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KAROLINA RETALI, VASSILIA HATZINIKITA, AND POLYXENI MANOLI



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Students' Attitudes toward Reading for Pleasure in Greece

Karolina Retali,¹ Hellenic Open University, Greece
Vassilia Hatzinikita, Hellenic Open University, Greece
Polyxeni Manoli, Hellenic Open University, Greece

Abstract: Research has indicated that students with more positive attitudes toward reading for pleasure tend to read more often, leading to higher reading achievement. As Greece is a country with below-average reading achievement in all PISA assessment cycles and with very limited related nationally representative research available, it is deemed important to examine factors related to attitudes toward reading for pleasure in Greece and explore any relation to reading achievement. Therefore, the present study, with the use of multilevel modelling analysis of the most recent relevant PISA database, examines factors related to fifteen-year-old students' attitudes toward reading for pleasure in Greece, focusing on reading achievement, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES). Findings indicated that there is a positive relation between students' reading for pleasure attitudes and their reading achievement, as well as a weak but positive relation between reading for pleasure attitudes and SES. In addition, boys were found with more negative attitudes toward reading than girls, even after controlling for reading achievement. The present study offers valuable insights for policy and practice and suggests that the promotion of reading as a meaningful recreational activity should constitute a major focus on behalf of parents, teachers, schools and government.

Keywords: Attitudes, Gender, Greece, PISA, Reading Achievement, Reading for Pleasure, Socioeconomic Status, Students

Introduction

Reading for pleasure is considered an essential life skill that contributes to personal, educational, and social development (Clark 2011; Clark and Rumbold 2006; Mullan 2010). Reading for pleasure can be defined as “people’s reading based on their own free will, including materials that reflect their own choice, at a convenient time and place” (Clark and Rumbold 2006, 6). In particular, research indicates that reading for pleasure is an activity that could enhance: reading and writing skills, vocabulary, general knowledge and educational success (Clark and Rumbold 2006; Cox and Guthrie 2001; Cunningham and Stanovich 1998; Krashen 2004; Lee and Krashen 1997; OECD 2010).

Reading attitudes have been defined by McKenna (1994) as readers’ affect toward reading. According to McKenna and Kear (1990), attitudes toward reading are based on a psychological construct with two main dimensions: attitudes toward reading for pleasure and attitudes toward academic reading. Research on attitudes toward reading consistently provides evidence that girls have more positive attitudes toward reading than boys, while the greatest gap has been noted for attitudes toward reading for pleasure compared to attitudes toward academic reading (Guthrie and Wigfield 2000; McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth 1995; Sainsbury and Schagen 2004). Clark and Douglas (2011) also indicated gender differences in attitudes toward reading for pleasure, highlighting that more boys than girls agreed with the statements that reading is boring and hard and that more girls than boys agreed that they enjoyed reading or going to the library. In line with previous studies, Clark and Burke (2012) found that females enjoyed reading more than males; they did it more often and sought out more reading opportunities, such as visiting libraries, suggesting that the gender gap in reading for pleasure and reading frequency was widening. McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth (1995) indicated that the gender gap in reading attitudes remained even after taking into account reading ability.

¹ Corresponding Author: Karolina Retali, Parodos Aristotelous 18, School of Humanities, Hellenic Open University, Patras, 26335, Greece. Email: kretali@eap.gr

In addition, consistent with McKenna's (1994) theoretical model regarding reading attitudes, where it is stated that students with lower reading achievement tend to have more negative reading for pleasure attitudes, empirical research findings support this suggested association indicating that poor readers tend to have lower positive attitudes toward reading for pleasure and vice versa (Clark and Douglas 2011; Lupo, Jang, and McKenna 2017; McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth 1995). In particular, Clark and Douglas (2011) and Lupo, Jang and McKenna (2017) found that students who read at or above the expected level for their age had more positive attitudes toward reading in contrast with their peers who read below the expected level for their age. Furthermore, McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth (1995) indicated that lower reading ability level was associated with more negative attitudes toward reading for pleasure.

Moreover, studies have found that students with more positive reading for pleasure attitudes had more successful reading experiences and read more often, leading to greater reading achievement (Clark and De Zoysa 2011; Gordon and Lu 2008; Sainsbury and Schagen 2004; Thames and Reeves 1994). The data from the international survey Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2006) also demonstrated that ten-year-old students with more positive attitudes toward reading for pleasure had substantially higher reading achievement scores than their peers with less positive attitudes. A meta-analysis by Petscher (2010) provided support for the association between reading for pleasure attitudes and reading achievement, indicating a moderate relation that was found stronger for primary school students compared to secondary school students. Overall, though it seems that high reading achievement and positive attitudes toward reading for pleasure go hand in hand, it remains rather unclear whether attitudes toward reading for pleasure boost reading achievement or whether reading achievement promotes positive reading for pleasure attitudes.

In addition, research demonstrated that socioeconomic status (SES) is an important factor related to reading for pleasure attitudes (Clark and Douglas 2011). Research pointed to differences in the frequency of book reading outside class for middle and lower income children (Pellegrini, Galda, Jones, and Perlmutter 1995). Moreover, according to the National Literacy Trust survey (Clark 2011), young people from lower socioeconomic class read less frequently than their more privileged peers. Also, reading attitudes have been associated with home literacy practices (Baker et al. 2001; Beech 1990; Mullan 2010; Neuman 1986; Rowe 1991; Shapiro and Whitney 1997), among which the amount of home literacy the child experienced before he/she entered school holds a prominent role (Hume, Lonigan, and McQueen 2012).

Regarding the Greek context, which the present study focused on, there is limited research on students' attitudes toward reading for pleasure, as studies mainly focused on primary education and types of reading for pleasure (Griva, Alevriadou, and Semoglou 2012; Malafantis 2005; Malafantis and Felouka 2013; Malafantis, Felouka, and Galanaki 2013; Vamvoukas 1990). Malafantis (2005) examined students' attitudes toward reading for pleasure in Greece, using a sample of 1,068 sixth grade students attending primary schools in Athens and the suburbs. He found that sixth grade students had rather neutral attitudes toward reading for pleasure (neither highly positive nor highly negative), with girls having overall more positive reading attitudes than boys. These findings were confirmed by a more recent study of Griva, Alevriadou and Semoglou (2012) including 405 fifth and sixth grade students from Greece, which indicated that girls had more positive reading for pleasure attitudes than boys. A higher percentage of boys stated that they preferred watching TV and playing videogames to reading, while more girls than boys expressed their preference to going to the library and spending money on buying books. In addition, Malafantis (2005) and Griva, Alevriadou and Semoglou (2012) found a statistically significant weak relation between reading attitudes and SES, indicating that students with higher SES had more positive reading attitudes. Moreover, Malafantis (2005) indicated a very weak but positive relation between students' reading achievement and reading for pleasure attitudes.

To the researchers' knowledge, there is no research with a nationally representative sample in Greece examining students' attitudes toward reading for pleasure in secondary education nor

studying the relation between reading achievement and reading for pleasure attitudes. Therefore, the present study examines whether fifteen-year-old students' reading for pleasure attitudes are associated with their reading achievement in Greece and explores factors indicated by research to be related to students' attitudes toward reading for pleasure. It should also be mentioned that it is the first time that both student level and school level are considered in the analysis of the data in a study examining students' attitudes toward reading for pleasure in Greece.

More specifically, the research questions of the present study are:

1. Is fifteen-year-old students' reading achievement in Greece related to their reading for pleasure attitudes?
2. Are gender and socioeconomic status associated with fifteen-year-old students' reading for pleasure attitudes in Greece, while controlling for reading achievement?

Method

Brief Description of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Survey

The PISA survey is an international survey, which is conducted by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) every three years, aiming to assess education systems in more than seventy countries/economies worldwide. More specifically, PISA assesses fifteen-year-old students' skills and knowledge of three key subjects: reading, mathematics, and science, focusing on one subject in each cycle of survey. The survey aims to assess the extent to which students at the end of compulsory education are able to apply their skills to real-life situations (OECD 2010).

PISA 2009 survey focused on students' reading achievement. Reading achievement is defined as "an individual's capacity to: understand, use, reflect on and engage with written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society" (OECD 2009, 14).

Sample

The data from PISA 2009 for Greece were used for the purpose of the present study, which constituted the most recent PISA data focusing on reading achievement. PISA 2009 data regarding Greece included a nationally representative sample and consisted of 4,969 fifteen-year-old students (2,557 girls and 2,412 boys) from 184 schools. Schools were chosen through stratified random sampling, while the geographical regions and the type of school (e.g., state or private, general or vocational school) were considered in order to render the sample nationally representative (Hatzinikita 2011).

Research Instruments

In PISA 2009, all students were given items assessing reading achievement. Questions included both multiple-choice items and open-ended questions. The questions were organised around texts and often included pictures or tables presenting real-life situations². Furthermore, students had to complete a twenty-minute questionnaire providing information about individual and family background and their attitudes toward learning and learning environment. In addition, school head teachers completed a twenty-minute questionnaire providing information about school characteristics³ (OECD 2009).

Variables Included in the Study

In the present study, the dependent variable was a standardized index for student reading for pleasure attitudes, as measured by PISA 2009. The PISA index for reading for pleasure attitudes included the following statements on a four-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree): a) I read only if I have to, b) Reading is one of my favourite hobbies, c) I like talking about books with other people, d) I find it hard to finish books, e) I feel happy if I receive a book as a present, f) For me, reading is a waste of time, g) I enjoy going to a bookstore or a library, h) I read only to get information that I need, i) I cannot sit still and read for more than a few minutes, j) I like to express my opinions about books I have read, and k) I like to exchange books with my friends.

The independent variables included in the study were: a) standardised reading achievement as measured by PISA 2009, b) the standardised PISA index of individual socioeconomic status (SES), and c) gender. Reading achievement was measured by PISA 2009 using a wide range of tasks with different levels of difficulty. Results were converted into a scale with an average mean for all the participating countries of 500 and a standard deviation of 100 test-score points. The PISA SES index was standardised before it was included in the analysis, with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. The PISA index of overall SES consists of three indexes measuring parents' occupation, parents' education, and home possessions. Open-ended questions were used to gather information on parents' occupation. Students' responses were then coded according to the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) (International Labour Organisation 1990). After coding parental occupation into ISCO, the codes were recoded into the International Socioeconomic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI) (Ganzeboom, De Graaf, and Treiman 1992), which provides a measure of the SES of occupations comparable across the PISA countries. In addition, in order to get comparable data across countries for parents' education, the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) (OECD 1999) was used to classify educational qualifications and study programmes (OECD 2012). Home possessions include sub-scales measuring wealth, home educational resources and cultural possessions.

²Examples of PISA 2009 reading items are available on the OECD website (<http://www.oecd.org/pisa>) and the Institute of Education Policy of Greece website (<http://www.iep.edu.gr/pisa>). OECD does not release all the test items used in PISA surveys, as these items have undergone rigorous procedures to ensure comparability across countries, which require much time, effort and economical resources. Therefore, most cognitive items are kept confidential, in order to be reused in other PISA surveys. However, the cognitive items released as examples from the OECD must be indicative of the type of items used in PISA surveys.

³The questionnaires that were distributed to the students and the school head teachers are available on the OECD website (<http://www.oecd.org/pisa>).

Method of Analysis

The data used in the present study were gathered taking into account that students are grouped within schools and therefore influenced by them. Therefore, a multilevel modelling analysis was conducted, which is considered the most appropriate method for the analysis of the associations of the independent variables with the dependent variable as it does not overlook the contextual effects (Teddle and Sammons 2010). The statistical programme MLwiN 2.27 was used (Rasbash et al. 2012). Variances at different levels were separated (Gelman and Hill 2006; Snijders and Bosker 2004). Standardised weights provided by PISA were used in the present study in order to account for the complex survey design.

Results

Variance in Attitudes toward Reading for Pleasure

The present study examined fifteen-year-old students' attitudes toward reading for pleasure in Greece and related factors. First, the variation in attitudes toward reading between schools and students in Greece was explored. Variance components model was estimated for a two-level model (student and school level). The outcome variable included in the model was students' attitudes toward reading for pleasure standardised. Based on the variance components model, the intra-class correlation (ICC) was calculated. The intra-class correlation (school level) showed that only 7.4 percent of the variance in self-reported students' attitudes toward reading for pleasure can be explained by differences between schools in Greece (see Table 1).

Table 1: Attitudes toward Reading for Pleasure between Students and Schools, as Measured in PISA 2009 for Greece

<i>Model</i>	<i>M0: Intercept-Only</i>	
	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	0.014	0.025
Student Variance	0.927	0.028
School Variance	0.074	0.013
ICC (ρ)	0.074	
Deviance	13748.521	

Source: Data Adapted from PISA 2009

Students' Reading Achievement and Attitudes toward Reading for Pleasure

Next, the possible association between Greek students' attitudes toward reading and their reading achievement was examined. Therefore, a variable measuring students' reading achievement (standardised) was added to the variance components model. The main effect of reading achievement was strong and highly statistically significant (0.423, *SE*= 0.016), indicating that high reading achievement is linked to more positive attitudes toward reading for pleasure (see Table 2, Model 1).

Table 2: Relation between Students’ Reading Achievement and Reading for Pleasure Attitudes

<i>Predictors</i>	<i>M0: intercept-only</i>		<i>M1: + Reading achievement</i>	
	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	0.014	0.025	0.001	0.17
Reading Achievement			0.423*	0.016
Student Variance	0.927	0.028	0.803	0.024
School Variance	0.074	0.013	0.022	0.007
Deviance	13748.521		12945.288	

* $p < 0.05$

Source: Data Adapted from PISA 2009

Gender and Students’ Attitudes toward Reading for Pleasure

Gender was added to the model as an independent variable, in order to examine whether differences between students’ reading for pleasure attitudes can be attributed to students’ gender. There was a large negative effect of gender on attitudes toward reading for pleasure, with male students indicating much more negative attitudes toward reading for pleasure (-0.673, $SE= 0.030$) compared to female students (see Table 3, M1).

Table 3: Differences in Students’ Reading for Pleasure Attitudes Based on Gender, Controlling for Reading Achievement

<i>Predictors</i>	<i>M1: + Gender</i>		<i>M2: + Reading achievement</i>	
	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	0.315	0.028	0.257	0.022
Male	-0.673*	0.030	-0.533*	0.029
Reading Achievement			0.357*	0.015
Student Variance	0.823	0.024	0.740	0.022
School Variance	0.053	0.009	0.017	0.005

* $p < 0.05$

Note: Female is the reference category in the model for variable measuring gender.

Source: Data Adapted from PISA 2009

This negative effect remained even after controlling for reading achievement (-0.533, $SE= 0.029$), with only a small decline in the effect, suggesting that male students have more negative attitudes toward reading for pleasure than female students, even when comparing students with similar achievement in reading (see Table 3, M2).

SES and Students’ Attitudes toward Reading for Pleasure

Moreover, the effect of students’ SES on reading for pleasure attitudes has been estimated. Students’ SES was found to positively relate to reading for pleasure attitudes (0.071, $SE= 0.015$). However, the effect of SES on reading for pleasure attitudes was weak and much smaller compared to the effect of reading achievement (see Table 4, M3).

Table 4: Students' SES and Attitudes toward Reading for Pleasure, when Controlling for Reading Achievement

<i>Predictors</i>	<i>M3: + SES</i>	
	<i>Coeff</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	0.267	0.022
Male	-0.550*	0.029
Reading achievement	0.334*	0.016
SES	0.071*	0.015
Student variance	0.735	0.022
School variance	0.017	0.006
Deviance	12498.22	

* $p < 0.05$

Note: Female is the reference category in the model for variable measuring gender.

Source: Data Adapted from PISA 2009

Discussion

The results of the current study agree to a large extent with the research evidence discussed earlier in the literature review (Clark and Douglas 2011; Griva, Alevriadou, and Semoglou 2012; Malafantis 2005; OECD 2010). More specifically, the findings of the present study, in line with McKenna (1994) theoretical model and empirical findings (Clark and Douglas 2011; Lupo, Jang, and McKenna 2017; McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth 1995), indicated that students in Greece who were better readers tended to derive pleasure from reading and held positive attitudes toward reading for pleasure; on the contrary, students who experienced reading difficulties tended to hold negative attitudes toward reading for pleasure. Nevertheless, Malafantis (2005) in his study with data gathered from Greece found only a weak association between reading achievement and reading for pleasure attitudes. The difference between the moderate effect that was indicated in the current study and was compared to the weak effect found by Malafantis (2005) could be due to the reading achievement measurement used in the two studies. More specifically, in Malafantis (2005), reading achievement was measured by using the school grade given to students in the subject of the “Greek Language,” while in the current study it was measured by using students’ scores from a test in reading achievement. Moreover, the difference in the strength of the relation could be due to differences in participants’ age and residence, as Malafantis (2005) examined primary school students coming mainly from Athens and the present study included a representative sample of secondary school students from all regions of Greece.

Moreover, according to the results of the study, boys in Greece were found to have much more negative attitudes toward reading for pleasure than girls, and these findings persisted even after controlling for their reading achievement and socioeconomic status. These findings are consistent with the findings from McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995) that indicated a gender gap in reading attitudes even after taking into account reading ability. McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995) suggested that differences between boys and girls in reading attitudes after taking into account reading achievement could be attributed to gender-specific cultural expectations.

In addition, in the current study, consistent with findings from Malafantis (2005) and other international research (Clark and Douglas 2011), there was a weak but positive relation between students’ socioeconomic status and reading for pleasure attitudes. Interestingly, this association was not as strong as that of the other factors (i.e. gender, reading achievement) also examined in the present research. Finally, it should be highlighted that in the current study only a small

amount of the variance in self-reported students' attitudes toward reading for pleasure could be explained by differences between schools in Greece.

The above findings point to a need for systematic qualitative research in this field in order to examine the reasons and possible effects of cultural expectations on the large differences in reading for pleasure attitudes between girls and boys, even after controlling for reading achievement. Also, the limited noted impact of schools on students' reading for pleasure attitudes as well as the relation between socioeconomic status and reading for pleasure attitudes, although rather weak, should be further explored. Developing students' desire to read for pleasure should be a key priority for teachers, parents, and governments (Cremin 2007).

First of all, teachers need to develop a classroom culture of reading for pleasure providing a variety of reading materials in order to boost children's interest in recreational reading; in this way, teachers can create a reading culture which will be cultivating the development of life-long readers, who find both purpose and pleasure in reading (Cremin 2007). Taking into account the diversity of reading literacy, which is not only limited to printed materials but also includes electronic texts, teachers should use electronic texts along with more traditional reading materials in order to motivate even the poorer readers to be engaged in reading (Frey and Fisher 2004; Linnakyla, Malin, and Taube 2004; Schwarz 2002). Also, taking into consideration the large gender differences in reading attitudes that were indicated in the present study, another suggestion would be that teachers include comics in their reading classroom culture in order to increase boys' or poor students' engagement in reading (Brozo, Shiel, and Topping 2008), which are shown to be a valuable tool for motivating reluctant and struggling students (Frey and Fisher 2004; Schwarz 2002). In addition, government should allocate funds to schools for libraries in order to develop a school library that fosters reading for pleasure (Baker 2003). In fact, school should become a place where time, resources, and space should be devoted to reading, which is viewed as a pleasurable and worthwhile activity (Clark 2011; Clark and Rumbold 2006; Mason 1993; Mullan 2010).

At the same time, parents and the home literacy environment contribute to the early fostering of love for reading (Clark and Rumbold 2006). Studies consistently provided evidence that parental involvement could be important for determining children's educational success, especially for those from lower social classes (Cheung and Andersen 2003; Evans et al. 2010; Melhuish et al. 2008; Share et al. 1983; Rowe 1991; Zellman and Waterman 1998). PISA 2009 did not include a measure specific to parental involvement, only for SES, but it is an important factor that should be examined in more depth in future studies in Greece. Given the importance of parental involvement in children's educational attainment, parents should promote reading activities at home from an early age, such as, reading to their children, buying children books as gifts or reading books on their own, in order to instill a sense of reading enjoyment and encourage reading for pleasure. Schools can also encourage and help parents take a more active role in their children's reading skills through literacy programmes, an initiative that has to be supported by government literacy policies as well (Rowe 1991). In this way, it is likely to minimise disadvantages related to students' socioeconomic status, which cannot be changed (Cheung and Andersen 2003; Linnakyla, Malin, and Taube 2004; Rowe 1991).

Overall, taking into account the benefits of reading for pleasure and the relation indicated between students' reading achievement and reading for pleasure attitudes, the promotion of reading as a meaningful recreational activity should constitute a major focus on behalf of parents, teachers, schools, and governments. The present study focused on secondary school students in Greece and used for the first time a nationally representative sample—looking both at the school and student level—and, therefore, could provide useful information to policy makers and practitioners by extending the existing knowledge of factors associated with attitudes toward reading for pleasure to secondary education in Greece. The findings of the current study could contribute to the understanding of students' reading for pleasure attitudes in Greece and, thus,

help the Greek education system provide students with equal chances to personal and educational development.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Karolina Retali: Adjunct Lecturer, School of Humanities, Hellenic Open University, Patras, Achaia, Greece.

Vassilia Hatzinikita: Professor, School of Humanities, Hellenic Open University, Patras, Achaia, Greece.

Polyxeni Manoli: Adjunct Lecturer, School of Humanities, Hellenic Open University, Patras, Achaia, Greece.

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