

Research methods

The methods chosen for this study were largely based on systems and developments I was already using as English co-ordinator. We began to collect data in September 1995 as part of a management initiative and school development plan. The most effective indicators of progress were reading quotients which were formulated from reading ages at significant times during the project and from reading interviews with pupils. As an action research practitioner who was directly involved at both the classroom level, implementing systems, and at the management level, overseeing and assessing, I was able to evaluate from a number of viewpoints at the same time. This proved valuable, particularly for providing a role model for other, less confident staff.

Conclusions

A key conclusion is that children need to have planned development throughout their school career. Learning to read is a continuous process. Evidence from our work so far tentatively suggests that progress becomes more erratic as children grow older. The expectations of teachers suggested that children knew how to read on arrival at a middle or upper school, when a closer examination suggested there was a range of attitudes and abilities that needed reinforcement. How this can be achieved will be the subject of further research. The factors needing further examination are:

- ★ *teachers' skills in teaching reading, not only in their initial teacher training, but in their continuing professional development;*
- ★ *the ability of teachers to use appropriate skills, techniques and teaching methods in the context of the age range in their year group;*
- ★ *teachers' enthusiasm, interest and commitment, which need to be passed on to pupils and parents; we need to review more closely how this happened during the project.*

Further reading

Chapman, L. J., *Reading: From 5-11 Years*, OUP, 1987.

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Factors that help children learn to read

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AIM

To identify factors that influence children's success in reading in the later stages of Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3, and to recognise and deploy strategies for maximising that success.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR THIS CASE STUDY

- ★ Opportunities for structured reading experiences, targeted towards the individual child, were highly influential. Children did not wish to have completely free choice. They preferred a mixed approach, combining choice and a structured context.
- ★ The skills of the teacher were critical in achieving progress in reading. Teachers' knowledge of how children learn to read, how to intervene, how to record and how to manage the reading process influenced pupils' success.
- ★ Learning and/or other developmental difficulties have significant influence.
- ★ Although the background literature suggests that gender is significant, with boys being less successful than girls, this was not the case in our sample. One contributory factor may be the high level of access to IT-based reading opportunities.
- ★ Pre-reading experience and early exposure to examples of the reading process are influential.
- ★ An individual's self-esteem and the pervading attitude of peers are highly influential.
- ★ As a result of undertaking this research project, I believe the most important factor in maximising children's reading potential is the impact of teachers' enthusiasm upon pupils' motivation and peer culture.

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Background

The many factors that influence children's success in reading can be divided into two groups: those which occur in the home in the early and consolidation stages of acquiring reading skills; and those which occur in the school. We concentrated on the areas where schools could make a difference.

This research began in September 1995, and the first stage was completed by December 1996. During this period, 120 children in Year 5 (ages 9 and 10 years) were screened. Those whose reading age was between 6 and 24 months lower than their chronological age were targeted by four Year 5 teachers and the library manager. Intervention was overseen by myself as English co-ordinator, and a programme was developed using the following components.

- ★ *Reading diaries.*
- ★ *Contracts between parents, the school and the children. The parents agreed to listen to their children regularly. The school agreed to provide training sessions for parents in supporting their children at home, to monitor children and carry out training in specific skills, and to train teachers in developing reading skills, recording and use of the library. The children agreed to take their reading pack (books, diary and summary grid) home every day, to read to another person outside school for not less than 10 minutes every day, and to keep their reading diaries up to date.*
- ★ *Reading summary grids. These were individual reading development programmes aimed at achieving specific improvements. They were based on screening, reading interviews and diagnostic programmes and were particularly important in enabling children to experience freedom within a context of security.*
- ★ *Specialist activities, such as decoding text groups, prediction opportunities and additional learning groups for issues such as phonics and reading extension.*
- ★ *The appropriate selection of books was achieved by the library manager, working with the children.*

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Teachers’ enthusiasm

Informed and enthusiastic teachers were vital to the success of the project. Knowledge of a range of children's literature and genres, continued participation in the world of children's reading and the ability to motivate and enthuse children were particularly important in inspiring them to make above-average progress. Teachers' enthusiasm generated self-motivation among children and a positive culture among their peers. See further comments under “Gender and self-esteem”.

Teachers’ knowledge

Teachers needed a secure grasp of the ages and stages of children's reading development. In terms of intervening, it was necessary that they had both the confidence and the expertise to enable appropriate reading opportunities and strategies to be put in place.

Reading summary grids

The grids were important over and beyond their management function of recording, because the process of completing them enabled the following activities to take place:

- ★ *a reading interview with the child, which identified current and previous encounters with literature;*
- ★ *the defining of teaching objectives, which could then be linked to National Curriculum Key Stage 2 reading requirements;*
- ★ *identification of what the child wished to achieve, how the teacher was going to help and how the parents were to be involved.*

In addition, information from the grid was useful for reading networks and peer group activities. For example, two children who expressed an interest in history – particularly 20th Century history – shared the same materials, even though they were at different reading levels, and were therefore encouraged and supported by each other. Quantifiable reading gains were identified.

Other systems

The above work was important within the following phased system of reading intervention.

- On arrival, each pupil was given a reading pack which consisted of a reading diary for communication between home and school, an initial text chosen by the child from the school library, and the reading contract. The contract was signed by all parents, teachers and students and enlisted active participation by all parties.
- In the first half term, all children were screened using the Salford Reading Test.

“Under-achievement by boys did not appear to be as prominent as expected.”

Further screening took place in December 1995 and June 1996 using Salford's B and C tests. (Reading testing has subsequently been carried out in lower schools before children arrive at the middle school.)

- In the light of this screening, the target group was defined. The cut-off period of 24 months behind chronological age was chosen because beyond this children are designated as having special educational needs that cannot be dealt with in the day-to-day curriculum.
- All children had access to planned curriculum reading activities – for example, book studies relating to classroom topics, lessons on finding reading material and information, studies on specific authors and enhanced opportunities to discuss reading with peers and teachers. In addition, the target group had regular opportunities to develop skills in areas of perceived underperformance. For example, phonic decoding, prediction, vocabulary building and strategies for successfully matching interest with print readability.
- Regular supervised periods were organised in the school library, including shared oral reading sessions. Additionally, students and parents were encouraged to visit public libraries, and to make use of computer software to access materials.

Each of the above stages served to highlight and focus attention on issues of reading competence and enjoyment. Where these were reinforced by teachers and the school management they were effective. However, where for a number of reasons the emphasis became diluted, results were not sustained.

Gender and self-esteem

One of the surprising findings from the research was that underachievement by boys did not appear to be as prominent as expected. We are uncertain as to the exact reasons for this, but reading interviews with boys in the target group suggest that if everyone in the school expected all pupils to be able to read across the curriculum, motivation would be significantly enhanced. Additionally, as reading co-ordinator, I believe there are positive links between boys' attitudes and abilities and the high ratio of IT available to every class – four CD-ROMs in every classroom and a ratio of one computer to four children. Boys have plenty of opportunity to read and work on screens, in what is perceived as a high-status learning medium. Interestingly, the same cultural expectations appear to support female as well as male achievements in reading.

Pre-reading experiences

The importance of achieving good transitions between lower and middle schools and middle and upper schools cannot be underestimated. Full documentation of reading achievement and experiences in lower schools leads to effective transition. The key issue is effective communication between staff, with an emphasis on each child's progress in reading being recognised and sustained.

Developmental difficulties

The process of screening that was developed during the project raised issues we had not expected. Screening identified children with problems and attitudes that went beyond what could be reasonably classified as under-achievement in reading. Some children were subsequently identified as having Specific Learning Difficulties (dyslexia), which affected their performance in other curriculum subjects as well as literacy. A further group of children was identified as being influenced by social and economic factors that could not be remedied by the school. While acknowledging these and other environmental issues, we concentrated on those areas in which schools and general classroom teachers made a difference.