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| Title | Reading - what's that? young children's perceptions of reading |
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| Source | <i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 14(2),43-55 |
| Published by | Institute of Education (Singapore) |

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Reading – What's that?

Young children's perceptions of reading

LINDA GAN

"You look at symbols called letters. If your brain can recognise the symbols put together to make sounds you come up with words and sentences and that way you recognise what the book's saying."

This sophisticated definition of reading by an eight and a half year old boy was fluently delivered after only a few minutes reflection in response to the question "What is reading?" – which introduced a local study aimed at exploring six to nine year olds' perceptions of reading. It's recognised that positive attitudes to reading at an early age play an important part in reading success. Studies focusing on ways of motivating young children to read and helping those who have problems have found it useful to explore how young children perceive reading and their ability to master the necessary skills involved.

Reid's pioneering study in this area in Britain (1958) used structured interviews with five to six year olds to elicit their notions of what reading was all about and found that the majority of them were well aware of how to go about reading and generally articulate about some sources of confusion and difficulty. She subsequently used information gathered from these interviews as a basis for predicting reading ability and for preliminary grouping and differentiated methods of early teaching. Southgate et al (1977) used the same personal interview technique to highlight the difficulties seven to nine year olds were encountering in the early stages of reading and came up with recommendations for extending beginning reading skills in what later became a Schools Council's reading programme in Britain.

Other qualitative studies with younger children have shown that even preschoolers have preconceived notions of reading and their abilities as 'readers' (Fry 1985, Mason and McCormick 1981).

Goodman and Altwerger (1982) in the United States, found that the majority of preschoolers they interviewed had already developed negative attitudes to reading – they were adamant that they did not yet know how to read and that reading would be hard to learn!

More positive attitudes were revealed in the local study to be discussed in this article. It was conducted in 1993 using a sample of thirty boys and girls from private kindergartens and primary one, two and three classes. Informal one-to-one interviews were conducted by the author, using a questionnaire adapted from Southgate (1977, see appendix one). These interviews yielded valuable insights about young children's experiences with reading, some of which will be considered now.

Children's perceptions of reading

Children were initially asked 'What is reading?' Only five children made no attempt to answer this question and they were all six year olds, still in what Clay (1979) would describe as the 'emergent' stage of reading. Some of the definitions given by the rest of the children possibly reflect the perceptions of reading held by the adults supporting them in their efforts to read and the strategies being advocated as a means to deciphering text. The 'outside-in' (analytic) approach to the teaching of reading, for example is evident in (3) and (5), and 'the inside-out' (holistic) approach in (7), (9), and (12).

1. "Looking at pictures and reading them in my head"
2. "You see the words and read them out"
3. "Spelling"
4. "Learning language" (6+)
5. "Sounding out letters and putting them together"
6. "Reading words to tell you a story"
7. "Trying to understand a story" (7+)
8. "Talking words out"
9. "Looking at words and understanding them"
10. "Turning pictures into words"

11. "Imagining a story"
12. "Predicting what's going to happen"
13. "Filing words and meanings in our brains" (8+)

For good measure two six year olds also added that reading is "good for your brains" and "something that people do so they don't get bored!"

Children's general attitudes to reading

In response to the question 'Do you like reading?' 99% of the children enthused about reading with two thirds mentioning that it was for example, "fun, nice, exciting" and "better" than television as it's less tiring on the eyes!" However, whilst two thirds of these children said they found reading "easy", one third admitted they found reading hard and actually preferred doing other things.

In Southgate's study (1977), reading for pleasure featured more prominently in the reasons children gave for liking reading. The functional reasons given by the local six year olds perhaps reflect the initial apprehension felt by those about to enter primary school, for example: "Can go on to primary one", "Can help you in tests" and after settling into the system children still seem to be preoccupied with reading being primarily a tool for studying:

"Increases vocabulary"
 "Gives knowledge"
 "Helps us to study" (7+)

"My mother says it helps my English"
 "Nice to learn about interesting characters
 and you get ideas for stories"
 "A good way to learn" (8+)

Children's concepts of themselves as readers

'Do you think you are a good reader?' drew positive responses from 60% of the youngest children, 70% of the seven year olds and

80% of the older children. Boys seemed more confident than girls overall in their ability to read. Generally the majority of children seemed to base their opinions of themselves as good or non readers on the basis of whether they found the task easy or difficult. For those who were confident about reading it seemed to be the amount that could be read that was the determining factor. For example:

- 'Good' : "I can read my schoolbook in two days" (6+)
- "I read lots of books with small words"
- "I know a lot of words"
- "I read with expression and can read fast" (7+)
- "I've finished all the reading books in my class"
- "I understand what I choose to read" (8+)

As in Southgate's study (1977) it seemed to be the difficulty in decoding individual words which caused a lack of confidence in those children with negative perceptions of themselves as readers, not the demands of applying phonic rules or following a storyline. If confronted with a passage of text which contained a high proportion of unknown words, doubts set in. For example:

- Unsure: "I don't know a lot of words"
- "I can only read a little bit of words" (6+)
- "Some of the words I don't know" (7+)

Other reasons children gave to justify their answers were based on comparisons with their peers and how others perceived them.

- Good: "My mother tells me" (6+)
- "My teacher and mother tell me"
- "I can read the same pages as my friend" (7+)
- "My Mum tells me I'm a good reader"
- "I'm in the top reading group like my friends"
- "My friends tell me" (8+)

Unsure: "Friends always tell me I'm a good reader but I'm not sure."

"Other children in my class can read better than me" (6+)

"My teacher never tells me I'm good at reading" (8+)

When asked to give a reason justifying his opinion of himself as a good reader, one of the eight year old boys said "I just feel it in myself." Such confident conviction would possibly not be expressed by younger children attempting to come to grips with the printed word. They need constant reassurance they're on the right track and the value of parents' and teachers' feedback is borne out by some of the remarks quoted.

Where do you do most of your reading?

Children's answers to this question revealed their impressions of where they did most of their reading. The majority said they read more at home. Reading was not it seemed associated with school and the teacher, but at home, with parents (particularly mothers) being children's favourite person to read with/to and siblings, relatives and friends being mentioned too (especially) by the six and seven year olds. One six year old was dubious about which person she most enjoyed reading to but when pressed for an answer replied "My cat and My Dad!"

Southgate also found that the majority of her children believed they did more reading at home than at school and noted that they seemed to have a different concept of themselves as readers at home and at school. They perceived themselves in competition with peers at school and were made so much more aware of their lack of skills. At home however reading was regarded a pleasurable way to relax. This seems to be the case with the children in the local study too.

Childrens' perceptions of reading difficulties

In order to discover what types of difficulties the children were having with their reading and how they tackled them each child was asked whether they found their home reader easier than their school reader. The majority of the six and seven year olds found their self-chosen book at home easier, but the reverse was true for the older children. 90% of eight year olds found their home reader harder. These books included for example Enid Blyton adventures (favoured by the girls) and Roald Dahl stories, myths and legends, Tintin, and modern classics like *Stig of the Dump* and *Charlottes's Web*, chosen by the boys.

The difficulties being encountered by the children varied according to the different age groups. Half of the youngest group were concerned with the density of the print and half with the difficulty of the text. For example: "my home reader hasn't got so many words on the page", "... it's got more pictures" and "my school book's got more hard words."

The majority of the seven year olds focused on the difficulty of words, with one mentioning smaller print and one the length of the book. The eight year olds were preoccupied with the length of the book, the layout of the text, and the difficulty of the words. For example: "they have chapters and different stories in them and are longer", "... have smaller print, and tiny gaps between the lines", "... they have harder words – my school book is easier because it has words I know."

Following on from this question children were asked how they tackled words which caused them problems. All of them were able to describe what they did on meeting an unknown word and most of them mentioned more than one strategy. Table 1 sets out these strategies.

Table 1.

| Strategies Employed | Numbers of Responses | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|----|----|---|
| | 6+ | 7+ | 8+ | |
| Ask others for help | Adult | 8 | 6 | 5 |
| | Friend | 1 | 2 | – |
| Uses | Pictures | 2 | 1 | |
| Uses decoding skills | | 8 | 9 | 7 |
| Miscellaneous | Uses dictionary | | 1 | 4 |
| | Misses word out | | | 3 |

NB: As most children suggested more than 1 strategy the totals shown in the various categories are greater than the number of children interviewed.

Asking an adult was the most frequent response and the first strategy identified by the six and seven year olds, but only two children in each of these age groups specifically mentioned asking their teacher for assistance. This is in sharp contrast to Southgate's (1977) and Fry's (1985) studies where children were more reliant on their teachers for help. This is probably because of the different nature of the reading activities undertaken in British schools where teachers are more likely to hear children read regularly, on a one-to-one basis. The majority of children in all age groups relied heavily on decoding skills when approaching unknown words. With the exception of one child, all the six year olds made reference to using such skills. Six mentioned 'sounding out the words' and three said they looked exclusively at 'letters' –for example: "I join up the letters and spell the words."

Similarly all the seven year olds, bar one, said they 'sounded out' new words and one elaborated on the technique of "breaking words up into sounds and looking at the pictures for help." One also

said he "looked up the meanings in the dictionary". This more mature attitude to the reading act – of accepting that an unknown word is a word you don't understand and therefore must be checked out in a dictionary – was also mentioned by four of the eight year olds. Not one child (in any age group) admitted to 'guessing' a strange word, although three of the oldest boys honestly admitted to just 'skipping or ignoring' them. Two eight year old girls offered the most comprehensive descriptions in approaching unknown words: "I break up the word and pronounce it and check with my mother if I say it right and then look it up in the dictionary"; ... "I sound them out and check the meanings in the dictionary, and then copy them in a book to try and remember them." No mention however was made by any child interviewed of the use of context clues in tackling new words.

The purpose of reading

Only one child could not suggest reasons as to why children should learn to read. The different categories of reasons are shown in table 2 with the number of occasions on which different purposes were mentioned. The functional element, prevalent in children's reasons for liking reading, again dominates, with the majority of seven and eight year olds seeing reading as serving a direct purpose in aiding them with their schoolwork:

"To help them study"

"Helps with spelling and makes you clever"

"If they're not very good at English they can improve"

"So when they have their reading tests they can understand"

"If you can't read you wouldn't be able to read instructions in secondary school" (7+)

"It will improve their skills in comprehension and vocabulary"

"A good tool of learning"

"So they understand all the words in school textbooks and storybooks" (8+)

Reading for environmental information was also deemed important by these older children, for example:

"One of the most important things in life is to read signs and information..." (7+)

"Reading helps us avoid dangerous places and being scolded by police, like jaywalking" (8+)

Surprisingly there were three six year old boys who saw the need to read being linked with securing future employment!

"If they don't learn reading when children grow up they'll only know how to play"

"So when they grow up they can do work" (6+)

Table 2.

| Categories of reasons | Number of responses | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|----|----|
| | 6+ | 7+ | 8+ |
| An aid to further learning | 3 | 6 | 6 |
| To help with spelling/writing etc. | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| For information | – | 1 | 2 |
| For pleasure | 1 | – | 2 |
| To secure future employment | 3 | – | 1 |
| Some use (no reason given) | 1 | – | – |
| To make others happy! | 1 | – | – |

NB: As most children suggested more than one reason the totals shown in the various categories are greater than the number of children interviewed.

Only one six year old and two eight year old boys suggested that children should read for the pleasure it can give. The most endearing reason for learning to read though must surely be from one of the youngest girls who said that learning to read "would make Jesus happy!"

On reflection

It is difficult to make generalisations from the reading experiences of such a small sample of children, but certain insights have been produced which merit discussion. Firstly, if we refer to the children's explanations of what reading is, it becomes apparent that **we cannot assume that young children instinctively develop an understanding of what reading is all about just by being immersed in the process from an early age.** In addition to sharing books with children which are geared to their personal interests and needs, it is important for adults to gradually increase young children's awareness of what they are actually doing when reading. Illustrations are the first clues children use to help them understand a story and serve as a useful 'bridge' in helping children develop such an awareness. Yet only three children mentioned referring to pictures as a supportive strategy for deciphering unknown words. Adults perhaps need reminding not to 'push print' too early at the expense of children happily 'indulging' in 'telling' stories from the pictures presented, nor to discard picture books too early. Children often enjoy returning to the books they first enjoyed reading for the 'comfort' and reassurance they still give and should not be made to feel that such books with large print and high visual content are too 'babyish' for them.

Secondly **the lack of emphasis children placed on reading for enjoyment and the fact that so few of them saw it as directly useful for themselves is a cause for concern.** Parents and teachers need to devote more time to inculcating an appreciation of reading and the pleasure it can give, otherwise there is a very real danger of a gap opening up between children reading to extend school knowledge and reading for pleasure. If older children begin to lose interest in reading for its own sake and come to regard it as nothing more than a skill to be mastered then reading becomes nothing more than a chore.

Related to this is the information yielded about children's personal reading habits. Eight year olds said their self-chosen books were more difficult than those they were reading in school. This calls into question whether they are gaining pleasure or being frustrated in their efforts to read their own books. If the latter, then will such

frustration discourage them from pursuing the task of reading? Alternatively, are the books being chosen by the six and seven year olds to read in private, too easy and therefore not 'stretching' them sufficiently? Carol Chomsky (1972) found a significant correlation between reading exposure, language maturity and reading achievement. She concluded that it was the number of books, particularly those that were above the child's own level of linguistic maturity, that was the critical factor affecting reading progress.

If children then are to move towards the goal of not only being **able** to read but children who **do** read, then teachers and parents need to guide children in their personal choice of books **slightly above their** independent level of reading difficulty, and to share in the reading and recording of these books with them – particularly with those children between the ages of seven and nine which it has been suggested is a critical stage for ensuring that the habit of personal reading becomes established. Keeping records of the books children read, both at home and at school will provide adults with the opportunity to check on whether such habits are being established.

To conclude

This article has attempted to describe and discuss the findings from a small pilot study which used intensive interviewing with young children in order to investigate their initial and ongoing experiences with reading. Such 'mini-interviews' are perhaps more valuable than any test in providing diagnostic pointers for further action, and the sort of information which will enable adults to help children to become fluent, thoughtful and habitual readers.

APPENDIX ONE

YOUR VIEWS ON READING

1. What is reading?
2. Do you like reading? Why?
3. Do you think you are a good reader? What makes you think that?
4. Do you like reading to yourself or to someone else? Why?
5. Where do you do most of your reading – at home or at school?
6. What kinds of books do you like best?
7. What book are you reading for pleasure at the moment?
8. Is this book more or less difficult than the book you are reading with your teacher?
9. What is difficult about it?
10. When you are reading by yourself, and you come to a word you don't know what do you do about it?
11. Do you think children should learn to read? Why?
12. Why do you think grown ups need to be able to read? Why?

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