

Exploring the Culture of Reading Among Primary School Teachers in Botswana

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African nations have rich oral traditions that are often perceived to eclipse print culture. But a careful look reveals that among lower and upper primary teachers in Botswana, reading is important and valued—and that these attitudes toward reading can be transferred to students.

In Botswana and other African countries, it is common to hear the lament that there is no reading culture (Magara & Batambuze, 2005; Tella & Akande, 2007). Kay Raseroka (2006), the director of library services at the University of Botswana, explains that Batswana (citizens of Botswana) have relied on “orally based information networks and interpersonal communication for personal decision making, survival, and contributions as citizens” (p. 2). Reading the printed word in Botswana and many other oral societies was introduced and promoted by Christian missionaries (Landau, 1995). Reading became something Africans did for “utilitarian, functional and achievement purposes” (Macheng, 1982, p. 34).

We propose that there is an unresolved and persistent tension between reading print and conversation as preferred pastimes. This is illustrated in the following comment by a secondary school teacher who was interviewed for a study on literacy instruction in Botswana’s examination oriented environment.

We Batswana do not have a culture of reading like people in other countries, especially those in the west. Whereas people in the west would prefer to read a book than to talk to the person sitting next to them in a bus seat or talking to the person they meet at a bus stop, we wouldn’t do that. I realized this in England

when I visited my husband who was studying there. We are not like that. We talk to each other even if it’s the first time you meet a person. When we are on a journey together, we converse all the way and learn a lot from each other, and not only that, we might end up being friends. We are more sociable than people in the western countries. We believe in talking to each other not so much in reading books. (Molosiwa, 2007, p. 123)

We agree with this teacher’s perception that in Botswana most people do not read books in public places. When you do see someone reading in public it is most likely a newspaper, although even that is not common when people are waiting for transportation or when traveling in combis (minivans used for travel in and around cities and towns). We know these things because Bontshetse is a citizen of Botswana and Michelle is a U.S. citizen who makes yearly visits to Botswana.

We are teacher educators who shared an office at the University of Botswana in 1998 and who have collaborated on a variety of teaching and writing projects since that time (Commeyras & Mazile, 2001; Mannathoko, Mazile, & Commeyras, 2002). In June of 2008, Bontshetse contacted several school principals she knew in Botswana to ask if they would like us to deliver a workshop titled “Teachers as Readers AND Readers as Teachers: Creating Young Readers and Writers.” Four principals hosted this workshop at their schools. We created this workshop in response to repeated recommendations by researchers that schooling should be promoting a culture of reading (Molosiwa, 2004, 2007; Mpotokwane, 1986; Seeco, 2001). One way to get started on promoting a culture of reading is through teachers.

We doubt a culture of reading can exist without teachers being readers. We drew on Michelle’s experience with a group of teachers in the United

States who wrote about the potential of their personal reading to enhance their teaching of reading and language arts (Commeyras, Bisplinghoff, & Olson, 2003). If a culture of reading is an integrated pattern of reading behaviors, practices, beliefs, and knowledge (Behrman, 2004), then more information is needed on what teachers and students do and think that might actively create and maintain such a pattern. This information could then be used to design ways of promoting a culture of reading within schools among students, teachers, staff, and parents.

Background of Our Workshop in Botswana

Botswana is where the Kalahari Desert lies. Most of the country's population lives in the southeast portion of the country. This is a landlocked country that shares borders with South Africa, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. When Botswana declared independence in 1966, only 20% of children were enrolled in primary school (Ministry of Education, 1977). Today Botswana has achieved universal access to primary education, which consists of a 10-year basic education system (Republic of Botswana/United Nations, 2004). Schooling in Botswana begins with seven years of primary school followed by three years of junior secondary school and concluding with two years of senior secondary school.

Promoting a culture of reading has been a goal of the Botswana government. This is reflected in the 1994 revised national policy on education. One of the objectives in the revised policy was to "promote a culture of reading among Batswana" (Republic of Botswana, 1994, p. 27). The Botswana National Library Services described the culture of reading as follows:

"[I]t is mostly school-going pupils who engage in reading, and they don't have much choice as they have to read to pass their examinations. After schooling, it has been observed, very little reading is done. A few people who continue with further education at university or at technical/professional institutions read within their field of studies. Most, if not all, material at tertiary level comes from outside the country. Because of the low readership, publishing output is skewed towards educational materials, which have a reasonable market." (Masalila, 2008, p. 23)

Promoting a culture of reading is considered important in advancing students' reading abilities and

achievement. However, in 2000, four-fifths of the standard six (grade 6) students failed to reach the desirable standards set by the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) assessment of reading and mathematics (Keithelle & Mokubung, 2005). Only 24.3% of these students reported being asked to read at home or being asked questions about what they read, while the teachers complain that "they cannot interest their students in reading anything which is not required for class" (Hamblett, 1977, p. 17).

Conditions such as these are why there are continued calls for promoting a culture of reading in Botswana. Precisely what is meant by *culture of reading* remains unclear, in part, because the government has not provided anything specific about it as an educational objective. Our position is that the existing culture of reading needs to be investigated because the concept is used monolithically as though it means the same thing everywhere and to everyone (Commeyras, 2001).

The culture of reading in one Botswana junior secondary school was studied by Molelo and Cowieson (2003), who used a case study design to interview students who reported that they liked reading fiction, magazines, and comics. The students also reported reading as one of the most enjoyable parts of learning because it was an opportunity to learn about other cultures while enabling them to improve the English skills needed to pass examinations. The students preferred group or paired reading because they could help one another.

In the Molelo and Cowieson (2003) case study, interviews were conducted with five teachers, the headmaster, and personnel at the local public library. It was reported that teachers rarely visited the library, and there was no cooperation between the school and the public library. Based on classroom observations and interviews conducted over a four-week period, Molelo and Cowieson (2003) opined that "inculcating a culture of reading calls for a radical change in the teaching methodologies employed by teachers" (p. 117) and that "teachers themselves lack a culture of reading" (p. 125).

More recently, a survey study of reading habits and attitudes across 10 primary schools in and around two cities (Gaborone and Francistown) found that 150 students viewed reading mostly for passing examinations, and many were dissatisfied with reading materials in their school libraries (Tella

& Akande, 2007). These students felt that reading textbooks, novels, and lecture notes was more significant than reading magazines, drama, poetry, or comics.

In another survey, Mathangwane and Arua (2006) studied reading in two rural communities and found that most of the adults liked to read the Bible, a hymn book, newspapers, or magazines. Their children primarily read school textbooks at home.

Also relevant are findings reported by Nguyen, Wu, and Gillis (2005) that teachers' reading scores contributed to some of the variance in standard six students' reading performance on the 1999–2000 SACMEQ study. They recommended that more be done to improve teachers' knowledge and skills in reading. While a stronger culture of reading seems important, there is also some evidence that Batswana are voluntary readers when they have access to materials that suit their personal interests.

Workshop Rationale

We created a workshop to get teachers thinking about themselves as readers and to encourage them to merge the African oral tradition that values conversation with the need to get students reading more in and out of school. The support for our approach comes from the findings of research studies in the United States on teacher effectiveness, wide reading, text-based discussions, book clubs, and teachers as readers.

For example, teachers who demonstrate a personal love for pleasure reading encourage their students to read and discuss books often (Pressley, Mohan, Raphael, & Fingeret, 2007). Literacy levels increase when students read frequently and widely (Anderson, 1996). Teachers who want to foster student independence and self-directed learning are encouraged to provide students with frequent opportunities to discuss what they read (Alvermann et al., 1996). One way to create more discussion is to use book clubs as part of instruction (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). In a survey study of 2,000 elementary school teachers a significant linear relationship was found between teachers who read personally and their use of recommended literacy practices (Morrison, Jacobs, & Swinyard, 1999).

Workshop Participants

Of the 86 teachers who turned in questionnaires, 62 checked the box for female, 13 for male, and 11 did

not respond. The imbalance between female and male teachers who attended is not unusual given that teaching at the primary level is dominated by women. The teachers varied with regard to the level of education they had attained. Sixteen reported earning degrees, 26 earning diplomas, and 26 earning certificates. Half the participants reported teaching in the lower primary grades (standards 1–4) and the other taught in upper primary grades (standards 5–7).

Although the workshops were held at four primary schools, some teachers came from other schools to attend the workshop. One primary school was located in the capital city of Gaborone, whereas the other three schools were in semiurban villages on the outskirts of Gaborone. The average length of service reported by the teachers was 15 years, with some being first-year teachers and several having taught 29 or 30 years. Although we have no basis for claiming that this group of teachers is representative of *all* primary school teachers in Botswana, they do represent a range with regard to education and years of teaching.

Workshop Description

We launched each workshop with this rhetorical question: Would you want a music teacher who did not like listening to music or did not enjoy making music? We then asked if the teachers thought students were likely to become voluntary readers if they were being taught by someone who does not enjoy reading or demonstrate the habit of reading. Second, we read them "The Reader's Bill of Rights" (Pennac, 1994) as a way of stimulating their thinking about themselves as readers or nonreaders. This is paraphrased as follows:

1. The right not to read
2. The right to skip pages
3. The right not to finish
4. The right to reread
5. The right to read anything
6. The right to escapism
7. The right to read anywhere
8. The right to browse
9. The right to read aloud
10. The right not to defend your tastes

Third, we shared some information from a university course that resulted in a collection of essays written by teachers about the importance of reading in their lives personally and professionally (Commeyras et al., 2003). This led to a description of how book clubs could be used with students to encourage more reading in and out of school. We encouraged the teachers to consider forming their own reading clubs in ways that could occur during school hours. One possibility was to read short selections and talk about them over the lunch period once a month.

Fourth, we encouraged the teachers to engage their students in creating simple books as a means of expanding the reading materials available within each classroom. We showed how these books could be made with everyday materials such as paper, elastics, cardboard from cereal boxes, gift wrap, and even sticks found in the school yard.

Fifth, we introduced the idea of writing acrostic poems as an easy way for teachers and students to create content to put in the simple books. After sharing a sample acrostic poem, we asked the participants to write their own. Then participants read their poems to the group.

Sixth, we provided teachers with a reading interest questionnaire they could give to their students to learn more about students' reading habits and preferences. Researchers have learned a lot by surveying student reading habits, preferences, and opinions (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). We encouraged the teachers to modify existing reading interest surveys or to create their own based on what they wanted to know about their students as readers.

Finally, we asked the teachers to answer a one-page questionnaire at the end of each workshop (see Figure 1); analysis of teacher responses appear

Figure 1
Reading Interest Questionnaire for Teachers

School: _____ Length of Service: _____

Teaching Level: Lower Upper

Education Level: Certificate Diploma

Gender: Male Female

1. Which of these have you read in the past month? (check all that apply)

- Magazines
- Newspapers
- Educational books
- Books for pleasure
- Religious texts
- Internet websites

2. Which do you prefer? Number in order of preference.

- Reading a book
- Listening to the radio
- Watching television
- Going to the movies
- Surfing the Internet

3. What is the title or author of the last book you enjoyed reading? (When did you read it?)

4. Do your students know you as someone who reads outside of school?

5. Do your students read outside-of-school assignments?

6. Would you (as a teacher) be interested in participating in a teacher book club?

7. Do you think your students would be interested in being in a book club?

in the next section. It should be noted that initially we collected this information to give to the principals to help them plan follow-up activities. Unfortunately, we do not have any follow-up feedback from the principals because three of the four principals were reassigned to other positions. Nonetheless, the information we gathered from the teachers is important and presents a more detailed understanding of reading in Botswana. The information may be useful, as well, to anyone working in settings where there are calls for developing and promoting a culture of reading.

Questionnaire Responses

Recent Reading

There are many types of reading material in the world. Based on our knowledge of Botswana, we knew what categories of material are available from street vendors, shops, schools, churches, libraries, reading rooms, and Internet cafés. We asked the teachers to indicate which of the following they had read in the past month: magazines, newspapers, educational books, books for pleasure, religious texts, and Internet websites. The teachers were instructed to check all that they had read in the past month (see Figure 2).

Almost all the teachers reported reading newspapers. This makes sense because newspapers are readily available and more affordable than magazines, books, or the Internet, which usually requires paying for time at an Internet café. In Botswana, there are two daily newspapers and five weekly newspapers that have been in circulation since the 1980s (Nyamnjoh, 2002). *The Botswana Daily News* (Dikgang Tsa Gompieno), a state-owned newspaper that is available Monday through Friday, features articles in both English and Setswana.

In a survey of media use conducted throughout Botswana (Thapisa, 2003), it was found that three quarters (75.4%) of a randomly sampled national population reported reading newspapers daily (23.3%) or occasionally (22.9%). Furthermore, when Arua and Lederer (2003) surveyed first-year humanities students at the University of Botswana on their reading interests and habits, they found that 57% of 77 respondents frequently read Botswana newspapers. Also, Molosiwa (2007) reported that teachers of Setswana in secondary schools used *The Botswana Daily News* because it is free and has content in Setswana.

In our questionnaire, the high percentage of teachers who reported reading educational books was more difficult to interpret. Perhaps they meant reading professional materials, or perhaps they had

Figure 2
Questionnaire Responses Indicating Teachers' Reading Materials

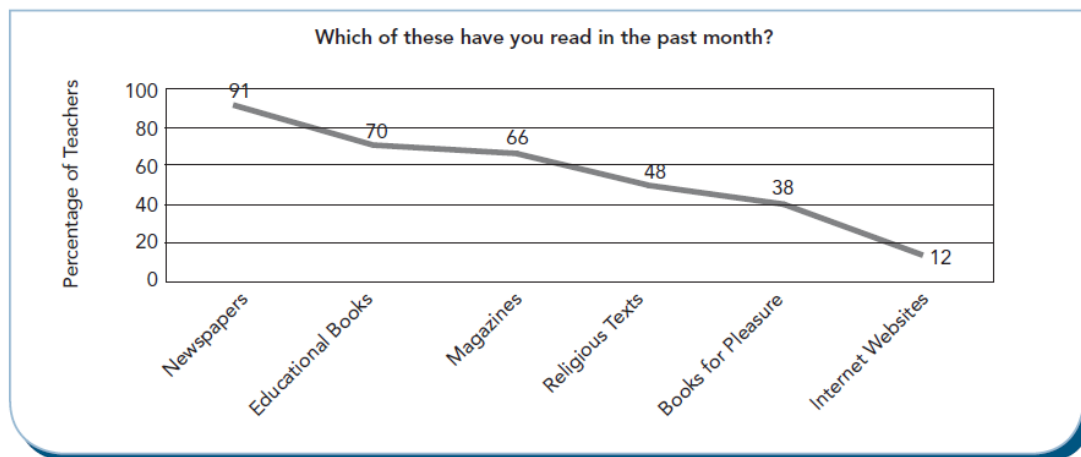




Photo by
M. Commyras

in mind the books they use while teaching their students. Molosiwa (2007), who surveyed 30 secondary school teachers, found that most responded that they seldom read books beyond what was needed for school purposes.

More than half of teachers reported reading magazines. We have observed that most of the magazines available in grocery stores, book stores, and other shops are from South Africa or countries outside Africa. This may be why Arua and Lederer (2003) found that those beginning university studies preferred reading foreign magazines.

The reading of religious texts was reported by almost half of the teachers. It is common on Sundays to see people walking with Bibles in hand, because 72% of the population identifies as Christian (www.nationmaster.com/country/bc-botswana/rel-religion); there are many denominations and churches within the country.

Only 10 teachers reported having read on the Internet in the past month. Perhaps most teachers do not have access or are not seeking it. It has been estimated that only 5% of the population of Botswana uses the Internet (www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm).

Reading as Compared With Other Activities

The second item asked the teachers to rate their preference for reading in comparison with other pastimes such as listening to the radio, watching television, going to the movies, and surfing the Internet. The instructions were to use numbers to indicate their order of preference (see Table 1).

More than half of the 86 teachers listed their first or second preference to be listening to the radio, reading a book, or watching television. According to Thapisa (2003), more than 90% of those who live in cities, towns, urban villages, and villages own radios. Those living in cities are more likely to own televisions. It is notable that reading a book was at least as popular as the listening to radio or watching television.

Going to the movies and surfing the Internet were not preferred pastimes for most teachers. There were four teachers whose first or second preference was surfing the Internet, yet three of them had not done so in the past month. Only one male teacher indicated an interest in the Internet. The fact that most teachers do not use the Internet probably is due to their lack of access.

Last Enjoyable Read

The third question teachers answered was, What is the title or author of the last book you enjoyed reading? Parenthetically, we asked when they had read it. We have classified the responses to shed light on what types of texts teachers enjoyed reading (see Table 2).

Eleven teachers did not provide any response to this question, and one simply wrote, "A lot of books read." Seven teachers listed two titles while

Table 1
Number of Teachers Indicating Order of Preference for Five Activities

Order of preference	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	No response
Reading a book	25	25	24	3	2	6
Listening to the radio	32	25	21	2	1	3
Watching television	24	29	20	4	2	6
Going to the movies	0	0	5	36	19	25
Surfing the Internet	3	2	4	17	32	27

Table 2
Title or Author of Last Book Teachers Enjoyed Reading

Genre	Total responses	Examples
Fiction		
African literature	26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Love on the Rocks</i> by Andrew Sesinyi ■ <i>Things Fall Apart</i> by Chinua Achebe ■ <i>When Rain Clouds Gather</i> by Bessie Head
British/American literature	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> by J.R.R. Tolkien ■ <i>Macbeth</i> by William Shakespeare ■ <i>To Sir, With Love</i> by E.R. Braithwaite
Popular fiction authors	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Danielle Steele ■ John Grisham ■ Sidney Sheldon
Nonfiction		
Religious/spiritual	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The Bible ■ <i>Steps to Christ</i> by Ellen White
Self-help	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Finding Mr. Right</i> by Emily Carmichael ■ <i>The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People</i> by Stephen R. Covey
Informational	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization</i> by Thomas L. Friedman
Newspaper/magazine titles	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>The Drum</i> ■ <i>Garden and Home</i> ■ <i>True Love</i>

the remainder provided one title or author's name. Two of our colleagues who have taught English and African literature at the University of Botswana reviewed the responses (M. Lederer and L. Molema, personal communication, October, 2009) and concluded that about one-fourth of teachers listed titles or authors that are known to be required in secondary schools and colleges in Botswana.

Also, there were eight teachers who listed the Bible or other books about Christianity as their most recent enjoyable reading. There is historical precedence for this in Botswana as in other African countries where reading the written word was first introduced by missionaries for the purpose of reading the Bible. In addition, the Bible is probably the most widely available reading material.

Twenty-two teachers provided information about when they last read something enjoyable. The responses ranged from "still reading" to having read the title in 1980. Fourteen of the teachers wrote that the last book they enjoyed was within the past six

months. For three it was in the previous year, and for five others it was two or more years ago. The fact that two-thirds of teachers did not provide this information leads us to speculate that they could not recall when they had read what they listed as enjoyable.

Reading Outside of School

The fourth question sought the teachers' opinion with regard to whether their students knew them as readers outside of school. The fifth question asked whether the teachers thought students were reading at home beyond what was assigned. Figure 3 and Figure 4 show teachers' responses to these questionnaire items.

Almost half of the teachers thought their students knew them to be readers while more than 50% replied "no" or left the question blank. Thirty-three teachers who answered affirmatively also provided a comment or example of how their students knew they were reading outside of school. For example,

several teachers indicated that they tell their students about something they have read in the newspaper. Other teachers wrote that they summarize stories they have read. One female teacher with 25 years experience wrote, "Every Monday, the first topic is what I read about during the weekend."

There were also responses indicating that students actually saw their teachers reading at the library or at home. A teacher from Boswa Primary School who indicated she had only one month of teaching experience wrote that on the weekends students come to her home to "play school" and that is when she shares herself as a reader with them.

In her case study of reading in one standard four classroom, Seeco (2001) found that children who reported reading at home meant doing assigned homework. We found something similar in teachers' comments. Some of the teachers did not understand our intent to know if they knew whether their students were reading beyond doing homework assignments.

For instance, a comment such as "Books of their choice—then ask them to summarize what they have read" does not fit our concept of voluntary reading for purposes apart from school demands. Other teachers seemed to understand our intended meaning, as evidenced by their comments in which they listed what they thought their students were reading that was not school related, such as books (e.g., library, picture, supplementary), magazines, and newspapers.

Participating in Book Clubs

A book club is simply a group of people who come together to talk about a book they have all read. In 1982, Macheng recommended that secondary school librarians organize book clubs and reading clubs for students to promote the habit of reading in Botswana. The final two questions in our questionnaire asked the teachers about book clubs: (1) Would you (as a teacher) be interested in participating in a teacher book club? and (2) Do you think your students would be interested in being in a book club? Overall, the teachers' responses were positive for both questions. Very few teachers indicated that they were not interested in being in a book club. Some teachers thought that some students would be more apt to like being in a book club than others (see Table 3).

The teachers' comments are informative. One teacher wrote that if she was interested in book clubs, her students would follow suit. Some teachers

Figure 3
Teachers' Responses to Questionnaire Item "Do Your Students Know You as Someone Who Reads Outside of School?"

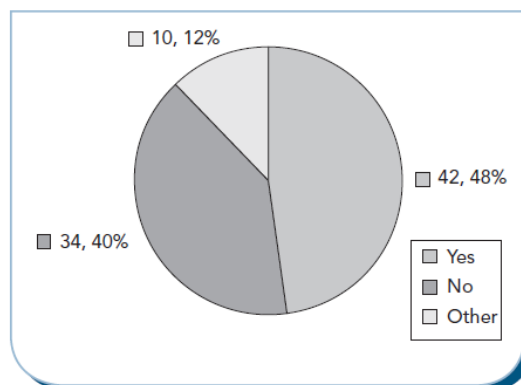
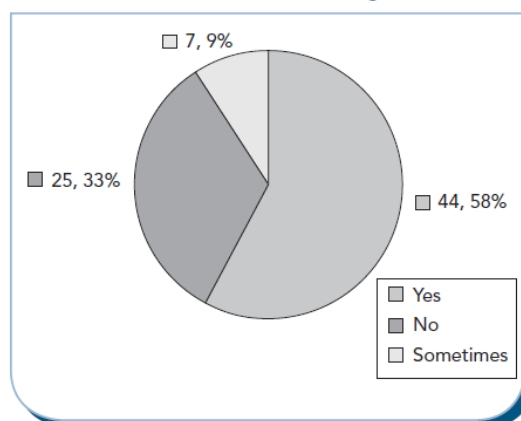


Figure 4
Teachers' Responses to Questionnaire Item "Do Your Students Read Outside-of-School Assignments?"



indicated that they had students who liked to read, stating, "There are those who show great interest in reading when others are playing. They will always have something to read on their own." One teacher added that using book clubs would support her ongoing efforts to encourage reading. Several teachers commented that a book club for students would assist with their learning from one another and provide an opportunity to explore and understand more.

Table 3
Interest in Book Clubs for Teachers and Students

Response	Teacher	Student
Yes	79	73
Some	0	5
Maybe	0	7
No	5	0
Missing	2	1
Totals	86	86

Some teachers wrote about the obstacles they foresaw, despite being in favor of using book clubs with students:

I think they can like it. The only problem is that we stuff them with too much work to copy the books into their notebooks. They end up reading word by word so as to complete the work for the day. (Female teacher with 20 years experience)

This teacher's concern is an important reminder that the current methods of teaching reading may be far different from what should occur in a book club in which the emphasis is on students having the freedom to respond in a variety of ways to what has been read. Participating in a book club should be a more open-ended experience; it should not be about answering questions provided by the teacher.

Another teacher focused on the reading ability of students when she wrote, "Yes, but only those who are able to read." Indeed, the difficulty of a book would have to be matched to the students' reading abilities. In general, when students are expected to read independently they should have texts where they know most of the words. If the teacher is there to provide guidance, then more difficult material can be read but, again, the recommendation is that students know many of the words so they can concentrate on meaning as opposed to decoding word after word. It would be counterproductive to give students material to read that leads to a frustrating reading experience.

With regard to participating in a book club for teachers, the concern about time was mentioned: "Yes where time allows, I am willing to." There were teachers who added that they were "very much

interested" in participating. One teacher saw as a benefit the opportunity to learn more that could be passed along to students, writing, "Yes, to learn a lot so I can pass it to my students and also the fact that I am still a student it will be a benefit for me." Another new teacher wrote "Obviously yes, because I want to live as an example to my students."

What We Learned

What we learned from teachers challenges the generalization that "Botswana is not a reading nation" (Seboni & Swartland, 2009, p. 15). We have evidence that among teachers there is a kind of reading culture even if it is unlike that found in other parts of the world. We learned that it is more common for teachers to engage in reading newspapers than novels. However, when teachers were specifically asked about remembering something they enjoyed reading, they recalled more fiction than nonfiction. The teachers enjoyed reading African literature along with novels by non-African authors. We also learned that teachers read for educational and spiritual purposes.

Teachers indicated a willingness to try new reading practices such as book clubs. They thought book clubs might interest and benefit their students. Like Macheng (1982), we would like to see book clubs introduced in schools as well as in the community through the village reading rooms.

Reading as an aspect of identity was acknowledged by those teachers who thought their students knew them to be readers outside of school time. Some teachers seemed to have thought about whether their students were readers beyond what was assigned in school. We find ourselves wondering to what extent people in Botswana would claim reading as a dimension of their identity.

There is much more to learn about what constitutes a culture of reading among teachers, students, and others in Botswana. We offer several empirical questions worthy of research:

1. In what ways are reading and writing significant habits in the lives of teachers?
2. In what ways do teachers share their reading and writing selves with students?
3. In what ways can a culture of reading and writing literacy complement oral literacy traditions?

Research is needed to investigate these and other questions about the interrelatedness of reading, writing, and orality among teachers as readers, students as readers, and society. We encourage others in Africa who advocate for the promotion of reading to investigate more specifically what a culture of literacy would mean in their particular contexts.

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