

1 Reading to Learn: A Major Social and Educational Issue

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Introduction

When the issues to do with the teaching of reading were being considered by the Primary Curriculum Review Body (1990), one of the main conclusions in its report was that while 'learning to read' had traditionally received adequate attention, this was not the case with regard to 'reading to learn'. In other words, we had not adequately stressed the various ways in which reading skills influence other forms of learning whether in relation to other subjects on the curriculum or learning outside the formal context.

The work reviewed here returns to this question fifteen years later. I propose to tackle the issue in a number of ways. In particular, I want to look especially at the role of reading and literacy skills in a whole range of matters, especially having to do with personal consequences and more especially in terms of social consequences. What I will argue is that reading literacy has a much broader range of effects than is sometimes suspected. In particular some of the outcomes associated with school failure can in some cases be traced to the failure to learn adequate reading skills. This line of argument will lead to the conclusion that social problems that are frequently thought of as unconnected have a common origin in school failure. In turn this will lead us to look at future curriculum developments and how the argument presented here should influence these developments.

A central argument here is that, while research has frequently identified many factors associated with reading success or failure, we have considered only one half of the inter-relationship between reading and other important variables. We have thought only of those variables that we identified as causes of success and failure in reading. Thus, significant attention has been paid to parental involvement, leisure reading, socio-economic factors and personal/social factors that indeed result in success.

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My point, however, is that is the reciprocal nature of the relationship needs to be considered. What are the personal and social consequences of failure to learn to read? My view is that in many instances success in reading may result in enhancement of those personal/social factors which are sometimes thought to be causes. Reading to learn may need to be considered in a broader context.

An important consideration has to do with how conceptualisations of reading and literacy have moved on over the last decade. Modern approaches do not simply try to establish whether students are technically able to read. In the PISA study, reading literacy is defined as ‘understanding, using and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, develop knowledge and potential and to participate in society’ (OECD, 2003). What I will look at are these effects on the ‘potential to participate in society’ and more especially at how reading failure impacts on the capacity of people to acquire the skills and learning that enable them to become involved in socially meaningful ways in those societal activities that make a contribution to living a full life.

Research on Reading and Personal Attributes

While we often complain about the absence of research in particular areas of education, we can have few complaints about the available information on reading achievements of Irish children. The tracking of reading scores in fifth class since the 1960s by the Educational Research Centre (with the co-operation of the Department of Education and Science), is an especially valuable source of gauging how we are faring on the central area of literacy skills (Cosgrove, Kellaghan, Forde, & Morgan, 2000). What is especially interesting is the association between a variety of social, economic and personal factors and success in reading in school. From the present perspective, the most recent study in the series found strong correlations between total test scores in reading and characteristics including participation in class, persistence in school work and capacity to work with limited supervision (p. 48). The most popular interpretation of these correlations is that the personal competencies studied enhance the students’ ability to learn. While this is likely to be part of the story, I would suggest that a further part of the explanation may lie in the way that success or failure in reading contributes to these same competencies. In other words, being competent in reading assists in the development of the ability to work with limited supervision and to persist with school work.

Transition from Primary to Post-primary Schooling

The evidence from a recently published ESRI study (Smyth, McCoy, & Darmody, 2004) on the experiences of first year students in post-primary education is of particular interest. The study followed 900 students from the time of going into first year to the end of that year, with a view to seeing what problems they experienced and what adjustments were needed. A few interesting findings emerged from this study. Firstly, it is worth noting that test scores in reading did not improve over the first years of post-primary education. In fact, only one fifth of the students in first year experienced a significant improvement in reading. It was also noteworthy that progress in reading was less good in schools where streaming occurs.

More directly relevant here is the finding that progress in reading was associated with better integration and, indeed, with other positive effects. Again, we are not suggesting that progress in reading simply caused this. Rather, it may have been a factor that interacted with other experiences to bring about a better adjustment in the crucial first year in post-primary school.

Before leaving this study it is worth mentioning the particular difficulties of students in lower streams. These students seemed to encounter particular problems with reading and this, in turn, may have been a factor in the lack of integration which they experienced. While this study did not investigate school completion, it is well known that streaming is a major contributory factor in the likelihood of dropping out of school, thus establishing a link between poor performance in reading and non-completion.

PISA Study of Reading Literacy

The PISA study (Programme for International Student Assessment) is one of the most thorough of international comparative studies in the amount of information collected and in the attention to the different levels of influence on reading achievement. In 2000, Irish 15 year-olds did remarkably well (ranking fifth of the 27 OECD countries). Indeed, only one country (Finland) had a significantly better result.

From the perspective of the present work, the findings at the individual level are especially informative. The results indicated that better reading scores were associated with a sense of success with self-regulation (students who read better judged themselves be better at regulating/controlling their own behaviour). Furthermore, better readers had a stronger sense of academic self-esteem. As in the case of other factors associated with success with reading, it is likely that the capacity

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for self-regulation and academic self-esteem do, indeed, influence the motivation for involvement in reading. However, it is equally likely that doing well in reading may well result in an increase in ability to self-regulate behaviour. For example, a good reader can decide how they can organise their own learning and study and thus have a stronger sense of self-regulation. Nothing creates a stronger sense of control than a student knowing that they can find out things by themselves.

The evidence for the effects of academic success on self-esteem is even greater. The weight of the evidences indicates that success enhances self-esteem rather than vice versa.

The International Adult Literacy Study (IALS)

Until now we have talked about how reading affects 11 year-olds, first year students in post-primary and also 15 year-olds. The case of adults is arguably even more interesting. An international adult literacy survey was carried out at the Educational Research Centre 1994 (see Morgan, Hickey, & Kellaghan, 1997). This is sometimes called the OECD study on the grounds that some of the best known findings were publicised by that organisation. It is also well-known as the study that showed that 25% of Irish adults were illiterate – something that is clearly not the case. What it *did* demonstrate was that a substantial portion of the population was unable to handle anything beyond the most basic skills.

The findings about the life style and consequences of low levels of literacy are predictable, at least to some extent. No one is astonished at the finding that people with low literacy levels have a lower level of education (generally) and lower average earnings than those with relatively better literacy skills. However, what is perhaps surprising is the way that limited literacy skills restricted people's lives. People with poor skills had less involvement in the community and in a range of social activities. They were even less likely to be involved in sporting activities. While part of this may have been due to the association between age and literacy level (older people have lower literacy levels), what is especially remarkable is that the relationship extended even to entertainment. In other words, people with low literacy levels tended to less involvement in any experiences that might enhance their lives. It seemed that the 'positive effects' of low literacy extended only to watching television for longer.

The Prison Adult Literacy Survey

The recently completed Prison Adult Literacy survey (Morgan & Kett, 2003) was based on the tests developed for the IALS and involved the Prison Education Service in the administration of the tests. The study was carried out at the request of Department of Justice and Law Reform. Many of the main findings generated considerable interest. In contrast to the IALS, a substantial number of prisoners (around one-fifth) scored so badly that they had virtually no literacy skills, thus making it necessary to have a 'pre-level I' test on the basis that the people in question were unable to complete the screening test prior to the main testing session. In one sense it could be said that this significant minority of prisoners was 'illiterate' in the traditional sense. Another substantial group had very poor literacy skills (Levels 1 and 2). What is particularly interesting about these groups (pre-level 1, and Levels 1 and 2) was that their experience of school was of having a very low commitment, in the sense that they reported very poor attendance at school, they tended to dislike the time they spent there and they left at the first opportunity. This was not a case of them leaving when they reached the statutory age but long before that. It is not an exaggeration to say that, for many of them, schooling finished before they got started.

There are probably two factors at work in the relationship between school experiences and anti-social behaviour. On the one hand there is a direct effect arising from the skills that are not acquired in school which, in turn, results in a greater likelihood of unemployment which, in turn, increases the chances of being involved in crime. Equally important may be another pathway *viz*, the effects of commitment to school on adherence to values that do not sit easily with involvement in criminality. There is evidence that a commitment to a social institution like family, school or church has this kind of influence. Both these factors may operate in the link between school failure and criminality.

One of the most interesting features of the Prison Literacy Study was the finding that the relationship depended on the type of crime involved. Specifically, the association between low literacy levels and violent/property crime was stronger than for other kinds of crime like sexual crime. This provides particular evidence of the pathway involved.

There is no suggestion that educational factors account for all crime. Rather, what we are suggesting is that, for some, it may be an important contributory factor to the pathway eventually leading to criminality. Failure at school lessens choices and predisposes young males particularly

to go in a certain direction. Equally, there is an important suggestion as to how the rehabilitation process should begin. There is little evidence anywhere that letting young people know what prison is like, has any impact on re-offending. On the other hand, the choices that are provided through education may offer serious hope of an alternative life-style.

Other Issues on the Same Theme

The findings summarised above illustrate the effects of success and failure at reading on personal and social development. The same theme is echoed in several other areas of research. It is possible to make only the briefest references to the drift of the findings emanating from these other areas.

One concerns how the concept of self is influenced by school experiences in general, and by reading failure in particular. There are strong indications that feelings of self-efficacy are influenced by success in school and, given the importance of judgements of self-efficacy across a range of domains, this shows how the important association between school experiences and social behaviour can be brought about. Self-efficacy relates in turn to self-esteem, thus linking school experiences to this very significant area.

It is worth considering a possible link between the superior performance of girls, especially in secondary school examinations and performance differences in reading. It has been demonstrated in several studies that from an early age girls consistently out-perform boys, especially at the lower end of the performance scale, i.e., relatively fewer girls than boys are found in the bottom percentiles. What has received less attention is the effect of this difference on the learning of other subjects and eventually on examination performance. My suggestion is that at least part of the gender difference in examination performance may be due to the initial boost resulting from the advantage in learning to read.

Generational effects, that is the association of poor school performance in one generation leading to similar difficulties in subsequent generations, is a major issue in educational disadvantage. My suggestion is that at least some of these are to some extent mediated by literacy deficits. If this is the case, then interventions that focus on literacy across generations should result in substantial improvements. The evidence of family literacy programmes suggests that this is indeed the case.

Implications

There are several important implications of the findings summarised here. One concerns educational disadvantage and the appropriate emphasis

in programmes for the future. Until now many intervention programmes have focused on the resources that are available to school (e.g., improved class size, home school links). It would be equally important to consider exactly what is supposed to happen in the intervention. There is evidence that reductions in class size do not impact on the what is taught or how it is taught. I would suggest that these are crucial questions and that particular attention needs to be given to literacy as a critical factor mediating the learning of other skills.

Another implication has to do with the way interventions are presented, especially those focusing on literacy. For example, the Crinan project in the North Inner City of Dublin is concerned with giving young teenagers involved in heroin the kind of education that they never experienced. To make this happen, they need to focus on literacy, but in a way that is novel and takes into account the age and interests of the young people.

Finally, we need to think about the priorities that should exist between subjects on the curriculum. We have been reluctant to place any subject in a pivotal position and say that it is inherently more important than any other. However, the next revision of our curriculum in both primary and post-primary may need to do just that. In particular, there will be a need to distinguish between areas of the curriculum where the content is the major focus and those which are enabling by their nature and which have implications for the learning of other subjects. In my view, we will need another definition of what is 'basic', which will not mean low-level, but rather a set of skills and competencies that are basic to the learning of other subjects.

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