

Children's Interest in Required Elementary School Literature

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The role of parents and teachers in children's early literacy development has been investigated from many perspectives, and a clear relationship has been shown between positive literacy experiences at home and at school in early childhood, and a subsequent lifelong motivation for reading. This research examines children's self-reported interest in reading the literature that is required in their elementary school program, as well as their habits and preferences for reading, both in and out of school. Data was collected from two focus groups held at an elementary school in Dubrovnik, with a total of 20 third grade students, all aged 9. Participants were asked simple questions to stimulate discussion on their preference in reading material, exploring positive and negative variables connected to their interest in reading. Results show that children report high levels of interest in reading in general; however, parental pressure, time constraints and inappropriate choice of reading material may diminish children's motivation to read literature that is required as part of the school curriculum. In addition, data suggest that siblings can play an important role as sponsors of literacy.

Introduction

Early Literacy Development. How can we encourage school-age children's literacy development, particularly their interest in required school readings? There are different approaches to these questions, since there are many successful methods. Several studies have emphasized the important role of both parents and teachers as early sponsors of literacy (Brandt, 1998, and Miller, 2010).

In general, children of primary and secondary school age have an interest in the world and an ability to understand events and stories that exceed their limited reading skills (Clarke-Stewart, 1998). This explains the child's cognitive ability to absorb information and provide logical and worthy feedback. Studies

have shown that children learn better when they are both cognitively and emotionally engaged in a task (Seth-Smith, 2006). It is up to parents and teachers to engage them in a productive learning environment.

Studies have shown that enjoyable shared experience between parents and children is a key for success in achieving positive predisposition in child's literacy development. Activities such as reading and being read to have shown significant increase in children's interest towards future reading (Clarke-Stewart, 2006). Educational literacy experts suggest that these activities should be promoted by parents for their children as it has shown positive response from the children.

Even when reading skills are still in development, a child who has only partially mastered a task can participate

in its execution with the assistance of a more capable partner (Vygotsky, 1978, in Clarke-Smith, 2006). This should be the fundamental base for parents when understanding how they can help their child to successfully complete a task. Before primary school age, children are dependent on their parents to guide them and to assist them with school work.

Role of Primary School Teachers.

Once children begin school, usually between the ages of 5 to 7, literacy development can be affected by his or her experience of teachers, both in the classroom and within the whole school environment (Seth-Smith, 2006). Teachers create a negative or positive learning environment which effects children's behavior. Thus, teachers should be focused on creating positive learning environment to promote literacy development. Studies have proved that teacher is the one who will influence a

child in emotional way; they will create positive or negative emotions that will set child's mind in the specific direction (Ahnert, Milatz, et al. 2013). Children with positive emotions about the teacher will be more engaged in the whole learning process, and child with negative emotional state will show lack of interest in gaining new knowledge. Particular teaching styles, or poor learning environment may partially explain why children lack motivation to complete school assignments, and thus their performance is seen as "under-performance."

According to Miller (2010), learning style should always be focused on children and not on teacher. Reading material has to be interesting to them and challenging in order to gain children's attention.

Recent research has suggested that, in addition to the role of parents and teachers in promoting a positive reading environment, learner autonomy is a key element of successful learning and teaching in general (Penrose and Geisler, 1994, Lennon, 2012). In early literacy development, free choice of reading material plays an important role in motivating students to read, and many schools in the United States and elsewhere have introduced an element of free choice into school reading material, allowing students to fully or partially select the literature, individually or as a group (Johnson and Blair, 2003, Arnstead, 2005, Culmo, 2009). Currently, in Croatia, a list of literature selected as required reading in public schools is formulated by the Ministry of Education. Individual teachers select from a list of approved texts. Students are generally not permitted to select their own reading material.

To further explore important factors in children's literacy, two focus groups were organized and first one being test focus group. Several other variables were identified in the questioning of two groups as older brother and sisters influence, children's obligations outside of school premises and how does that influence their approach to reading.

Methods

Subjects. With prior permission of the school principal, two focus groups were held in elementary school "Mokosica" on separate occasions. Each focus group included 10 participants. Of the total 20 participants, 9 were female and 11 were male. All were age 9 at the time.

Procedure. Permission for the focus group was obtained from the principal of the school. Students' participation was voluntary and completely anonymous.

Teachers selected the students so that each group of 10 participants included five students who were considered by their teachers to be strong readers and five students whose reading skills were considerably weaker. In order to minimize children's awareness of these distinctions in academic performance, they were mixed in their seating arrangement. Both sessions were conducted in Croatian language, which is the native language of all participants and the researcher. The focus groups were moderated by the researcher with support from an assistant. The sessions for both groups were audio taped. Written field notes were also taken during the discussion both by the researcher and the assistant.

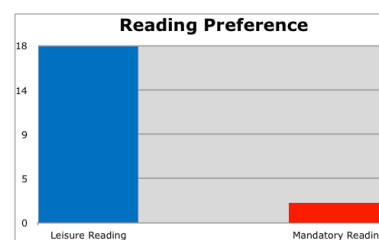
In order to encourage responses, the classroom was organized in discussion style, seating arrangement. The focus group began with the researcher and assistant introducing themselves. Then children were asked to state their names and their favorite animal. This method was chosen specifically to familiarize everyone with the instructors and to help the children relax. At this point, a method of order was introduced. Children were given a small picture book which would give them right to speak in the group. Other children who wanted to say something, were asked raise their hands in order to get the book and speak. This method was introduced to keep the order in the discussion group.

Children were asked different types of questions in order to determine their attitudes towards reading, and about their preference in books. The first session was held 45 minutes and the children showed great interest in answering questions. The second session, held at the same school one week later, lasted 30 minutes. Although the procedure used at the second session was identical, several questions were simplified and focused in order to encourage more focused responses from the children.

Although both groups provided similar answers, children in the first group spoke more extensively. This may be due the fact that the first group was held at 15:00, while the second group was held at 18:00, when children may have been more tired. Children in the second group also were less focused on task in general.

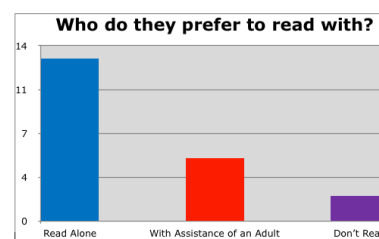
Results

General Reading Preferences. In general, children's self-reported interest in reading was high. When asked if they enjoy reading, 90% (18 out of 20) responded that they did. However, 90% of participants also reported that they prefer leisure reading at home (books of their own choice) over mandatory reading required for school (Figure 1). When asked why they prefer leisure reading, 90% of students mentioned the importance of free choice of what, where, when and how much to read. Students reported choosing magazines, journals, picture-books, and books they choose with their own free will as leisure reading material. Free choice of reading material is a key variable in determining their interest in reading in general. However, 90% of participants reported completing the required reading for school, even though it was not their preference.



In their comments, students seemed interested in following rules and expectations, as well as earning traditional rewards. Motivation for completing required reading assignments included "getting a better grade," and in one case a child said, "I don't want to be expelled from society." It is important to notice that majority preferred to read on their own.

When asked about their reading habits, 65% of respondents (13 out of 20) noted that they prefer to read on their own (13 out of 20 children), while 35% said that they prefer the assistance of an adult (Figure 2). Majority of the children reported reading alone for various reasons, including that they need "peace and quiet" and that it is "easier to focus when reading alone."



Interestingly, 4 out of 5 children who prefer to read with an adult answered

that they prefer reading with an older brother or sister, rather than parents. Children who read with siblings prefer that kind of engagement because “it is more interesting and amusing”, also “less stressful compared to reading with parents”.

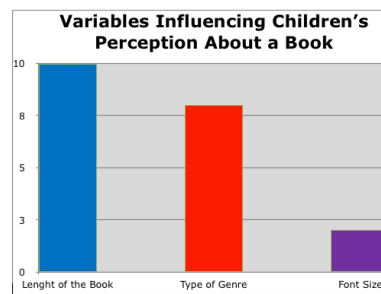
Further questioning provided more dependable answers about why children choose their older brothers and sisters instead of parents. In majority answers, children said that parents are at work most of the time, and when they are home they don't have the energy or interest to help the child with school assignments.

When asked which genre of book they preferred to read, the most popular answer in both groups was adventure stories. This preference was particularly strong in the second group. Poetry was also mentioned as a favorite genre.

Obstacles to reading. When asked about obstacles to reading, or reasons why they would choose not to read a new book, student replies included, “It is too long”, “It has too much text and not many pictures”, “The topic is not interesting”, and many more. Out of 20 children who were questioned about reasons that they avoid reading or reject particular books, 10 children (50%) complained about the length of the book, 8 children (40%) are discouraged by genre of the book, and two (10%) mentioned the importance of book font and typeface (Figure 3). These results are strictly concerning a first encounter with the book, and not after reading some part of it. These comments suggest that children make immediate judgements about reading material based on physical size, cover illustration and other aspects of visual appearance, and may reject books immediately without even starting to read.

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As the focus groups progressed, children in both group spontaneously volunteered comments about factors which interfered negatively with their reading. When one child commented that she lacked time for leisure reading due to obligations outside of school such as sports and music lessons, or tutoring, other children in the group agreed almost nearly unanimously.

In addition, a majority of children commented that they felt “pressured” or “nagged” by their parents to complete required school reading on which they would be tested, and sometimes encouraged to abandon leisure reading in favor of required reading.

In addition, several participants said they had lost interest in leisure reading completely. Researchers noted that these children seemed sad during the discussion. According to teachers, these particular participants have noticeably lower grade in courses than the others. Several students commented that they do not feel mentally connected to or engaged with their school reading assignments. The most common question was “Why do we need to read this?” and “Why is this useful?”

Discussion

Although the sample size is small, the qualitative data children's responses in these focus-groups offers important insight for parents and teachers interested in improving children's literacy development and motivation to read. Results point to several areas of potential weakness, in which current teaching and curricular practice could be improved to strengthen children's interest and motivation to read literature required as part of elementary school programs.

Results collected here suggest that required school readings may decrease children's motivation to read, particularly when the children have no role in choosing their own reading material. Allowing children some degree of choice in school readings may alleviate this problem. Results also show that older siblings often play a natural role as sponsors of literacy. School assignments could be structured to take advantage of this sponsorship. In addition, parents and teachers can also develop strategies to reduce time constraints, or structure reading times differently (offer children time during school to read), which would increase children's engagement.

Perhaps most importantly, these preliminary results seem to suggest that a small group of children already feel disengaged from school reading by the age of 9, and complete their assignments purely for extrinsic reasons (to earn a grade, or to please others). These children do not see any intrinsic value in reading, and may be at risk academically as they move forward. Additional research on a larger sample of students, in a wider geographic area, is necessary to investigate the causes of this disengagement in more depth.

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