ?
MARCUS	Yes.
SAJ	And since then?
MARCUS	Then I started collecting books.

In families where English was a secondary language, some parents valued the educational aspect of edutainment series books (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003) with regard to both topic and reading skills. For instance, Bradley's father,

Mr Soh, strongly approved of the *Murderous Maths* series since he thought the books couched abstract mathematical concepts in a humourous form, enabling the acquisition of both concepts and language. Bradley and his group of friends were all reading *Murderous Maths*, and said that they liked the humour and the comic book layout. Kiat Kar enjoyed ‘the tricks you can do on your friends’. However, all added that the books were interesting with Bradley commenting, ‘it teaches us more about maths in an easier way’. Kiat Kar liked the series ‘because it can teach you more about maths’. Thus, aspects of the series appealed to the dual audience targeted by publishers, noted by Buckingham and Scanlon (2003); Bradley’s father appreciated the educational aspect, while the children responded to the entertainment aspect. However, these Singaporean children also valued the educational slant of the books, or at least they legitimised their reading by calling on it as a rationale.

In some families, parents and children had different dominant languages because of their education, income and family relationships. Mrs Sundra, Gajendra’s mother, was educated to secondary level, and, while she knew many languages, Tamil was dominant for her and her parents. She said that she had not read much as a child, having not had access to books other than at school; consequently, she had not developed cultural knowledge of English books. Education and reading English were serious pursuits for her. She said, ‘as a parent, because I went through poverty, I do not want my child to go through that’, and she said that she used to tell her children ‘that education is very, very important. Education is wealth’. She viewed reading English as highly significant, saying, ‘when any books comes in for good education, I will try my best to buy for them [her children].’ She guided her children into learning vocabulary every night and took them to the library, supplementing her knowledge about books from the librarian. By contrast, her son, Gajendra, who spoke English at home with his sister, relied on participation with friends for his reading. His favourite book of the moment was one in the *Murderous Maths* series, which, he said, Bradley had recommended. Like Bradley, Gajendra’s enjoyment in reading the series was legitimised for his mother by his reference to its educational purpose. He said of one book that ‘this is more advanced maths, so it’s like better to read’ and of another that it was ‘quite near our syllabus. It’s like angles, time’.

Leonard’s family is another example of one whose dominant language and cultural affiliation were not English, yet for whom education and consequently

speaking and reading English were significant, like the Soh and Sundra families. Unlike these other families though, both Leonard's parents had tertiary education and the family was financially comfortable. The parents had arrived in Singapore from China 20 years previously. Growing up in China, Mrs Tong had not read any English in childhood. However, since her children were in an English-medium education system, she attributed great importance to reading English. She said:

Since they [her children] are in Singapore, I cannot ask them to switch. You know in China, the Chinese is the first language, I have to think. You know, here, English is the first language, the Chinese is a second priority. Although I really want them [her children] to learn, but you know the environment here. Yes, so you know the friends at school, they speak English.

The family had the financial wherewithal to support the children's development of reading; Mrs Tong bought books, relying on her sons' choices and the bestseller lists. Leonard reported reading many of the series from the higher age range, and some of his friends independently nominated him as an example of a good reader. At interview, he spoke about *Murderous Maths* and *Horrible Histories* and proposed two titles in the *Geronimo Stilton* series which, he said, his friends had recommended. In likelihood, these were the English-speaking friends mentioned by his mother. The importance attributed to education in this family meant that the parents valued the role of series books as a means to reading development while the child valued the pleasure he derived from his reading and his friendships found in the peer group. Thus, the aims of each generation could be synchronised in series books.

In families where English had been spoken as a dominant language for one generation, cultural affiliation to English was not particularly strong. This was true among families with children at Angsana School, for example, who also had relatively smaller incomes. Therefore, parents appreciated series books as a means of practising reading and did not oppose their children's choices; for instance, Mrs Ang said she had no objections to Patrick's selections, including the *Mr Midnight* and *Mr Mystery* series which were popular in Angsana School. By contrast, Stephen's family had been using English over two generations, and his mother, Mrs Sheng, objected to the subject matter of these local series. She expressed confidence in the family guidance and strong alignment with English and the culture of English in books which she could transfer to her children. She said:

because we understand the English books, so we know more of the culture, we are able to share with them.

Although she recognised that her children would read these books among peers at school, she was quite unhappy about it because she felt that some topics, for example, the supernatural, contradicted her Christian religion. Therefore, on the one hand, Mrs Ang, who was less culturally affiliated to English, valued the positive attitudes and skill improvement that she thought reading local series books could provide. On the other hand, Mrs Sheng's cultural and linguistic affinity to English encouraged her son away from local series to international ones.

By contrast, even though, like Mrs Sheng, other relatively well-off English-speaking parents had cultural and linguistic knowledge developed through their own childhood reading, they acknowledged that they did not know contemporary children's English books and therefore could not guide their children's choice. The phenomenal increase in globally marketed titles of children's books over the last 20 years has resulted in this situation which is not restricted to Singapore alone. The books and authors recommended by parents, for example, Mrs Tarson, Mrs Tee and Mrs Soo were most often familiar, traditional, classic choices, such as series by Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl, because the parents said they were assured that the content was appropriate. Among these three English-speaking families, Mrs Tee said that she did not 'dictate' Nicola's book choice but recommended interesting and suitable books. However, the only books mother and daughter had in common were those of Enid Blyton. Mrs Tee said:

I mean because children's books, Enid Blyton is what everybody goes through, children goes through. So I think that's the only common one you see.

She noted that she only found out about contemporary series books when she took her daughter to the library and examined her choices. Likewise, Mrs Tarson acknowledged that she did not know many contemporary children's authors and said that Gillian 'gets a lot of source materials from her friends'. These parents all noted how their girls read contemporary series books, making them independent

from the family but connected to the peer culture of their generation and therefore autonomous in their reading.

Similarly, but more overtly, Jing Wen's parents had tried to direct her reading choice, using their own experience of reading Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl. Like Mrs Tee and Mrs Tarson, they valued the 'safe' content but had an explicit educational agenda as well. However, Jing Wen had resisted this control by questioning whether her parents were trying to stop her from reading and pointing out that over-directing her choice would result in a decrease of her interest. Thus, drawing on ideas of interest and motivation in her counter arguments, the daughter successfully leveraged on the educational value of learning to read English through her choice of series books. Parents and child reached a compromise and consequently, Jing Wen had pursued her love of series books, beginning with *Mr Midnight* and the animal, fairy and princess series valued in her social group. Therefore, in these Singaporean families, where English dominance and cultural attachment had developed over generations, a move away from family cultural knowledge towards contemporary, international series books was clearly observable among the children. Parents' unease at exposing their children to the unfamiliar and unpredictable was evident, and it mirrors a tension between global and local pressures experienced nationally (Chong 2006). In these cases and in this aspect of children's reading, generational continuity was viewed as broken. Moss (2007) and Rudd (2000) observe that reading series books may be mere crazes or phases soon forgotten by their readers. However, according to Corsaro (1997), it is quite possible that this youth culture, created around reading series books and now part of individual reading biographies, will lead to societal change as these children refresh and reconstruct peer cultures at future stages of their lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated how children in a multilingual, postcolonial country are agentive in reading English in their peer group, preferring to read series books at length rather than the extracts of the school curriculum. They take immense pleasure in reading contemporary, international series books written in English, and the positive attitudes developed provide suitable

conditions for the advance of their reading skills and fluency. The data evidences that it is particular characteristics of these series books which make them attractive to children and motivate them to read. Through children's own cultured reading – recommendations and discussion with each other – and independent selections in libraries and bookshops, they actively attain membership of their peer group, and this draws them into a global reading community and culture.

Children's choice of reading matter may or may not have their parents' approval, depending on the interrelationships of factors such as family cultural affiliation to English, the dominant home language and the value placed on education. However, in general, parents provide for their children's reading of contemporary, international series books. Where necessary, children negotiate with their parents to legitimise this type of voluntary reading by calling on its role in their learning to read English. This shows their awareness of the importance of English in education in the society.

Furthermore, this research has shown changing familial relations and attitudes towards children's reading in the peer group. In families where English is not culturally or linguistically dominant and where education is highly valued, children speak and read English with their friends. Parents have no objections to the content of series books and, in fact, value the books' function in facilitating reading development through practice and extension. Whatever a family's financial status, this holds true, although less well-off families value the potential for gaining knowledge in subjects, such as maths, as much as for reading development. Therefore, children's reading of contemporary international series books in their peer group, apart from the school reading curriculum, is very helpful for low-income families for whom English is not a dominant language. Their children, as all others, must participate in a meritocratic, English-medium education system.

In families with strong English linguistic and cultural affiliation developed over generations, a few positions on children's reading are clear. Parents object to the subject matter of local and international contemporary series and prefer the 'safe', traditional choices they read in their own childhoods. This is because they do not know much about contemporary, international series. However, the importance of education and reading English in these families can override such parental hesitations, and children actively seek out the contemporary series, so

being pulled into an international readership and culture. Here, the domestic situation reflects the strains between local and global forces felt nationally.

To conclude, social and educational changes in multilingual, postcolonial Singapore mean that reading English is highly valued. Therefore, despite some tensions in family relations in English-speaking families, the development of reading skills and motivation achievable through children's reading of contemporary, international series books is accepted. In homes where families are in the process of cultural and linguistic change or where incomes are low, this type of cultured reading in the peer group is actively encouraged and is regarded as particularly helpful for children's reading development.

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Children's Books

Astrosaurs (Steve Cole)
Encyclopaedia Brown (Donald J. Sobol)
Geronimo Stilton (Elisabetta Dami)
Go Girl (Rowan McAuley)
Horrid Henry (Francesca Simon)
Horrible Science (Nick Arnold)
Horrible Histories (Terry Deary)
Magic Kitten (Sue Bentley)
Mr Midnight (James Lee)
Mr Mystery (James Lee)
Murderous Maths (Kjartan Poskitt)
My Magic Pony (Sue Bentley)
Pet Finders Club (Ben M. Baglio)
Rainbow Magic (Daisy Meadows)
Stardust (Linda Chapman)
Secrets of Droon (Tony Abbot)
The Fairies of Starshine Meadow (Kate Bloom and Emma Pack)
True Singapore Ghost Stories (Russell Lee)
Tiara Club (Vivian French)
The Pony Mad-Princess (Diana Kimpton)
Usborne Puzzle (Susannah Leigh and Brenda Haw)
Winnie the Horse Gentler (Dandi Daley Mackall)