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Abstract

This research addresses the need to broaden students' understanding of scholarship from numerical constricts into an encompassing notion associated with service and citizenship. Participants read three works of fiction over a period of eight months: *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, and *Please Look after Mom* by Kyung Sook-Shin. Open-ended questionnaires and peer discussions helped crystallize their comprehension of the terminologies under study. Based on written accounts of students who believe that education's emphasis on science and technology should be complemented with humanistic studies, the outcome proves Kidd and Castano's Theory of Mind (2013) which posits that literature may be utilized as a formative vehicle towards the development of sensitive minds and hearts which are vital to make academic training oriented towards the common good. The themes that emerged from their reflections show an accentuated understanding of intelligence and the connection between study and service.

Keywords: reading fiction, study, service, citizenship

Introduction

Living in the 21st century brings with it some sparks of hope and optimism for the present generation of youth with their ability to carry on and improve political traditions and to strengthen the moral fiber of society. Now more than ever, young people have the skills and resources to participate actively in shaping society, even as commentators have bemoaned the apparently universal trend among the youth to resort to violence in the face of social conflict.

Without denying facts and without limiting ourselves to pessimistic reports about today's youth and their activities, adult professionals who study and interact with them need to be critical about the inadequate image being presented perhaps inadvertently in popular media. Such negative news reporting is a clarion call to take a proactive stance in documenting and helping young people to pursue their true and noble goals of becoming responsible agents of change. This study takes off from the consideration that they can and may grow in cultural understanding and service; they are willing and capable to think, feel and act for others' sake if given the helping tools to form their developing minds and hearts in a way that would lead them to become willing to decide and to act for worthy and noble goals.

One helping measure towards the development of sensitivity and understanding is by giving the youth the time and opportunity to read literary works of fiction (Oatley, 2013). Reading would afford them a glimpse into the inner world of people who are similar yet different from themselves, and who deserve sympathy and consideration as much as they do. Young people who are exposed to works of literature develop their empathic capacities that are the beginning tools for a life filled with understanding those

whom they might perceive as “others”; the ready disposition to understand and to be accepting of others is necessary for productive citizenship. By embarking on a study in which young people are invited to explore the idea of what constitutes learning and understanding by reading literary fiction, I aim to shed light on their role as citizens who, privileged with a formal education and gifted with an innate capacity to become dynamic transformers, develop cultural sensitivity and a better understanding of the human condition.

Rationale of the Study

One of the most significant developments in Philippine education has been the growing interest in identifying and educating the intellectually gifted, i.e., those who “manifest extraordinary skills in either or both areas of the academic and arts” (Proclamation No. 199, 1999). Although this interest now extends across the country with the adoption of a comprehensive K+12 curricula, recent educational reforms have focused largely on improving instruction in the fields of science, mathematics and technology, with the assumption that training the youth in these areas would equip them with the know-how for public service and shape them into citizens capable of paving the way to sustainable progress. Indeed, “the gifted and talented constitute the most important human resource of a nation to address society’s need for strong leadership” (PN 199, 1999). How is cultural reading effective in lending an orienting function to science, technology and mathematics (STEM) education? Does reading works of fiction have any value in forming cognitive states and emotional mindsets, such as seeing the connections between study and service, scholarship and citizenship?

The value and appeal of reading fiction literature as a cognitive-contouring, heart-forming exercise has been emphasized of late even by the business sectors. Although literature per se does not provide answers to economic crisis, malnutrition, global warming, or any of the challenges of sustainable progress, literature nevertheless “can bring a fresh perspective, especially when it comes to people matters,” (Biriotti, 2013). The introduction of the field of cognitive science in the 20th century has prompted educators to explore what happens in the minds of the learners (Bruner, Goodnow and Austin, 1956) rather than to concentrate merely on external factors as stimuli for learning. Reading has been regarded as a powerful shaper of mental processes and understanding the deep connection between reading and learning is a motivation to examine sound literary practices in the classroom (Ornstein, 1994).

Literature Review

B.F. Jones (1990) describes successful learners as self-directed, strategic, well-informed, and empathic. It is closely allied to the current emphasis on learning as a self-regulated activity: self-regulated learners are able to modify and monitor themselves using metacognition, self-awareness, self-efficacy and mastery towards a targeted learning outcome. Its ultimate goal is the acquisition of lifelong learning skills that would enable persons to become happy, fulfilled, and fulfilling members of society. For this to become possible, the youth need to develop human understanding and fellow-feeling, without which a sense of solidarity would be hard to achieve.

Coined by Kidd and Castano (2013), Theory of Mind (ToM) is developed when, as a consequence of being exposed to works of literary fiction, a person begins to understand what goes on in another's mind, and why others behave the way they do. ToM allows the reader to comprehend another's emotions, and to realize what another person may or may not know. The realization of another person's state of mind is understood to impact a readers' emerging identity as they use mental clues derived from reading about characters and their circumstances in order to guide their personal responses and decision-making (Nguyen & Frye, 1999). Understood in this context, reading is a step towards becoming self-regulated learners who recognize that their success involves the ability to understand others and do something constructive to foster solidarity; in other words, to view themselves and the world through the eyes of the others and be able to transform the present condition for the better. Jones (1990) further contends that successful students value listening to and learning from persons of different backgrounds and consider these encounters as inspiring and enriching their life experiences.

From a Vygotskian point of view, learning can lead to development, and by reading about the characters' emergent emotional and social behavior as depicted in works of fiction, reading as a cultural activity may accelerate the development of a mind that is enabled to understand others' perspectives and a heart that is disposed to be helpful and sympathetic before a pitiful human condition.

Research Question

This study addresses the need to expand students' understanding of education and intelligence from static and numerical constricts and to help relate these notions to the inclusive concepts of empathy, service and citizenship. This is in pursuant to the overarching goal of developing students equipped with the 21st century skills of communication, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity. This is undertaken by offering a range of works of fiction for students' personal reading and as part of the English program, and then seeking to answer the question: does reading fiction help expand students' idea of what constitutes intelligence and scholarship?

Method

General Descriptions

The study made use of existing data about the traits or features to which the participants, aged between 13 and 15, belong. Based on a research conducted in 2015 by Acumen-Harvestry Proprietary Research on Consumer Portraits, this age bracket is called "Generation Z." Substantiating quantitative data, their research painted a clearer picture of Gen-Z Filipino consumers: (a) they are digital mavens, born and bred with technology at their fingertips. Their moves are described as "borderless", i.e., their social circles are not restricted by geography but extended to their online activities. (b) They are getting older, sooner, in the sense that they acquire knowledge and information far beyond their years and not necessarily within the level of their critical thinking skills. They have a sense of realism and wisdom largely drawn from inspirations posted on social media more than from actual human experience. Driven by fast access to information, they get affected by social issues and tend to take a personal stand on it. They tend to overestimate bits of information – 43.75% respondents affirm the importance of knowledge of other countries, languages and cultures but underestimate the value of lived experience. (c) They are self-aware, sometimes to the point of diving into unhealthy levels of self-absorption.

Being introspective, they need to see the more serious and real suffering of others and become responsible sharers of those burdened by poverty and isolation.

Participants

The participants comprised of sixty (60) students with the majority aged 14 at the beginning of the study (forty male, twenty female) studying a Communication Arts and Skills in English programme in a public high school. Data were collected from students attending eighth grade during the school year 2013-2014.

Data Collection and Reading Activity

Prior to reading literary fiction, students wrote what they understood by the word, “scholar.” Their awareness was valuable to the study because it was meant to give an idea of the depth as well as gaps in their understanding of the word. This approach was adopted from the model developed by Goodman (2001) on *Vocabulary Self-Awareness*.

To the question, “What does it mean to be a scholar?” students’ answers generated the following ideas:

Table 1. Responses to the first question prior to reading.

Who is the scholar?	<i>N</i>	<i>f (%)</i>
A student who receives education for free.	50	83.3
A student who has very superior IQ.	47	78.3
A student who belongs to the upper 10% of his class.	34	56.6
Those who are under the tutelage of highly qualified teachers.	25	41.6

Reading Selections

The choice of reading materials matter. Kidd and Castano (2013) published an article in [Science](#) arguing that literary fiction — as opposed to nonfiction— temporarily enhanced a skill known as Theory of Mind, or the ability to imagine what might be going on in someone else’s head. Researchers found that literary fiction tends to focus more on characters’ interior lives than nonfiction or genre stories, thus developing the capacity for empathy.

As part of a year-long English course with a 1.2 credit value (average 4-hours per week), participants were required to read outside of regular class hours and on days and time determined by themselves three works of fiction: *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, and *Please Look after Mom* by Kyung Sook-Shin. A theme common to all three were learning and education. After a period of eight months, using open-ended questionnaires, students were asked to reflect on what their readings tell them about scholarship, education, personal happiness, and success. Over the school year, an array of facilitating approaches such as peer discussions, written narratives and personal reflection essays were utilized to help crystallize the participants’ notions of the terminologies under study: scholarship, intelligence, study and service.

The White Tiger. Balram Halwai, the protagonist, is the son of a poor rickshaw driver. Deprived of any opportunity for advancement, he convinces himself that education may be sought on the streets and pavements, in seizing opportunities for peddling and in the constant haggling and bargaining with

customers and fellow hawkers. Balram eventually becomes a self-made entrepreneur and climbs India's rigid social ladder. He describes himself as "a man who sees 'tomorrow' when others see 'today.'" The increasing competition and the self-consciousness of having climbed to the top through unjust means made him take one wrong decision after another, leading to his moral corruption.

Written by Aravind Adiga for which he won the Man Booker Prize in 2008, the novel was well-acclaimed and made it to the *New York Times* bestseller.

Things Fall Apart. The protagonist of the story, Okonkwo, was a brave and stalwart farmer who wanted to make a name for himself and prove that he was the portrait of a perfect man in the clan. Determined not to suffer the same fate as his father who never succeeded in any enterprise, Okonkwo worked very hard and eventually became very wealthy and popular. However, he was also much feared by everyone in the village. In the course of time, he became very violent and opposed to anything he regarded as unmanly and unfit for his idea of manly feat and strength: music, conversation, showing love and affection, which he denied even to his own son. Deep inside, Okonkwo was afraid of being regarded as a spineless failure the way his father had been regarded and who, unlike him, was tender-hearted. Ironically, Okonkwo could not reconcile his power and personal triumphs with the looming influence of Christianity, which values love and kindness above all things. Seeing that things were falling apart in the civilization he had always known, Okonkwo suffers in extreme frustration and commits suicide.

This African novel is probably the literature for which Chinua Achebe has been most known for. First published in 1958, it has been widely taught in the United States and has been translated into 50 languages worldwide.

Please Look After Mom. It is a poignant novel about the children's search for their mother. Told in different voices, each child recounts his or her memories of their mother and was sadly astonished that they knew very little of her, except for some vague childhood memories when their mother had sacrificed a lot so that each of them could go to school. Now successful, the children trace their roots in their desperate attempt to paint a picture of their mother, and realizes that in the hectic business of getting their own education in the city and making a name for themselves, they had forgotten their mother. The novel raises the question about what constitutes personal maturity, and suggests the idea that the search for their own mother paves the way for a deeper understanding of other people and of themselves. The loss of their mother evokes a loss of their inner selves, guilt over their ingratitude, remorse for not having sufficiently shown in the past some understanding and gentleness for her weaknesses and illiteracy – all told in a deeply moving way as each of the siblings experiences a shifting nature of personal identity. It evokes tenderness and pity and challenges the reader with some thought-provoking insights about whether fame and success were worth forgetting one's own roots and family.

Written by South Korean [Shin](#) Kyung-sook, this unforgettable book has won for the author the 2011 [Man Asian Literary Prize](#). The perennial relevance and universality of the theme promises this book to be a classic.

At the close of the school year, answers were sought to the questions: Did their writing outputs reflect an accentuated understanding of education and success? Did post-reading peer discussions explore the

connections between study and service, scholarship and citizenship, personal success and solidarity? Did their reading journey imply the relevance of framing the task of reading literary fiction as a potentially identity-defining experience towards becoming scholars with a cause?

Results and Discussion

For data analysis, participants' written narratives were scanned and responses were classified into categories. Data yielded recurrent descriptive words of what it means to be a scholar and four themes in particular were continuous across more than 45% the written narratives. An empathic outlook toward people previously thought of as "other" and relating one's own agency to helping less fortunate individuals is present in the tone of their writing.

The results show that most of the participants understood scholarship as possessing four specific personal qualities: hard work, cooperation and collaboration, love for others beginning with one's family, and being goal-oriented.

Table 2. Post-reading responses to the first question.

Who is the scholar?	<i>N</i>	<i>f (%)</i>
Hardworking and industrious, committed to academics	33	55
Mindful of others especially with one's family	30	50
Cooperative and collaborative learner	29	48.3
Goal-oriented, purposeful, forward-looking	27	45

Some of the interesting responses given to this question are given below to provide an in-depth information about how the participants deepened in their understanding of intelligence and education:

On hard work:

2: A true scholar is determined and disciplined

5: resilient, enduring, persevering, not giving up

#13: "He is persistent in his studies, thinking always of the future. Kung may tiyaga, may nilaga."

39: He is self-reliant. If we keep relying on others, we will not learn to survive on our own.

#61: works hard to achieve excellence in any field he chooses

On being mindful of others:

#4: helpful, has the habit of helping others without expecting gratitude

#8: selfless, loving and diligent for the sake of family

#15: has sense of love and affection to our parents and other elderly because nobody else can grant us wisdom more than they can;

#21: patriotic; has love for country

#46: closeness to familial bonds

#57: nurtures close family ties, including extended families

#58: respect another person's well-being, valuables, respectful of elders; "magalang"

On being a cooperative and collaborative learner:

#6: We have to help one another by sharing what we learn.

#10: He works with others, learns with others

#14: A true scholar has bayanihan spirit; knows "collective learning"

#29: advances forward without hurting anybody.

#33: kind, patient, warm, caring,

#37: has sympathy for others, loves others

On being goal-oriented and forward-looking:

#18: motivated to work for national progress amidst all [the scholar's] achievements

#23: has sense of doing what is right for the benefit of the country in the future

#51: reformed for the better

Over the course of the year, students became increasingly aware of the problem of lack of access to quality education and grew in understanding of its complexity *and* their privileged role to undertake and pursue service-oriented researches that would benefit the larger community. Reading experience thus becomes akin to a rite of passage, a defining moment, where they are emotionally moved interiorly challenged and engaged. As such many students in the course of their reading thought about their own role in enacting social change. Examples from the students' essays, reflections, and narratives show how reading literature may encourage students to see the connection between selfhood and learning as the ability to understand other people. Their reading experience of fictional literature supports the theory that creative literature is identity-defining and pro-social engaging. We may contend that it is an obvious consequence of reading activity in general – but such findings need to be articulated time and again if we English teachers are to influence educational policies and measure with informed decisions backed up by actual classroom experience.

Paradoxically, even if the literature used for this study were fictional, it would seem that, based on their answers, reading fiction helped them to balance idealistic and pessimistic viewpoints about societal problems and thus form a more realistic appraisal of what they can accomplish as citizens.

Overall, this study supports the previous research that young people who take time to read literary fiction fare better in recognizing the feelings of other people and in putting themselves in their shoes.

This is a useful idea in encouraging parents and teachers to foster reading at home and in school and in discussing books with them. Nurturing love for reading promotes not only a healthy pastime but also family conversations and emotional growth.

Interview with the participants after a period of participating in a literature-based program will help ascertain if such a mode of learning (voluntary, self-paced reading of fictional literature) have been pivotal in guiding their actions and defining their sense of who they are as late adolescents. Five years from now, are they studying and working with a clear consciousness that in fulfilling their obligations and employing their talents with rectitude, they are serving society?

Conclusion

The findings suggest continuity between reading and a deepening sense of identity in relation to others. The relationship between reading literary fiction and later involvement in service learning and solidarity activities may reveal a part of the process through which the seeds of citizenship and civic commitment are sown in youth. These findings demonstrate that it would be fruitful to explore further the influence of cultural reading and reflections in youth on different forms of civic actions in adulthood and, if productive, to investigate how personal reading and experiences on service can be encouraged. Research on reading fiction and non-fiction and its effects on adolescents can help in the implementation of effective values formation and service learning programs. An improved understanding of the interconnections between the emerging selfhood and society, between a highly rigorous academic curriculum, the importance of the habit of reading, and the development of a caring culture, may be essential to moving forward in our knowledge of how youth develop empathy and civic attitudes, and become instruments of progress.

The data from this study implies that understanding what constitutes scholarship in adolescence are pertinent to acquiring cultural sensitivity and understanding; and that the bridge between the understanding gap may be achieved by reading works of fiction. The findings illustrate a process in which one's relationship to society is not given, but must be constructed with knowledge of cognitive mindsets and emotional states, and of awareness of how people cope with their being already-positioned in society. Being active readers and consumers of literature, youth can reflect on their decisions about sustaining progress or changing the present order and determining the positions they will take in the future. While some individuals do not develop a sense of civic investment until adulthood and that the commitment of some adolescents may dwindle, the data suggests that the promotion of cultural reading and reflective attitude in adolescence can set a pattern that continues and has impact throughout adulthood in terms of understanding himself and others.

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