



PRAESA

Nurturing the growth of
biliteracy and multilingualism

A short report on the online *Learning to Love Literacy* course

In 2023, the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) ran an online course funded by the African Publishers Innovation Fund (APIF) aimed at contributing to deepening the impact of reading aloud to children across Africa. This report provides information and reflection on this intervention.

The context

Reading for pleasure refers to reading that we do of our own free will anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading¹. The extent to which this type of reading is an established and widespread social practice is often used by researchers as a measure of a society's level of literacy development. This is the case because in order for reading for pleasure and life-long reading to be an integral part of the social fabric, an intergenerational cyclical process needs to take root, which includes adults becoming literacy role models for children.

While many proponents of the value of reading for pleasure have long regarded it as the 'missing ingredient'² in children's language and literacy learning, more recent research providing evidence that reading for enjoyment is more important for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status³ has helped attract the attention of education policy and curriculum planners as they seek new ways to address the challenge of low or falling literacy levels around the world. Across the African continent over the last two decades, there has been a growing awareness of the

¹ Clark, C. and Rumbold, K. 2006. *Reading for Pleasure: A research overview*. London: National Literacy Trust.

² Krashen, S. 1993. *The Power of Reading*. Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, Inc.

³ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2002. *Reading for change: Performance and engagement across countries*. New York: OECD.

importance of reading for pleasure and the need for reading to take place beyond the school gates.

The primary form that reading for pleasure takes with preschool and early primary school children is reading aloud – where adults read storybooks to children. Over the past decade, much groundwork in popularising reading aloud to young children has been done by reading activists and literacy organisations. Projects like Nal’ibali in South Africa – which was conceptualised, initiated and implemented by PRAESA between 2011 and 2015 – have been instrumental in ‘normalising’ the notion of reading for pleasure⁴.

Since the inception of the Early Literacy Unit at PRAESA 23 years ago, we have worked with schools, communities, organisations and institutions, training, supporting and mentoring adults in offering children regular, personally meaningful engagements with text in the languages that they understand and know best. This experience has repeatedly made it clear to us that while reading aloud to children has the potential to positively impact literacy levels, if the texts selected by the adults and/or the reading of them fails to inspire and connect with the child-audience, the opportunity for significant literacy and language learning is heavily diluted.

Many of today’s adults were not read to as children and thus they are not able to simply rely on past experience to provide them with a repertoire of children’s books to read to children or modelled behaviours that make for engaging read-aloud experiences. Although the assumption is that professional training equips teachers and librarians to offer such engaging read-aloud experiences, the reality is that with the predominant global skills-based approach to literacy teaching – developed in the North – little emphasis is placed on the craft involved in informal book-sharing with children. Thus, even these two groups of adults – who act as role models for other adults and who *should* be well equipped to use effective read-aloud practices – often do not have an extensive repertoire of effective read-aloud behaviours and an ‘inner library’ of texts to draw on.

⁴ Bloch, C. 2018. ‘Story by story: Nurturing multilingual reading and writing in South Africa’ in *Children's Literature in a Multiliterate World*; Daly, N., Limbrick, L., and Dix, P. (eds.). UCL Institute of Education Press.

PRAESA believes that by sharing appropriate information and techniques, we can positively affect the way that all adults read aloud to children. Supported with funding from APIF, it developed and facilitated a short course to help maximise the language and literacy opportunities offered by reading aloud to young children as a form of reading for pleasure, by helping participants learn how to select books for reading aloud, read aloud in an engaging way and use a read-aloud story as a stimulus for imaginative and critical thinking.

Overview of the *Learning to Love Literacy* course

A newly developed course entitled *Learning to Love Literacy: The power and potential of informal book-sharing for children's language and literacy development* was aimed at adults in Sub-Saharan Africa who engage – directly or indirectly – with children in home, school, and community settings, for example: caregivers, librarians, literacy trainers, early childhood development (ECD) trainers, preschool and primary school teachers and community workers. It consisted of six free one-hour online live webinars facilitated by Prof. Carole Bloch held between 1 March and 5 April 2023 using the online platform, Zoom. The course:

- * shared insights drawn from integrative neuroscience that are important for understanding children's language and literacy development in multilingual settings.
- * provided examples of books for children published across Africa and other reading and story resources – including those available for free – that are available on the continent in local and in ex-colonial languages.
- * provided information on how to select books that are of interest to children and that are best suited for reading aloud.
- * provided demonstrations and guidance on how to read aloud in engaging ways.
- * provided insight into techniques that help children concentrate and connect with stories.
- * demonstrated how to talk to children about stories in ways that stimulate their imagination and critical thinking (rather than 'testing' children's 'understanding' of a story through factual recall).

Table 1 details the titles and dates of the six sessions. Six course handouts (totalling 11 pages), which consist of themed annotated lists of useful resources shared in the webinars (see Figure 1), were developed and provided to participants.

Table 1: Course webinar session titles and dates

Session number	Session title	Date of session
1	The power of reading aloud	1 March 2023
2	The power to participate: Getting to know compelling stories	8 March 2023
3	Filling our inner libraries: The search for compelling books	15 March 2023
4	Exploring books: Day by day	22 March 2023
5	Where does reading aloud lead us?	29 March 2023
6	The end ... is the beginning	5 April 2023

Figure 1: The course handouts



All webinars were recorded and edited. In order to make the course content more widely and permanently available, the webinar recordings, together with the handouts and this report, will be available for free download on the training page of our website from August 2023: <https://www.praesa.org.za/training/>.

Before the course began, all prospective course participants were asked to complete and submit a registration form that:

- * provided information about themselves, their motivation for doing the course and their current understanding of key position statements on reading aloud;
- * provided us with their permission to record and share the webinar sessions on public platforms; and
- * provided us with their permission to use the information supplied in the form for the purposes of research and/or reporting.

At the end of the course, participants were asked to complete and submit a course evaluation form. A summary of the data from both these forms as well as the session attendance records, and what can be learned from them, is detailed below.

The data and its lessons

The participants

Based on attendance at previous PRAESA online webinars, we assumed that between 50 and 80 participants would attend the course. However, initial course registration was much higher than this at 135 registrations. As is the case with many online events, actual course attendance was lower than the registration level with 98 registered participants actually attending one or more of the course sessions, meaning that the conversion rate from registration to attendance was 72.6 per cent. From the Zoom session attendance records it was clear that an additional 13 unregistered participants attended one or more of the course sessions. Attendance at individual sessions fluctuated between 41 and 68 registered and unregistered participants (*see* Figure 11). We also know anecdotally that very often one person from an organisation registered for the course but viewed the sessions together with fellow staff members using a single device (laptop or cellphone). Since we were not able to collect data on these

participants as well as other unregistered participants, the data below provides information on the 98 registered participants.

Almost two-thirds (66 per cent) of the registered participants were between 30 and 49 years of age (*see* Figure 2) and, while we advertised the course on Facebook and through the AIPF network and our colleagues in other African countries, most participants (83 per cent) were from South Africa (*see* Figure 3). Lower attendance from other countries may be due to PRAESA being less well-known in these countries as well as reduced internet access and/or less stable internet connection than in South Africa. Other African countries represented amongst participants were Eswatini, Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Zambia (*see* Figure 4). There was one participant from Germany and another from the United Kingdom – both of whom work on projects located in or focused on Africa.

Figure 2: Registered participants by age group

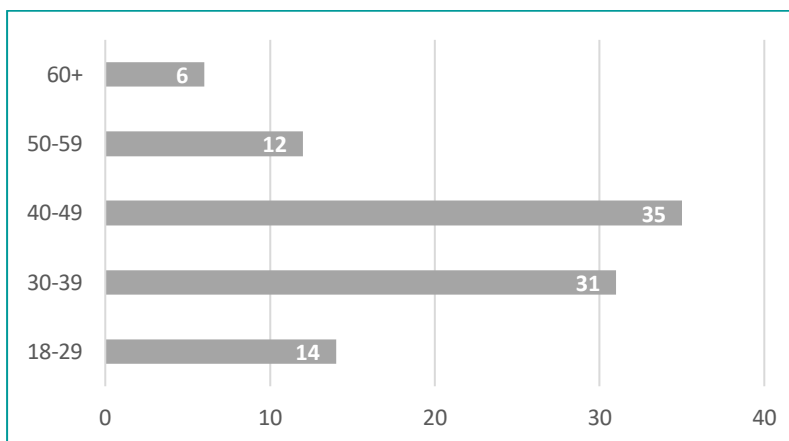


Figure 3: Percentage of registered participants from South Africa versus other countries

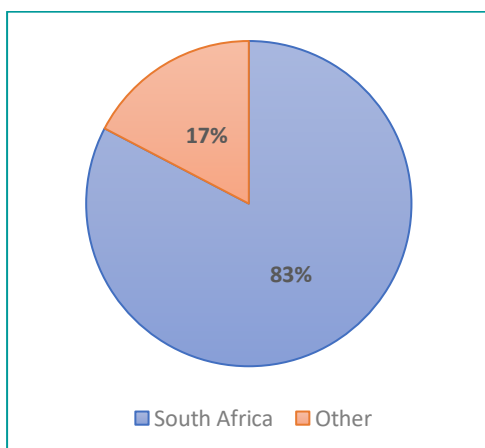
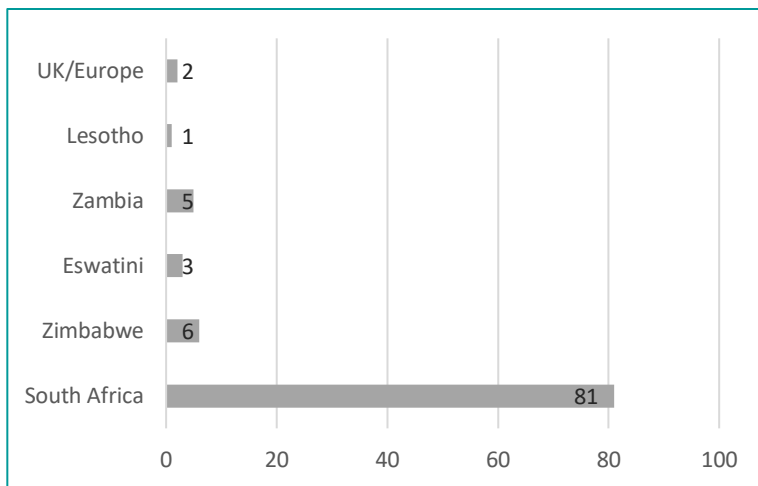
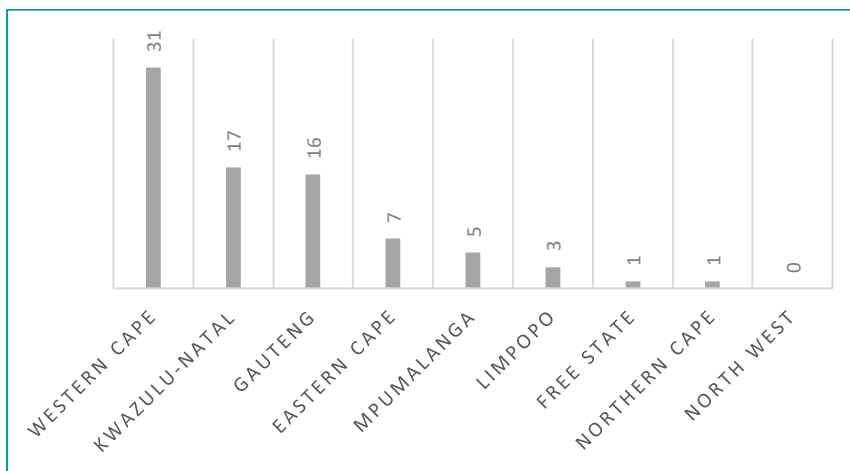


Figure 4: Number of registered participants by country



Within South Africa, most registered participants (65.3 per cent) came from three provinces (Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng), while there were under ten participants from five provinces and no participants at all from North West Province (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Number of registered participants from South Africa by province



In our initial planning we had estimated that 60 participants would be drawn from literacy and/or education non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or community-based organisations (CBOs) and 20 participants would come from libraries. Our estimation of NGO/CBO participants was correct but much lower for library participants (see Table 2). The range of work-settings that participants came from was broader than anticipated.

Twenty-three different NGOs/CBOs – working primarily in the literacy, ECD and primary education sectors – were represented amongst participants. (Five of these organisations each registered between 5 and 9 staff members for the course.) Course participants also included staff from ECD centres/preschools, primary and secondary schools, and tertiary institutions. The category ‘other’ in Table 2 includes a children’s isiXhosa author, a tutor, a government education department official and two owners of small educational services businesses.

Table 2: Number of registered participants per organisation/institution type

Type of organisation/institution	Number of organisations/institutions	Number of participants
NGOs/CBOs	23	60
Libraries	4	4
ECD centres/preschools	4	4
Primary schools	8	8
Secondary schools	1	1
Tertiary: teacher-training colleges/universities	3	3
Other	18	18

In order to identify which sectors the course’s direct and indirect beneficiaries come from, registered participants were asked to indicate the – often, overlapping – sectors in which they work or volunteer (*see* Figure 6). This data showed that while NGOs/CBOs were the largest direct beneficiary of the course, ECD centres/preschools and primary schools were the largest indirect beneficiary.

We were interested in understanding the participants’ main reason for registering for the course and so asked them to select which option from a list of four items best represented their primary motivation: ‘to help me be better equipped to do my job’, ‘to help me be a better volunteer’, ‘to help me be a better parent/caregiver’ or ‘because the topic interests me’. The majority (73.5 per cent) of participants indicated that they expected the course to help them be more effective in their jobs (*see* Figure 7). From the outset, we had deliberately chosen not to offer any form of certification for course attendance or completion because, understanding the vital role that motivation plays in learning, we wanted to attract participants who were sufficiently intrinsically motivated to attend. The percentage of people who registered because they wished to improve their professional effectiveness is significant because it implies that, despite the

intensity of international and local pressure to view literacy simply as a hierarchy of mechanistic skills to mastered by children, those working ‘in the field’ in the education and literacy sectors have at the very least an interest in exploring holistic and community-of-practice approaches to literacy learning that capture the more nuanced ways in which our children become readers over time as well as the role that adults as reading role models have to play in this.

Figure 6: Direct and indirect beneficiaries

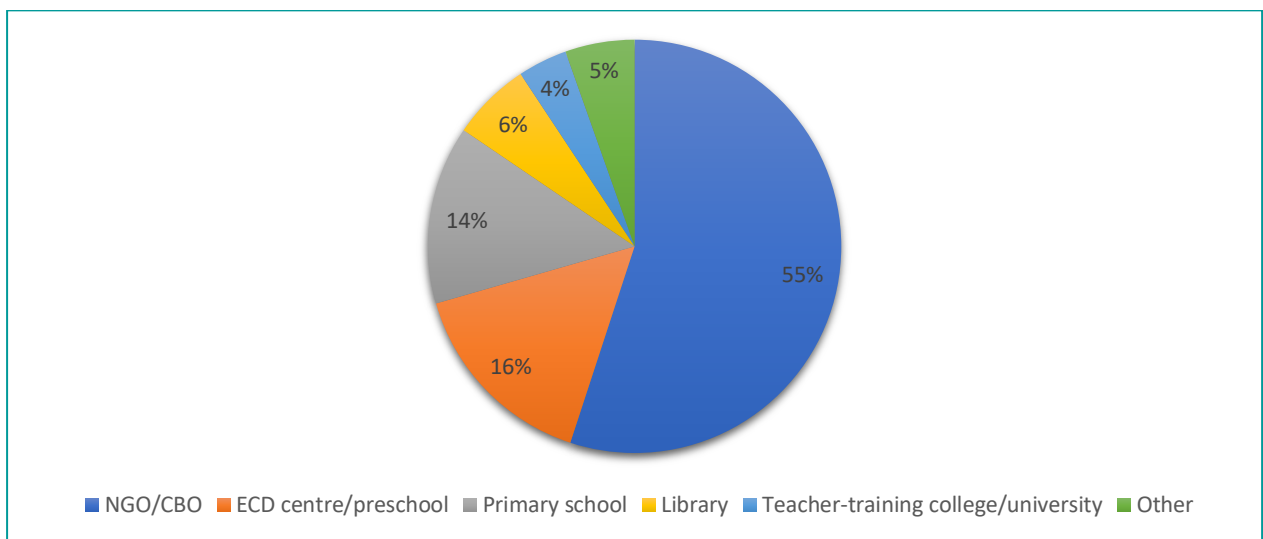
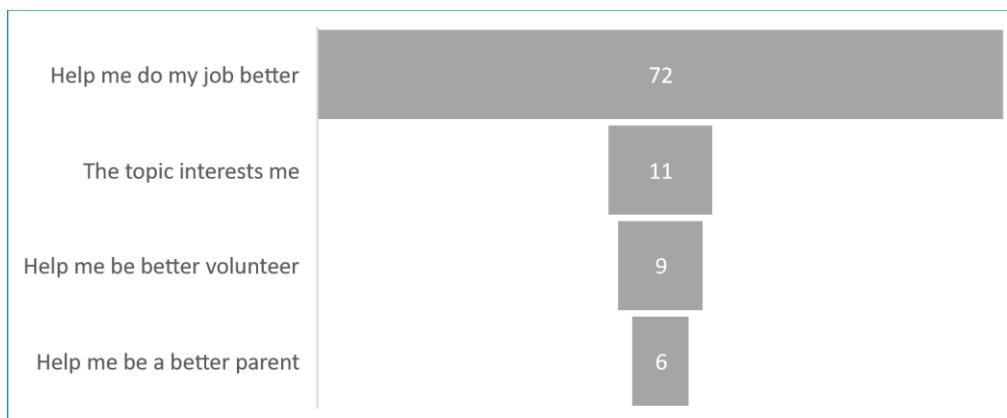


Figure 7: Participants’ primary motivation for course participation



Because we wished to develop a course that was responsive to participants’ current understanding of the critical role that reading aloud plays in children’s literacy development, we devoted 6 of the 13 questions on the registration form to this.

Participants were asked to indicate how familiar they were with the topic of ‘reading aloud’ (see Figure 8). More than half (53.1 per cent) of participants indicated that they had some basic understanding of the topic (see Figure 9) which was in line with our initial premise of the success campaign ‘messaging’ level has had at popularising reading aloud to young children.

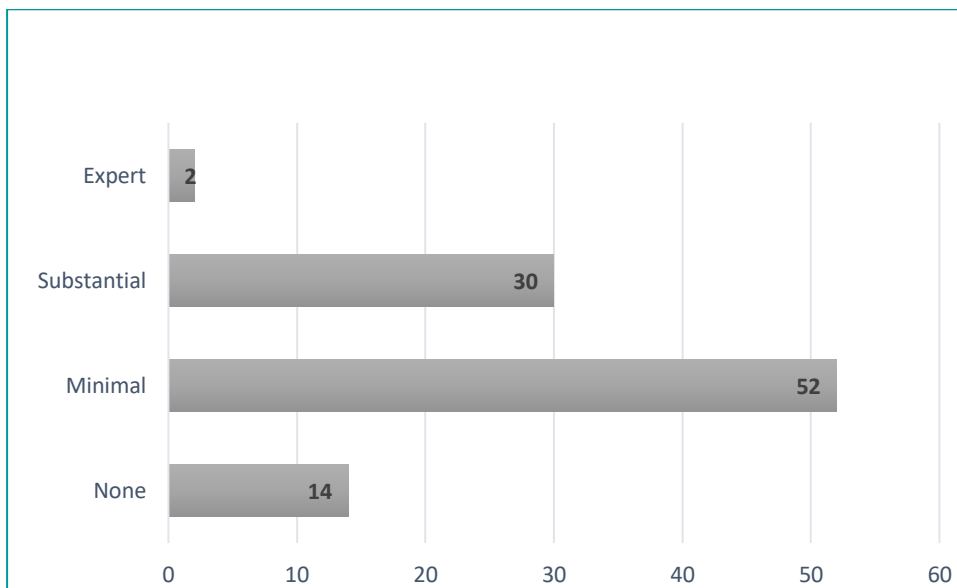
Figure 8: Extract from the course registration form

How much would you say you know about reading aloud?
Please tick/circle ONE option.

8. I know ...

- a) nothing – it’s a new topic for me
- b) a little bit – I have been introduced to the topic and I know the basics
- c) a lot – I have been doing this work for a long time and I have already learned quite a lot
- d) mostly everything there is to know – this is an area of deep expertise and special interest to me.

Figure 9: Participants’ level of prior knowledge (number of participants)



To test how close participants’ understandings of reading aloud were to the ones we would be promoting in the course, we asked them to respond to five statements (see Table 3). Again, the high level of alignment with the course’s underlying premises is indicative of the degree of penetration that has been successfully achieved by reading-aloud campaign messaging.

Table 3: Registered participants' alignment with the course's key understandings of reading aloud

Statement	Course's position on statement	Participants who agreed with statement		Participants who disagreed with statement	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1. Reading aloud to children is an enjoyable supplementary activity but it is not <i>essential</i> to learning to read.	Disagree	9	9.2%	89	90.8%
2. As we read aloud to children, they learn about written language and how books work.	Agree	96	98.0%	2	2.0%
3. When children can read for themselves, we should stop reading aloud to them.	Disagree	10	10.2%	88	89.8%
4. Adults are the only ones who should choose which books to read aloud to children. Children should not choose what we read aloud because they don't know enough to make good choices.	Disagree	4	4.1%	94	95.9%
5. How we talk to children about a story we have read aloud matters as much as how well we read the story.	Agree	93	94.9%	5	5.1

Although we had originally intended to measure the course's effectiveness by asking participants to respond to these statements again in a post-course evaluation, the high degree of alignment with the course's perspectives at the outset made this redundant and so they were not included in the evaluation form.

The course

The course was offered in English over a six-week period, with each weekly session being one hour. Session 1 focussed on what integrative neuroscience has to tell us about language and literacy learning, while the other five sessions focussed on how to share books with children – including short video clips providing demonstrations of adults sharing books with children of different ages – and where to find story resources. From the Zoom chat function used during the sessions, it quickly became apparent that

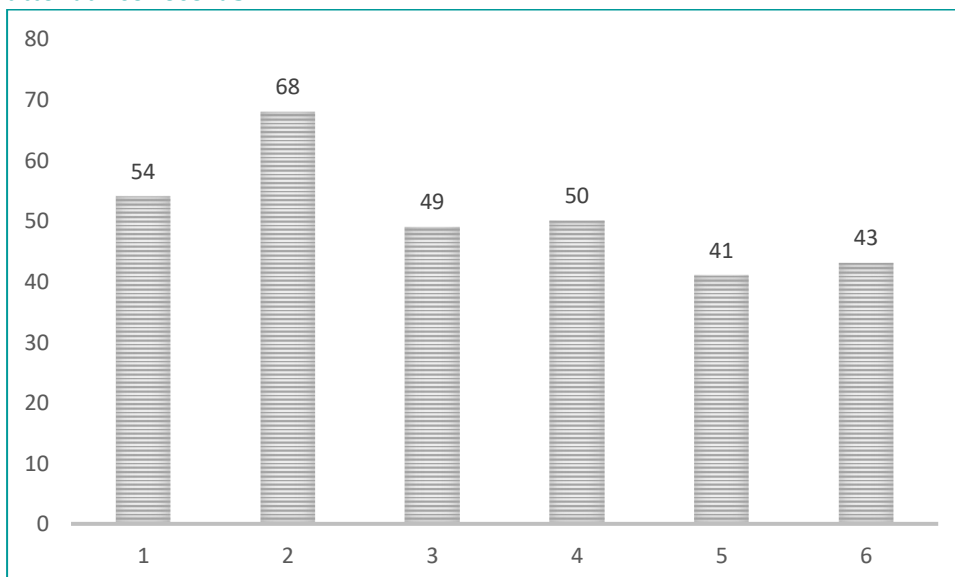
participants found information that we shared about resources invaluable and thus we decided that providing this information in the form of annotated themed resource lists (see Figure 1) would make the best use of post-course handouts.

Figure 10: The facilitator with some of the participants in session 1



Attendance at sessions fluctuated, with session 2 recording the highest number of participants and session 5, the fewest participants (see Figure 11). Factors affecting attendance were cited by participants as the ongoing loadshedding (scheduled electricity blackouts) in South Africa, prior work commitments and illness.

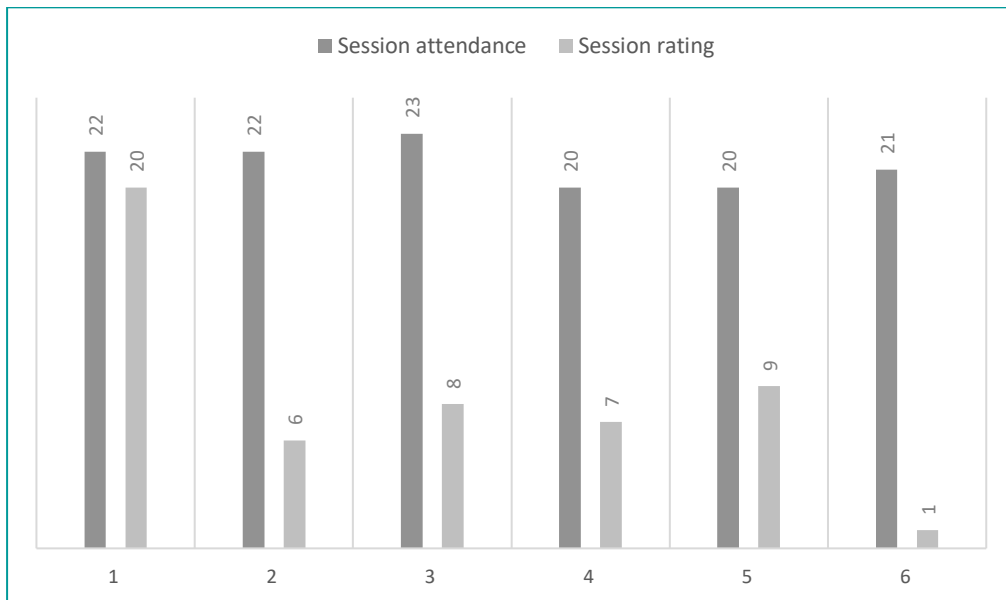
Figure 11: Number of participants (registered and unregistered) per session, based on session attendance records



After session 6, all 98 registered participants were sent an evaluation form, which they were asked to complete and return. Only 26 completed forms (26.5 per cent of all forms issued) were returned. Given our experience of face-to-face training where return-rates of completed evaluation forms are low unless course time is allocated for their completion, we anticipated this low rate of return. Of course, a higher number of returns, may have provided more diverse data but the available data the available forms offers is nevertheless useful.

Participants were asked how many of the six sessions they attended, which *two* of these they considered the most useful and/or interesting and which sessions they found the not useful or uninteresting. Only 12 of the 26 respondents (46.2 per cent) said they had attended all six sessions, while session 3 was the session which most of them had attended (88.5 per cent). All respondents except one (who found only session 6 not useful) reported finding all the sessions useful, but session 1 was the most popular session by far and the last session, the least popular. (*See Figure 12*).

Figure 12: Session attendance and rating, based on data from the evaluation forms



In order for us to understand the way participants had interpreted the course content, they were asked to write down two things they had learned from the course. Table 4 summarises this feedback and offers insight into, not only what made an impression on them, but also where the gaps in their knowledge and understanding may have been

before attending the course. This in turn, provides some insight into where more work by the reading-for-pleasure promotion movement is needed.

Table 4: What respondents learned from the course

What respondents reported they learned	Number of respondents reporting this
Recommended storybooks and story resources	8
Reading aloud to children is an impactful activity.	8
Stories offer many opportunities for ‘academic’ and ‘life-lesson’ learning.	7
How we learn (including, how we learn to read) is based on the way the human brain functions.	6
Reading to babies is important.	5
It is important for you to enjoy/love the stories you tell or read to a child.	3
Where to find free reading resources	3
Reading aloud ‘boosts’ a child’s imagination.	2
Reading aloud helps children learn how written language works.	2
Learning does not only happen in formal learning settings.	1

Our main take-aways

In conclusion, some of the lessons we have learned or been reminded of through offering this course are that:

- * free online learning opportunities have the potential to reach a broader audience more cost-effectively than is possible with a face-to-face course, but online courses exclude those who do not have good-quality, affordable and reliable internet access.
- * online-course participants may be more likely to skip sessions than participants in face-to-face courses so this needs to be built into the course design, for example, by starting each session with a ‘recap’ of the main points from the previous one.
- * while the message that reading aloud to preschool-aged children may have been widely communicated, many people still need do not recognise the value of reading to babies and to older children who can already read for themselves.
- * many of those working in the literacy and education sectors continue to need support in learning the ‘how’ of reading aloud to children: how to select and read texts that invite ‘connection’ for children.

- * parents, caregivers, adults who work with children as well as those who provide formal or informal training to others need encouragement to explore children's books for themselves so that they build their own 'inner libraries' of books and stories that they can be drawn on in their book-sharing with children.

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