

The Relationship Between Reading Enjoyment and Proficiency

Purpose

This document was developed by the Agency of Education (AOE) to support the Advisory Council on Literacy (Council) in performing their duties as defined in Act 28 of 2021. The purpose of this document is to examine the relationship between a love of reading and literacy proficiency.

Introduction

Statements by Council members indicated an interest in exploring the relationship between reading enjoyment and proficiency. The AOE reviewed articles and research syntheses to explore two questions: (1) Does literacy proficiency lead to a love of reading; and (2) if yes, what is the strength of that relationship.

Summary of Findings

One conclusion based on this review of the literature is that, “Those who read well are likely to read more, thus setting an upward spiral into motion” (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Similarly, frequent reading improves reading ability. Feelings of competence increase a person’s desire to engage in an activity, and reading is no exception. Additionally, deriving a sense of pleasure from an activity also promotes a person’s engagement in that activity, while continued practice promotes growth in the development of a particular skill – whatever that skill may be. Thus, students who enjoy reading and feel successful are likely to read more; whereas more reading strengthens a student’s reading proficiency, thus contributing to an overall ease of experience that can lend itself to an increased sense of satisfaction with reading as a whole. A satisfying experience is likely to encourage further participation in said activity, so readers who feel successful will continue to read and become more proficient as they do so.

There are, however, limits to the information presented in this research. Reading enjoyment and reading skills do not have a clear-cut reciprocal relationship; there are factors beyond enjoyment, such as reading volume and motivation, that contribute to reading proficiency (van Bergen et al., 2021). While it is clear that reading for pleasure can lead to an increased volume of reading, which increases vocabulary and improves comprehension, pleasure is not the only internal motivator that prompts students to read. Based on the research, it seems that any form of intrinsic motivation can be a powerful driving force to increase frequency and volume of reading, thus exposing students to more text and strengthening their comprehension skills. The joy of reading is certainly an example of intrinsic motivation, but so is reading a technical manual to learn how to participate in a beloved activity or engaging in text-based computer games that rely on the player’s ability to read and respond quickly. At the same time, different

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people enjoy engaging with different types of texts and for different purposes, not all of which would fit into the umbrella of “reading for pleasure.” In other words, the desire to curl up with a good book is not the only effective source of motivation when it comes to students engaging with texts.

Annotated List of Studies Reviewed

‘Matthew Effects’ in Academic Achievement

In [What Reading Does for the Mind](#), Cunningham and Stanovich explore the “reciprocal influences of early reading acquisition and reading volume” as they relate to early success and struggles as well as later reading comprehension (1998). When students struggle with reading early on, they are often exposed to less text than their more skilled peers, providing them with fewer opportunities to practice. Since they already struggle with decoding and fluency, the texts these students are exposed to are often too difficult for them, causing them to struggle more and comprehend less. The combination of these early struggles results in “unrewarding early reading experiences that lead to less involvement in reading-related activities” (1998). Since they read less, less-skilled readers do not develop the automatic word recognition necessary for comprehension. This slows the reading process and requires the use of mental energy and resources that should be spent on comprehension to simply decode the text. “Thus, reading for meaning is hindered; unrewarding reading experiences multiply; and practice is avoided or merely tolerated without real cognitive involvement” (1998). Additionally, the authors found “enormous differences in word exposure that are generated by children’s differential proclivities toward reading” (1998). In other words, children who read more learn more words, which makes reading easier and more enjoyable, thus leading to more reading and exposure to new words, and so on.

Standard of Coherence

In [Reading as Liberation – An Examination of the Research Base](#), Pimentel and Liben cite and summarize multiple studies that discuss the idea of a Standard of Coherence, or how much a reader expects to understand and how that connects to how much effort they are willing to put forth. In short, when a reader’s Standard of Coherence is high, those readers are more likely to read strategically in order to gain the understanding that they expect (Pimentel & Liben, 2021, citing Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994) while their peers with a low Standard of Coherence “are more likely to be satisfied with a surface ‘good enough’ sense of what they read” (Pimentel & Liben, 2021 citing Ferreira, Bailey, & Ferraro, 2002). “A number of studies (Narvaez, van den Broek, & Ruiz, 1999; van den Broek, Lorch, Linderholm, & Gustafson, 2001; Yeari, van den Broek, & Oudega, 2015) have shown that readers with higher Standards of Coherence, when reading to learn or study, spend more time, make more connecting inferences and build stronger mental models of the text” (Pimentel & Liben, 2021).

Positive Impacts of Pleasure Reading

This study, [The impact of Pleasure Reading on Academic Success](#), has limitations based upon the population of students involved and the short timeline. One hundred-five students from a rural Texas high school were invited to participate; however, only sixty-five students returned

the appropriate paperwork. The document does, however, contain a rich collection of previous work focused on the relationship between the pleasure of reading and academic success.

For instance:

According to Cullinan (2000), pleasure readers at all grade levels whom scored higher on standardized tests in all subject areas, developed greater reading comprehension skills, had increased fluency, and displayed higher levels of general knowledge.

However, in spite of the evidence that pleasure reading had a positive impact on student academics, the number of students who read for pleasure has declined at an alarming rate. According to the National Endowment for the Arts (2007), “the percentage of 17-year-olds who read nothing at all for pleasure has doubled over a 20-year period” (p. 7).

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The Literature Review provides evidence that “. . . pleasure reading builds reading comprehension, increases background knowledge (which is useful in all content areas), increases student vocabulary skills, and has been shown to increase our understanding of human behavior and help us to empathize with others (Murphy, 2013).” Additionally, there is research that indicates another benefit of pleasure reading, which results in greater academic achievement, leads to greater success in the workforce (National Endowment of the Arts, 2007).

Reading for Pleasure

The United Kingdom Education Standards Research Team released a report, [Research Evidence on Reading for Pleasure](#), in 2012 that highlights research about the relationship between reading for pleasure, independent reading, and why children read. Not surprisingly, research suggests “. . . that there is a positive relationship between reading frequency, reading enjoyment and attainment (Clark 2011; Clark and Douglas 2011).” A 2002 OECD study revealed that reading enjoyment has a stronger impact on children’s educational success than a family’s socio-economic status. Additionally, research indicates a positive perspective toward reading results in higher scores on assessments (Twist et al, 2007). According to international assessment data, “Regularly reading stories or novels outside of school is associated with higher scores in reading assessments (PIRLS, 2006; PISA, 2009).” One study that may be of particular interest at this point in time due to social isolation caused by the pandemic claims “. . .that reading for pleasure can also promote or enhance social skills in young people (e.g., Allan et al, 2005 cited by Clark and Rumbold, 2006).”

Motivation, Engagement, and Student Performance

The research synthesis from Scholastic, [The Joy and Power of Reading: A Summary of Research and Expert Opinion](#), presents findings about the relationship between motivation, engagement, and performance, all of which have a positive impact on the others. “Motivation works in a spiral; avid readers read more, and their reading prompts increased learning and a passion for even more reading. The reverse is also true (Guthrie, et al. 2012)” (Bridges, 2014). Similarly, this extensive reading leads to deeper comprehension (Bridges, 2014 citing Duke, et al., 2011). It is intrinsic motivation, however, that leads to reading achievement more so than external motivation such as grades or assignment completion (Bridges, 2014, citing Guthrie, et al., 2012). This suggests that reading enjoyment, which is a form of intrinsic motivation, leads to increased

performance. That is, “if students are drawn to read by deep longing and interest, they will succeed (Guthrie, 2008)” (Bridges, 2014). At the same time, “Students who read only a steady diet of assigned titles don’t get to answer, for themselves, the single most important question about book reading: why does anyone want to? (Atwell, 2007)” (Bridges, 2014, citing Atwell, 2007). In “The Pleasure Principle,” Atwell discusses how “smart, well-meaning teachers erect instructional roadblocks between their students and the pure pleasure of the personal art of reading” by using only external motivations to get children to read. She says, “When we teachers embrace our role as literate grown-ups who help children seek and find delight and enlargement of life in books, they have a good chance of growing into adults who enjoy and love reading” (Atwell, 2007). Finally, according to Bridges, there is evidence that “[c]hildren who read for pleasure are likely to do significantly better at school than their peers who rarely read. Sullivan & Brown (2013) demonstrate that pleasure reading is linked to increased cognitive progress over time” (Bridges, 2014).

Reading Enjoyment and Reading Skills

A 2021 study with the title [Literacy Skills Seem to Fuel Literacy Enjoyment, Rather Than Vice Versa](#), looks at the so-called reciprocal relationship between the former and the latter. According to this study, which tested the directionality of this relationship in 3,690 twins aged 12, “Literacy skills impacted literacy enjoyment, but not the other way around” (van Bergen, et al., 2021). The authors report that “avid readers tend to have good literacy skills: reading skills correlate $\sim .30$ with reading enjoyment (Froiland & Oros, 2014; Retelsdorf et al., 2011). Moreover, word reading, reading comprehension, and spelling (together: literacy skills) each correlate $\sim .40$ with how much children and adolescents read for pleasure, also known as print exposure (Mol & Bus, 2011)” (van Bergen, et al., 2021). They go on to caution that a lot of the research that has been done has not been about reading enjoyment in and of itself, but rather on motivation, or reading engagement (which consists of reading enjoyment combined with reading exposure) (van Bergen, et al., 2021). Therefore, the conclusion cannot be drawn that the simple fact of enjoying reading leads to increased literacy skills.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to the following people who provided research for this review:

- Mary Grace, Partnerships for Literacy and Learning;
- David Liben, Achieve the Core; and
- Lindy Johnson, Essex Westford SD Literacy Specialist/Coach.

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