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Independent Reading and School Achievement

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Effects of Independent Reading on Learners

The amount of free reading done outside of school has consistently been found to relate to growth in vocabulary, reading comprehension, verbal fluency, and general information (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding 1988; Greaney 1980; Guthrie and Greaney 1991; Taylor, Frye, and Maruyama 1990). Students who read independently become better readers, score higher on achievement tests in all subject areas, and have greater content knowledge than those who do not (Krashen 1993; Cunningham and Stanovich 1991; Stanovich and Cunningham 1993). Although the correlations are steady, determining the appropriate causal interpretation of the relationships is problematic. This section reviews research on the status of independent reading, how it develops across age levels, and how it is encouraged.

Preschool and Kindergarten

During the 1930s and 1940s educators believed that children should not be taught to read until they were six and a half years old and performed well on reading readiness tests. This belief was based on a study showing that most children who received formal reading instruction when they were that age usually succeeded in learning to read (Morphett and Washburne 1931). Inferences made from the study established teaching practices for many years. Later researchers went beyond simple chronological age and looked at the literacy experiences children had during their early years (Wells 1986). Other researchers studied children who learned to read without direct instruction before school entrance (Durkin 1966; Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982; Heath 1982, 1983; Holdaway 1979; Mason 1984; Morrow 1995; Ninio 1980; Taylor 1983; Teale 1984; Teale and Sulzby 1986). Some concluded that children learned to read naturally, although a great deal of supportive and interactive behaviors conducive to the learning were apparent. Overwhelmingly the studies show that children from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds learn to read early.

Children who learn to read before school entrance (about 1 percent of the population) are those who are read to, who have someone to answer their questions, and who like to make marks on paper. They are called “paper and pencil” kids (Durkin 1966). Studies show clearly that children need not be from privileged homes in order to learn to read early, but they must have access to print and have someone to read to them (Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 1988). Heath (1982), concluded that the way children interact with books in many homes differs from how they are expected to interact with books in school. Children who come to school with well-developed skills in “taking meaning from books” are clearly at an advantage.

Other researchers looked at the acquisition of reading from a developmental point of view. Clay (1966), a leader in the field, introduced the concept of emergent literacy–the idea that learning to read and write begins very early in life and follows a continuum instead of appearing in distinct stages. Research in emergent literacy shows that children acquire considerable knowledge about language, reading, and writing before coming to school. By the time they are two or three years old, many children can identify signs, labels, and logos they see in their homes and communities (Goodman 1986; Kastler, Roser, and Hoffman 1987; Strickland and Morrow 1989). Emergent literacy researchers found that reading and writing develop concurrently and interrelatedly (Clay 1966, 1991; Sulzby 1985). Children learn to read through active engagement and construct their own understanding of how written language works. Adults help learners by modeling behaviors, such as writing a shopping list. Even more important than the demonstrations of literacy are the

occasions when adults interact with children around print, reading together from pictures and text.

When Durkin (1966) studied the homes of children who had learned to read early, she found that someone in the home read to the children, answered their questions, and encouraged them to write. Wells (1986) counted literacy events (which he defined as any encounter in which the child was involved in reading, writing, or engaging with print), and found that prior to school entrance some children had hundreds of literacy events, whereas others had few or none. The amount of experience that five-year-old children had with books was directly related to their reading comprehension at seven and eleven years old. Children who had engaged in hundreds of literacy events entered school understanding more about the world than children with minimal literacy events and furthermore, they excelled at the end of elementary school. Six years of schooling could not make up for the loss children suffered by not engaging in literacy events in their early lives. Wells stated that of all the activities considered possibly helpful for the acquisition of literacy, only one—listening to stories—was significantly associated with later test scores. The need for extensive early literacy experience was further documented in the research of Durkin (1966), and Teale and Sulzby (1986, 1992).

The value of reading to children is demonstrated repeatedly. Clark (1984), Clay (1979), Durkin (1982), Holdaway (1979), and Smith (1978) showed that reading to children helps them learn that written language differs from oral language, that printed words on a page have sounds, and

day-care workers read to children daily and introduced concepts about print incidentally, they emphasized discipline and behavior control instead of literacy. Adult caregivers need models for interacting with children when they read to them.

Snow (1996) found that talking with children had an even stronger effect on literacy learning than reading aloud to them. During table talk, parents answer children's questions, give them focused attention, and listen to their words. Children learn new vocabulary, clarify

Students' reading ability and desire to read are affected by the structure of the texts they read. If texts are well organized, have a logical flow, and include relevant information, they are inviting

Barbieri (1995) found that seventh-grade girls read for personal reasons: to clarify their beliefs, to find out who they are, and to discover that they are not alone. Like Atwell (1987), she found that time, choice, and response are necessary parts of a literacy program if students are to develop enthusiasm for reading. Psychologists Brown and Gilligan (1992) found that girls' sense of identity is deeply rooted in their perceptions of relationships, which they see as a way of knowing, an opening between self and others that creates a channel for discovery—an avenue for knowledge (28). Girls read to explore relationships; it is central to their reading. Barbieri (1995) found that girls read to search for answers to personal problems that bother them. Students want the freedom to choose the books they read, to talk with peers about the books, and to respond to reading in ways they chose.

Most educators are concerned about what students read because reading only light material does not automatically result in an ability to read advanced material. Hafner, Palmer, and Tullos (1986) found that better readers preferred complex fiction. In a large-scale study in fifteen countries, Thorndike (1973) found that for fourteen-year-olds, the types of reading that correlated best with reading comprehension were (1) humor, (2) history and biography, science fiction, myths, and legends, and (3) adventure and current events. By the end of secondary school, the pattern changed somewhat: students with the highest levels of reading comprehension read history, biography, technical science, philosophy, and religion. Mellon (1990) found similar reading tastes and habits among rural teens.

Cunningham and Stanovich (1991) assessed the construct validity of a new measure of exposure to print by using a book title recognition test (TRT) with middle school students. The TRT correlated significantly with spelling, vocabulary, verbal fluency, word knowledge, and general information. Further, the TRT accounted for variance in the criterion variables when differences in both general ability and phonological decoding ability were controlled. Although correlational, the data suggest that print exposure is an independent contributor to the development of verbal abilities. Based on cumulative data from several studies, Cunningham and Stanovich (1991) concluded that print exposure is a significant, unique predictor of spelling, vocabulary knowledge, and general world knowledge.

Stanovich and Cunningham (1993) continued to question where knowledge comes from; they challenge "cognitive efficiency" theorists who say that the crucial variable in learning is not exposure per se, but conceptual need and inference of meaning from context. They also challenge those who say that information is available to individuals in all but the most seriously deprived environments and conclude that exposure to print could not account for differences. In their study of 268 college students, measures of exposure to print predicted differences in knowledge in a variety of subject domains after individual differences on four indicators of general ability had been statistically controlled. Although correlational, the results suggest that exposure to written sources of information is an independent contribution to the acquisition of content knowledge.

Educational policy makers have asked questions about when to begin teaching children to read. Hanson and Farrell (1995) conducted a followup study of 3,959 high school seniors from twenty-four school districts in ten states. Using curriculum guides and school records, they assessed the inclusion of kindergarten reading instruction, family background, and educational history variables. Following a direct assessment of reading interests and competencies of high school seniors, they compared the relationship between reading instruction in kindergarten, students'

subsequent schooling experiences, and their reading competencies as high school seniors. Their data show clear, consistent, and positive differences associated with receiving instruction in reading in kindergarten. The advantage of early instruction in reading was maintained throughout schooling and remained evident at the senior high school level.

Summary

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have attempted to specify the effects that reading has on cognitive functioning, but it is difficult to document specific behavioral outcomes associated with reading. Spurious correlations may arise because literacy levels correlate with many other desirable behaviors. It is well known that exposure to print is a good predictor of spelling, vocabulary knowledge, and general world knowledge. Even when the variance attributable to general ability and phonological decoding are controlled, measures of exposure to print correlate significantly with spelling, vocabulary, verbal fluency, and general information. Research shows that the amount of time spent reading varies by age level.

Programs to Promote Independent Reading

Schools and public libraries develop programs intended to increase the amount and quality of reading students do. The programs are located in homes as well as in schools and public libraries. Some are more effective than others.

Preschool and Kindergarten

Programs for preschool children leading to independent reading traditionally include story hours, parent and child programs, book-related activities, and other outreach attempts. Librarians work to reach underserved families, such as homeless children and their families, the physically handicapped, children from homes where English is not the primary language, and other groups with special needs.

Bridge and Carney (1994) described a reading program where university students read to inner-city kindergarteners in a ten-week program. The program also encouraged parents to read to their children at home. Evaluation data show that children's scores on literacy tests improved and the level of parent involvement in their children's reading increased.

The Nassau County (NY) Public Library offered a program designed to increase literacy and promote library use among disadvantaged families (Towey 1990). The project, called Babywise and funded through a Library Service and Construction Act Title I grant, began as an outreach effort for low-income families and teen parents with children under age two. Librarians met with

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copy of the storybook *Goodnight Moon* (Brown 1947), as well as an information brochure and a coupon to be redeemed for a free book at their local public library.

Program evaluators used the number of coupons redeemed at public libraries as one indicator of

partnership has grown to include the Association of Youth Museums and involves librarians, Head Start teachers, Center for the Book staff, and others. Videos, workshops, regional meetings, and staff development result from these partnerships (ALSC 1996).

Other effective research

development activities such as sentence-

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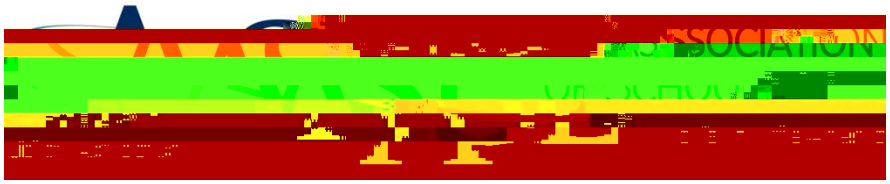

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