

Special Issue on Reading beyond the basics: Multiple perspectives

Editorial: Different perspectives on developing readers

This special issue of *Journal of Research in Reading* was prompted by two ideas. First, it was felt that the area of children's later development as readers needed more attention. So often children who are of an age to be becoming fluent readers do not attract the attention of researchers unless they are giving us cause for concern. The papers included in this special issue report on research about children in the later stages of reading development but who are not necessarily finding it difficult. The second reason was to bring together researchers from a range of different perspectives to publish in the journal. Cognitive psychologists have been well represented over the last few years, but this has perhaps been at the expense of other perspectives, despite the huge advances in our understanding of the teaching and learning of reading from the diversity of disciplines. A journal such as this, which focuses on a subject whose understanding is contributed to from a range of fields, is in a unique position of being able to bring together research findings to contribute to a wider understanding of how readers develop and are developed.

As governmental and commercial programmes designed to develop literacy in children and adults proliferate, it is increasingly important that researchers are knowledgeable not only about their own, but also other, perspectives on reading. Researchers working in different research paradigms have different epistemological understandings of reading and what it entails. This should be a strength that enables those working with children and adults to become more effective. We should not travel down parallel routes never acknowledging others' advances. We should not fight amongst ourselves while others make financial gain from materials or practices based on little evidence. The papers in this issue present an eclectic selection that represents different ways of collecting and analysing evidence. However, each paper addresses some aspect of the complex combination of cognitive, social and linguistic processes involved in the development of readers. The research reported here shows how children's development is affected not only by their cognitive abilities but also by the social and cultural contexts in which they are learning. Investigating reading development, as the papers in this issue make clear, is a multi-faceted and methodologically challenging endeavour.

The first two papers in this issue address issues to do with reading development beyond the early stages and specifically how readers process print. Kate Nation and Maggie Snowling report on a study that followed the development of the reading skills of children from 8 – 13 years of age. Although the relationship between children's phonological skills and reading performance is well established, their findings suggest that oral language proficiency also influences the course of reading development. While this will not surprise classroom practitioners, it is encouraging to get such substantial evidence. This is particularly the case given the concern in education for the low status afforded to oral language in classrooms. In this study, children with weaker oral language skills tended to have lower word recognition skills than might have been expected from their non-word decoding skill. This is an important finding given the practice of removing underachieving readers from other classroom activities to work on pencil and paper based exercises.

Rhona Stainthorp and Diana Hughes' paper reports on a group of precocious readers that they have followed since the children were five. These children were identified as being able to read before starting primary school. In this paper the authors report on their performance just as they had left primary school. They found that on most measures the young early readers had maintained and some had increased their advantage. In the light of the previous paper it is interesting to note that, whereas Nation and Snowling's findings suggest that oral language proficiency influences reading development, Stainthorp and Hughes's findings lead them to conclude that reading performance and experience lead to better oral skills (in this case receptive vocabulary). They conclude that evidence from this study shows that 'in a very real sense, reading does make you smarter' (p.???) . Others might, however, suggest that in fact reading makes you better able to succeed in school by increasing your cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990). In other words, the more the child's language and experience matches the expectations of the school, the better the child is likely to do. Whatever the interpretation, there are important indications in both these papers for the relationship between performance in all language modes and school attainment.

The next two papers address issues to do with children's attitudes to reading. Marian Sainsbury and Ian Schagan report on a survey of pupils in England's attitudes towards reading which allows comparisons between 1998 and 2003. During this time the British government introduced a National Literacy Strategy in England to raise reading attainment. Evidence from national assessments and results from the recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) gives evidence of some success in raising attainment in reading for 11 year olds. The survey reported here suggests that the increase in attainment may be at the expense of enjoyment. However, the survey also shows that pupil's confidence and independence as readers have risen. These findings show the importance of considering longer-term outcomes in judging any attempts to raise standards.

Addressing a similar topic, Liz Twist and colleagues from NFER draw on the data from the PIRLS study. They agree with Sainsbury and Schagan about the decrease in reading enjoyment, particularly in relation to those countries with high achievement. However, they also raise important questions about the robustness of measures of attitudes in reading where young children are involved. They propose that, whereas there is a consistent relationship between high attainment and positive attitudes to reading within countries, the relationship appears more questionable between countries. They argue that comparisons between attitudes of pupils in different countries may be unreliable due to the young age of the children and the different ways in which certain questions are translated – particularly the difficulty inexperienced readers have in responding to negative statements.

The final two papers look more closely at the school context and propose different approaches to data gathering in order to illuminate children's reading behaviour. Gemma Moss and John MacDonald use school library records as a way of exploring children's text choices. Rather than taking the more common split of fiction or non-fiction, they categorised texts according to their design characteristics – that is how they are designed to be read rather than their content. They used the data to explore the relationships between choice and other characteristics. They argue that one of the most important differences in behaviour was related to the teaching group rather than the more usual factors of gender or ability. They point out the role of social networks in the pattern of choices made by pupils. They also argue that the teachers' attitudes to reading and the extent to which they encourage variety played a part in influencing the patterns of choice.

Vivienne Smith further develops the issue of the extent to which teacher attitudes to literacy influence children's attitudes. She reports on a pilot study in which she worked with a group of teachers on an action research project through which she hoped to help teachers change their classroom practice to develop children's critical literacy. The paper examines the methods she used to access both teachers' and children's attitudes to literacy. She discusses the difficulties that are involved in encouraging teachers and children to develop critical attitudes within a context where professional autonomy has become limited.

The papers in this special issue adopt different perspectives and different research methods to explore how children develop as readers beyond the basics. As well as examining how more experienced readers process print, the authors consider the relevance of attitude and choice in reading. Furthermore, the view of literacy as social practice illustrates the way in which the context within which the reading occurs also influences children's attitudes and behaviour. These different perspectives complement each other and contribute to our understanding of reading and readers.

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REFERENCES

BOURDIEU, P. (1990) *The Logic of Practice* (R.Nice, translation). Cambridge: Polity Press. (Original work published in 1980).