

13 A longitudinal study of the effects of two reading methods on leisure-time reading habits

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Whether or not one takes the position that mass literacy is leading to mass mediocrity, the question of leisure-time reading — in extent and in quality — is rightly regarded as an important educational question. How much time people spend reading, what they read, the uses to which they put reading and the value they place on reading — these are questions which carry serious implications for all concerned with the teaching of reading. For, in spite of the heavy investment in reading education, it does seem that even when we succeed in teaching the skills of reading, the status of adult reading is far from reassuring (Harris 1969).

Numerous studies of the reading interests and habits of adolescents have been carried out in Great Britain (Inglis 1969, Jenkinson 1940, Smith and Harrap 1957, Yarlott and Harpin 1970) and in the United States (Andrew and Easley 1959, Gallo 1968, Wittly 1969). It is difficult to compare the results of these studies since reading tastes appear to change with time (Yarlott and Harpin 1971). The problem of comparison is further complicated by the fact that the studies vary in their methods of assessment and also in the age level and education of the participants. Despite these discrepancies, there seems to be general agreement that fiction is preferred to nonfiction (Andrew and Easley 1959, Jesson-Dibley 1960, Shores 1964) and that poetry is not popular (Yarlott and Harpin 1971). Research on adult reading patterns seems to suggest that in the United States, at any rate, most adults regularly read newspapers, about 85 per cent read magazines and approximately one quarter read books (Asheim 1956). Research has also helped to identify a number of correlates of leisure-time reading. Among these factors are education and occupation (Asheim 1956), availability of material (Waples 1932), sex (Waples and Tyler 1931) and peer opinion (Smith 1956). There is however a dearth of research on the effects of methods of teaching reading on subsequent leisure-time reading habits of adolescents and adults. This lack of information is a serious limitation of reading research. The present study reports the results of a longitudinal study of the effects of two different approaches to reading used in primary school on subsequent leisure-time reading behaviour.

Background

Sample

In September 1967, all the pupils in two sixth standards in a Dublin boys' primary school were randomly assigned to either an experimental group (N:36) which used an individualized approach to reading, or to a control group (N:38) which used the traditional basal-reader approach. At the outset there was no significant difference between the groups in verbal reasoning ability or in age.

Reading methods

Both groups used the same classroom library and were taught reading by the same teacher during the daily forty-minute reading period. The experiment (Greaney 1969) lasted for eight months.

Each boy in the experimental group was allowed to select his own reading material which he read at his own rate during the reading period. At least once a fortnight each child discussed his progress and the material he had been reading with the teacher. These reading conferences were used for diagnostic and instructional purposes. Groups were organized to discuss common interests or to tackle common reading problems. Finally, each boy was encouraged to do some activity based on what he had read. All the boys in the control group used the same reader which had been officially sanctioned by the Irish Department of Education as being suitable for pupils in the sixth grade. While the boys in this group were free at any stage to use the classroom library, they were not free to read their library books during the class period. In an effort to compensate for any possible Hawthorne effect in the experimental group, the control group prepared and published a fortnightly school newspaper.

Primary school results

Measures of reading comprehension, spelling, word recognition, attitudes to reading, and of amount and quality of reading were obtained before and after the experimental period. There was no significant difference between the groups in reading comprehension, spelling and word recognition (Greaney 1969). However, significant differences in favour of the experimental group were found in the book-reading practices of the group. The experimental group read more books and devoted more time to book-reading. Furthermore, the fiction they read was rated of a higher quality than that read by the control group, and the range of topics in their non-fiction reading was wider. The attitude of the experimental group towards the reading class was more favourable than that of the control group (Greaney 1970).

In June 1974, questionnaires were mailed to the home addresses of the seventy-four students who had participated in the original study. At this stage the average age of the former students was 18.6 years. Completed questionnaires were returned for sixty-six subjects. Four subjects who

received questionnaires failed to return them; four others could not be contacted. Of the respondents, thirty-five had been in the original control group and thirty-one in the experimental group.

Proportion reading books

The proportion of the group reading books was obtained by counting the number of respondents who had fully or partially read at least one book over the previous three months. In a similar manner, proportions were calculated for magazine reading over a two week period and for newspaper reading over a three day period.

Time devoted to books

Respondents were asked to indicate the amount of time they had devoted to leisure-time book reading during the previous two weeks. The response categories were A none, B less than one hour, C one to three hours, D four to six hours, E more than six hours.

Time devoted to magazines

Respondents listed the magazines they had looked at or read during the previous two weeks. After the name of each magazine they were requested to insert the number of minutes they had spent reading or looking at it.

Time devoted to newspapers

i.e. the number of minutes spent reading newspapers over a three-day period. The response categories were A none, B less than five minutes, C five to thirty minutes, D thirty-one to fifty-nine minutes, E one to two hours, F more than two hours.

Amount of book reading

i.e. the number of books fully or partially read as leisure-time reading over the previous three months. Books were divided into fiction and nonfiction categories and the number read in each of these categories was calculated.

Quality of fiction material read

Respondents were instructed to list the titles and authors of books they had fully or partly read for leisure during the previous three months. The listed books were classified by one of the writers, a former lecturer in English at a Dublin teacher-training college. A rating of five points was given to a category which was described as 'great books, including the classics'. Representative of this category were works by Brecht, Brontë, Camus, Chekov, Dickens, Dostoevsky, George Elliot and Kafka. The second category, given a four-point rating, consisted of other works frequently found on college literature courses. Representative authors in this category were Scott Fitzgerald, Salinger, Steinbeck, James Stephens and Wilde. Three points were allotted to 'good' quality fiction which was essentially entertaining, e.g. novels by John Fowles, Hammond Innes,

Neville Shute, Irving Wallace and Maurice West. Popular novels including crime, science fiction, and spy stories by writers such as Arthur C. Clarke, Maclean, Wheatley and Wyndham received a two-point rating. The lowest category, for which one point was allotted, consisted of material of the popular-ephemeral variety.

A mean quality score of the fiction material fully or partly read was calculated for each individual.

Quality of nonfiction material read

A four-point classification system was used in estimating the mean quality score of all the nonfiction material fully or partly read for leisure during the previous three months. Scholarly works most of which were of a philosophical, psychological, sociological, historical or political nature were given a four-point rating. Among those listed was *The Phenomenon of Man* (De Chardin), *Origin of Species* (Darwin), *Ireland since the Famine* (Lyons), and *The Gulag Archipelago* (Solzhenitsyn). Three points were allotted to popular or journalistic treatments of serious topics and to some biographical material. Representative of this category were *The Orange and the Green* (King), *Daybreak* (Baez), *Slaves of the Sons of Heaven* (Whitcross), and *Bury me in my Boots* (Trench). Two points were given to books dealing with crafts, hobbies and sports. Biographical material with popular appeal such as *Diary of a Rock Star* (Hunter) and *Sting like a Bee: The Muhammad Ali Story* (Torres) received a one-point rating.

Quality of magazines read

A four-point classification system was also used to classify magazines. A rating of four points was assigned to good quality magazines of a political, satirical, historical or professional nature (*Newsweek*, *Punch*, *Business Management* etc); three points to magazines dealing with hobbies and crafts; two points to sports magazines, some music publications (*Melody Maker*, *Disc* etc) and also a number of popular women's magazines (*Woman's Way*, *Woman* etc) and one point to material which was predominantly of the sensational popular romantic variety.

Leisure-time reading preferences

The questionnaire contained a list of popular leisure time activities, one of which was reading. Each subject was asked to mark the activities in order of amount of time devoted to each. Provision was made for ranking activities which were not printed in the questionnaire. Points were awarded for each rank. These ranged from one point for the first rank to eleven points for the activity that was given least time.

Results

Proportion reading books

Responses to the questionnaires indicated that over a three-month period 73.3 per cent of the experimental group and 57.1 per cent of the control

group had fully or partially read at least one book. The difference between these two proportions was significant ($z: 1.97; p < 0.05$). A further analysis of these data revealed that 66.7 per cent of the experimental group and 25.7 per cent of the control group had read at least one nonfiction book over this period. Again the difference between the two proportions was significant ($z: 3.36; p < 0.01$). Although the percentage (63.3 per cent) of the experimental group respondents who had read at least one fiction book was greater than the percentage (54.3 per cent) of the control group, the difference between the groups was not significant ($z: 0.74; p > 0.05$). The figures for magazine reading and newspaper reading were almost identical for both groups. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents had looked at or read at least one magazine during the previous two weeks and all but one respondent had looked at a paper during the previous three days.

Time devoted to books

The data based on the responses to the question, 'During the past two weeks how much time did you spend on leisure-time reading of books?' are summarized in Table 1. The value of chi-square ($\chi^2: 5.55; df: 4; p > 0.05$) indicated that there was no significant relationship between the type of reading instruction received at primary school and the amount of time devoted to leisure-time book reading.

Table 1 Leisure-time reading of books over a two-week period

Time	None	Less than 1 hour	1-3 hours	4-6 hours	More than 6 hours	
Group E (Experimental)	7	5	4	6	7	29
Group C (Control)	16	5	6	2	5	34

Time devoted to magazines

Over a period of two weeks the mean number of minutes devoted to magazine reading by group E ($\bar{X}: 67.8; SD 82.2$) was less than that of group C ($\bar{X}: 81.5; SD: 155.9$). However the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant ($t: 0.45; df: 63; p > 0.05$).

Time devoted to newspapers

Approximately three-quarters of the respondents had spent more than one half-hour reading newspapers over a three-day period. The application of the chi-square test indicated that there was no significant relationship between type of reading instruction and amount of time spent reading newspapers ($\chi^2: 7.92; df: 5; p > 0.05$).

Amount of book reading

While the mean number of books fully or partly read for leisure purposes over a three-month period was greater for group E ($\bar{X}: 2.97; SD 2.59$) than for group C ($\bar{X}: 1.91; SD: 2.28$), the difference was not significant ($t: 1.74; df: 63; p > 0.05$). There was a significant difference between the mean number of nonfiction books read by group E ($\bar{X}: 1.10; SD: 1.10$) and by group C ($\bar{X}: 0.45; SD: 0.95$) ($t: 2.54; df: 63; p < 0.05$). For fiction, the difference between the groups (group E: $\bar{X}: 1.87; SD: 1.96$; group C: $\bar{X}: 1.46; SD: 1.77$) was not significant ($t: 0.88; df: 63; p > 0.05$).

Quality of fiction material read

The mean qualitative ratings of fiction books read or partly read was 2.54 for group E; for group C the mean was 2.44. There was no significant relationship between methods of reading instruction and quality of fiction material read ($\chi^2: 1.83; df: 4; p > 0.05$).

Quality of nonfiction material read

Because of the small number of entries in the two lowest categories (i.e. books dealing with crafts, hobbies and sports, and biographical material with popular appeal), these categories were merged. A chi-square analysis of the data showed that there was no significant relationship between type of reading instruction and quality of nonfiction material ($\chi^2: 1.70; df: 2; p > 0.05$). The relatively high mean ratings recorded by group E ($\bar{X}: 3.10$) and group C ($\bar{X}: 3.33$) indicate that in general the nonfiction material was of a high standard. Good quality books of a philosophical, psychological, sociological, historical or political nature accounted for 46.2 per cent (E: 47.1 per cent; C: 44.4 per cent) of the nonfiction material read. Popular treatments of serious topics proved to be the second most popular category (30.8 per cent) among the respondents in both groups (E: 23.5 per cent; C: 44.4 per cent).

Quality of magazines read

The mean quality rating for group E ($\bar{X}: 2.66$) was slightly greater than that for group C ($\bar{X}: 2.38$). However, the relationship between the quality of magazines read or looked at and type of reading instruction was not significant ($\chi^2: 3.12; df: 3; p > 0.05$).

Leisure-time reading preferences

Reading was the fifth choice of group E and the sixth choice of group C. The application of the Mann-Whitney U test to the ranked data indicated that leisure-time reading could be considered equally popular among both groups ($z: 1.53; p > 0.05$).

Discussion

In interpreting the results of this study it is important to bear in mind that the sample which was used was quite small and was confined to students

from one Dublin school. Therefore the reading patterns observed should not be considered representative of eighteen to nineteen year old Irish males. Secondly, a number of questions on the questionnaire covered a period of time during which approximately one fifth of the subjects were either preparing for or taking examinations. Had the survey been conducted at a later date it is likely that the mean score on a number of variables for both groups would have increased. Thirdly, no attempt was made to validate the respondents' claim concerning their reading habits. It should be noted however that their responses to a number of open-ended questions were quite frank; no apparent effort seems to have been made to give the socially desirable answer. Lastly, the term 'read' was used rather loosely to describe books which were fully or partly read and also magazines and papers which were looked at.

Despite these limitations the findings are of some importance. They indicate that an approach to reading in which efforts are made to develop favourable attitudes toward reading may have more positive long-term effects than the more traditional basal-reader approach. The present study was carried out six years after two groups of students had been exposed to two different approaches to reading. In comparison with former basal-reader students, a significantly greater proportion of subjects who had been exposed to an individualized approach had read at least one book during a three-month period. Members of the individualized group had read significantly more nonfiction books than their basal-reader colleagues. Furthermore the proportion of the individualized group who had read at least one nonfiction book was also significantly greater. More specifically two-thirds of the individualized group had read at least one nonfiction book during a three-month period as against a quarter of the basal-reader group.

While it is obvious that firm conclusions cannot be reached on the basis of this exploratory study, nevertheless a number of findings are pertinent to reading instruction. The evidence from this study shows that effects of a particular method of reading instruction may persist over a number of years and that an approach to reading in which efforts are made to foster the book reading habit, such as an individualized approach, can have positive long-term effects.

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