

Supporting 11 to 13 year old students' reading: perceptions of parents.

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In New Zealand, during the last decade, there has been a focus on improving home-school partnerships to help raise literacy achievement. When parents are aware of what is happening in the classroom to support their child's reading development and learning, parents can put strategies in place to further endorse learning in the home environment. The article explores the issues surrounding the role of parents in the literacy learning of their children, particularly those of young adolescent students.

Twenty seven parents of students in years seven and eight were randomly selected by the principals at six New Zealand schools. The schools represented a wide range of school types. The parents were interviewed using a semi - structured schedule. The research found that there was a link between parents who enjoyed reading and modeled this in their home environment to their child's perceived interest and success in reading achievement. Fathers often were a powerful model for their children, more particularly their sons, when in developing attitudes towards the value and interest in reading for leisure or information.

Keywords: Parents' perspectives, reading, young adolescents.

Introduction

In New Zealand there has been a focus on improving home-school partnerships to help raise literacy achievement (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2003). Other countries have also been exploring this idea, notably England which has a broad government initiative related to parents, particularly those whose children are at risk behaviourally or educationally. One part of this initiative has been the Parent Support Adviser (PSA) which began as a pilot scheme in 2008 and has expanded into a national programme in all parts of England (Lindsay, et al., 2009). New Zealand is also recognizing the value of a national strategy, by recognizing the recent evidence regarding the engagement of parents in home-school partnerships (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2003).

We contend that when parents are aware of what is happening in the classroom to support their child's reading development and learning, parents are more knowledgeable and can put strategies in place to further endorse learning in the home environment. One of these strategies, we believe, is for teachers to encourage parents to model an interest and enjoyment in reading both for pleasure and for information. Young adolescent students can benefit from the support, guidance and role modeling by both their mother and father (Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa'afoi, & Taleni, 2006).

Of concern and relevance to our research project is that in New Zealand, similar to other countries, there is a drop off, or plateauing of reading achievement as young adolescents reach their final years of primary schooling (See, for example, Brozo, 2005; Hattie, 2007). Similar to England, New Zealand children's attitudes towards reading are altering, especially in the later years

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of primary schooling (Cremin, Mottram, Collins, Powell, & Safford, 2009; Crooks, Smith, & Flockton, 2009; Twist, Schagen, & Hodgson, 2007). Furthermore, there is a clear link between reading achievement and the amount of time a child reads for enjoyment (Chamberlain, 2007; Twist, et al., 2007). Parents can be a powerful influence on their children's attitudes towards reading and time they have to read for pleasure in their home environments. We contend that it is timely to explore parents' perceptions of what they know and appreciate can encourage, or on the other hand be barriers to, their child's reading progress and enjoyment in reading for leisure and to gain knowledge.

Teachers and principals should consider parents as an important asset when developing a learning culture that supports students' learning in literacy (Argent, 2007). Working effectively with parents requires skill and commitment by teachers as they are a critical link in motivating and engaging their children in reading. Studies on parental support of their children's literacy development, or learning in general, frequently includes the perceptions and experiences of mothers (see, for example, Fletcher, Greenwood, & Parkhill, 2010; Nichols, 2000; Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003; Wylie & Hodgen, 2007). Other studies when discussing fathers, report on the mothers' or teachers' views of how fathers are involved (see, for example, Eirini, 2006; Morgan, Nutbrown, & Hannon, 2009). As reflective practitioners we can further develop our knowledge by having a deeper understanding of the influence and perspectives of both mothers and fathers. Without doubt, both mothers and fathers have a guiding impact on their children's attitudes to reading.

Our interest in this area had been ignited by earlier research. In an investigation with colleagues (Fletcher, Parkhill, & Fa'afai, 2005; Parkhill, Fletcher, & Fa'afai, 2005) on Pasifika students' perspectives on barriers and supports in reading in New Zealand schools, the influence of fathers on success in literacy achievement was evident. Pasifika is a term of convenience used to encompass a diverse range of peoples now living in New Zealand, who have strong family and cultural connections to their Pacific Island countries of origin. In New Zealand, Pasifika students are overall underachieving in reading (Alton-Lee, 2003; Crooks, et al., 2009). In this earlier study of Pasifika students who were achieving in reading and writing according to

results from standardised tests, some of the students reported that their fathers were actively involved in supporting their literacy development. This included taking their child to the library, teaching spelling words and encouraging reading for pleasure.

We were interested in the issues surrounding the role of parents in the literacy learning of their children, particularly those of young adolescent students. The research reported in this article investigated fifteen mothers and twelve fathers of 11-to-13 year-old students in New Zealand schools. It sought to uncover these parents' perceptions of what supports reading of the children and their involvement in this process. We believe that the qualitative research presented in this article is of specific relevance for the reflective professional in classrooms and at a macro level to inform governmental policy by introducing a pilot study to encourage home/school partnerships in a range of contexts, as has been the case in England.

The literature

Motivating children to read and enjoy books occurs from an early age

In several western countries there is a belief that parents read and share books with their children. Erini (2006) in a UK study, using longitudinal data from the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70), investigated the long-term influences of both father's and mother's interest in their ten year old children's education. The sample included 1,737 men and 2,033 women. Erini concluded from this data that the mothers' interest in their child predicted the educational attainment of both daughters and sons. On the other hand, the fathers' interest when their child was aged ten only predicted a daughter's educational attainment. In Morgan and colleagues (Morgan, et al., 2009) UK study of fathers' involvement in young children's literacy development, they reported on fathers' involvement in a family literacy programme. These authors interviewed mothers and used home visit records made by the teachers. According to these data, the majority of fathers were involved to some degree in helping support their child's reading skills. Nevertheless, the fathers were concerned to a lesser extent in literacy associated activities with their children, than the mothers. Both Morgan and colleagues' (2009) and Erini's

(2006) studies give an insight as to the function and awareness of fathers, but this is problematic in that the data were collected from the mothers and their perceptions of the fathers' involvement, rather from specific interviews with fathers. In a review of the role and importance of parents in their children's lives O'Connor and Scott (2007) reported that the quality of the relationships had a major influence on a number of outcomes, including the educational achievements of the children (see also, Cullen, Cullen, Band, Davis, & Lindsay, 2011).

Children's attitudes to reading in New Zealand have appeared to decline as they reach adolescence. For example, the 2008 New Zealand National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) reading assessment of Year 4 students (children eight to nine years of age) and Year 8 students (children 11 to 12 years of age) showed that reading as a preferred leisure activity outside of school declined markedly between 2004 and 2008 (Crooks, et al., 2009). In 1996, 77% of Year 8 students cited reading as a preferred leisure activity. By 2008, that percentage had dropped by 18 percent. The 2008 NEMP data indicated that in Year 4, 80% of the students were positive about reading in their own time compared to 59% of the Year 8 students. This substantial decline would appear to indicate that children are less interested in reading at a time in their schooling when literacy engagement is crucial for success in the secondary system.

Home-school partnerships

Successful and positive home-school partnerships support children in their learning. These partnerships are further enhanced by families who have high expectations for their children (Alton-Lee, 2003; Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Wylie, 2004; Wylie & Hodgen, 2007). Argent (2007), when discussing the *Every Child Matters* policy in the UK, advocated that individual schools need to recognise the importance of a learning culture that includes parents and that school leaders should examine the partnership they have with parents. Effective teachers recognise the importance of a positive link between the school and home (Ortiz & Ordóñez-Jasis, 2005). When parents are well informed about what is happening in the classroom learning programmes, this supports the child, particularly when an intervention programme is being planned. For example, Padak

& Rasinski's (2006) research on a home reading involvement programme for primary grade students demonstrated increases in reading achievement. Throughout daily 10 -15 minute sessions the parents read a short passage both to and with their child, listened to the child read the text, and discussed and engaged in a related word study activity. These programmes have been instigated both in the early and middle years of schooling. The children in this study achieved in reading well above what would normally be expected.

Socio cultural theory

A socio-cultural perspective of how children learn suggests that when children's own family backgrounds and cultural experiences are compatible with that of their teacher and the wider school environment, students are more likely to succeed (Grenfell, 2009; Lai, McNaughton, Amituanai-Tolosa, Turner, & Hsiao, 2009; Macfarlane, 2010). Similarly for children to be influenced by their home environment, they need connections with their primary caregivers, particularly mothers and fathers who are permanently resident in the home (Goldman, 2005). This author examined five large-scale studies of fathers and concluded that non-resident fathers were less likely to be involved as a major influence in their children's academic and social lives. Socially constructed interactions with peers and teachers that are authentic and relevant enable students to develop meaningful understandings (J. Cullen, 2002; Hodges, 2009). Teachers who can relate home and cultural knowledge and experience to learning in classrooms offer a significant bridge in the learning process. This informal or 'unschooled' knowledge that children bring to the learning environment in the classroom can vary substantively in character in relation to the 'school knowledge' which is often more formally obtained (Alexander & Fox, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). Acknowledging this and also that a child's prior and existing knowledge are strong and influential factors when learning to read are crucial issues in improving reading achievement (Alexander & Fox, 2004; Ruddell & Unrau, 2004; Stanovich, 2004).

In a north-eastern city in the US, Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) conducted a study in a low income middle school with approximately 1,340 students in grades 5 to 8. In this school the results from state assessment in reading indicated

that approximately 68 percent of the eighth graders were performing below basic levels in reading. Seven hundred and fifteen students completed a questionnaire about their reading habits. When asked who were the different people who encouraged them to read 70 per cent of these young adolescents selected parents and 63 percent selected their teacher. Hughes-Hassell and Rodge contend that schools should partner with parents to encourage leisure reading as often there can be a disjuncture between the school and home environments.

Hodges (2009) in her study of 12 to 13 year olds reading development in the UK found that teachers, and arguably parents, who engage in conversations about reading with young adolescents, help develop and define their identities as readers. She advocated that these conversations about reading 'nudge them gently into thinking about themselves as readers, towards the end prompting them to begin to talk collaboratively and even initiate questions rather than merely respond (p 174)'. These types of dialogues whether with a child's teacher or parent help develop understandings and knowledge around literacy learning. As Argent (2007) suggested, developing the link between the school and parents begins to establish a learning community where these types of strategies can be promoted.

The family and community, and to some extent the school, have some relevance on their socio-cultural beliefs and values in regard to reading and reading goals (Ruddell, 2004). Parents' contributions can be significant in terms of their own understanding of the importance of reading. Parents can support their children by developing reading skills in the home. Vygotsky (1978) is pivotal to such theoretical perspectives, in particular his theory on the zone of proximal development. This takes place when there is explicit teaching and collaboration with and by fellow students and teachers. Parents can further support this learning

Thus, our research investigation sought to explore the influences of mothers and fathers in supporting their young adolescent children's attitude to, and interest in reading. Our study looks at a key issue in regards to the partnership between parents and their children when reading in the home environment.

Methodology

Qualitative researchers are focused on appreciating human behaviour and circumstances from the research participants' own perspectives (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2007; Hammersley, 1992). Our investigation employed interviewing to give explanations of the social world and what was taking place. We wished to explore how parents viewed reading and the effects this had on their own children's attitudes to and success in reading.

The authors of this study asked principals of six schools, which represented a wide variety of school types in the South Island of New Zealand, to nominate parents of Year 7 and 8 students who represented a range of reading abilities. Students who were achieving in reading and students who were underachieving were identified by the their teachers using the school's assessment data. From this group of students, the principals identified in total twenty seven of their parents. Twelve of the parents were fathers and fifteen were mothers. The parents were interviewed using a semi-structured schedule. The critical question underlying the development of the interview schedule was, 'What are we trying to find out about the parents' attitudes to reading and the links from this to their children's reading?' The order of the questions was considered and if the questions would progressively develop and the parents would feel at ease from the start of the interview (Punch, 2009). As the interviews were semi-structured, the number of questions was also limited to allow for the interviewers to follow up on issues and for the interviewee to add additional information that they perceived as relevant. Questions were asked such as: 'How do you encourage your child to read at home?', 'Can you tell me about your child's reading?', 'Do you go to the library and if so do you take your child?'

One difficulty we encountered was finding a representative sample of fathers. The principals indicated that they had difficulty in recruiting fathers to the study thus limiting the number to 12, most of whom were involved in school governance or were regular visitors to the school. All of the fathers lived permanently with their children or in one case, grandchild and only one was a single parent who was a widower. The parents were interviewed individually and it was recorded, then transcribed. Once the data collection was completed early codes were developed, in consideration of the research questions. These were influenced by the previous

research findings within the socio-cultural tradition (Harry, Klinger, & Sturges, 2005). Thus, these codes tended to be descriptive requiring minimal or no inference further than the portion of data itself (Punch, 2009). Categories included use of libraries, parents' attitudes to reading, knowledge of their child's reading achievement and the types of texts their child read. Using these categories as a guide, the overall data were scanned to look for patterns and any discrepancies. The data were read and reread thus creating initial classifications. These became our first point of reference. This was followed by axial coding of the interview transcripts (Neuman, 2003). The axis was tested against the data, which produced identifiable codes. This influenced and informed our decisions regarding possible interwoven themes. The next stage in the process was to provide an interface of main ideas within the qualitative data.

Finally, we re-evaluated our categories and codes in order to ensure the overall analysis was focussed around main ideas (Charmaz, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During this process of selective coding the most important codes that re-emerged recurrently guided the research. These incorporated concepts such as the supply and availability of books in the home and beliefs about the significance of reading and the parents' own attitudes to reading.

Discussion and findings

All but three of the parents interviewed were of European descent. All of the fathers were either qualified tradespersons, in a profession or a manager of a large workplace. The mothers had a range of work and home commitments. A variety of themes emerged from the data.

1. Influence of father's reading habits

Some of the mothers interviewed discussed how their husband's lack of interest in reading appeared to be influential even when the mother said she was an avid reader. One mother who enjoyed reading, was finding it difficult to encourage her underachieving son to read. She explained that her husband's interest in reading was low, similar to their son.

'Yes, it has been 24 years and I have never seen Tony (my husband) read a book.'

Similarly, another mother whose son was under-achieving in reading described her husband's reading habits.

'No, he reads the newspaper...He will read the newspaper, fact books but try and get him to sit down and read a novel - no way.'

One father articulated on his own experiences which had made him decide to do better with his own children. He said:

'I'm quite aware now that I went quite a few years without physically finishing a book...I think that I read one book at school.'

When asked if he considered reading important he responded:

'It's the basis of everything... and if the children can (be) reading fiction it's good for them...It keeps their imaginations going.'

Considering his own childhood background it was apparent he was resolute in ensuring his child had more positive experiences in reading support.

Another father, with a son who was a successful reader, described how he loved to read. He said:

'I read newspapers. I also love to read ... I can say that (reading) is the best foundation for any career.'

All of the fathers whose children were reportedly achieving well in reading were positive readers. They read a variety of texts such as non-fiction, Internet articles, newspaper articles or Bible related literature. These fathers were well informed about their children's progress in reading. This was evident from their knowledge of school reading programmes, reporting methods to parents, interviews with teachers and dialogue with their children. They were consistently complementary about their child's school reading programmes and said their children were enthusiastic about reading.

One father summed up the prevailing view by saying:

'Concerns? Well, she reads a book far too fast [laughs] ...No, nothing concerns me about it [her school reading].'

However one father, a recent arrival in New Zealand who was of non European descent, believed that the schooling from years 1 to 6 were more influential on his child's success in reading. He expanded on this opinion:

'I want to give thanks to the Primary School. They have done most of the ground work and with the Intermediate [a separate school for years 7 to 8]...I know there's nothing much coming from the school.'

As a group, the six fathers whose children were reportedly achieving in reading were conversant about the kinds of books their children read and their favoured authors and text- type. A father while describing his daughter's reading in detail explained:

'She loves history books. It's more of a problem to stop her reading. She has read all the Harry Potter books as well.'

2. Mothers' reading habits

The mothers interviewed had a range of backgrounds and interests in reading. One mother of four children described how she had struggled as a reader. She said:

'I am not a huge reader at all. I have always struggled with reading to be perfectly honest and I related much more to my middle two [who both have been low achievers in reading], than to my eldest and youngest children [both successful readers]... It was quite foreign to me. To be honest, I did everything I could to avoid reading right through school.'

Another mother who also had four children, two of whom had achieved well in reading whilst the other two had struggled, explained:

'I was diagnosed as dyslexic when I was about thirteen. My brother was severely dyslexic so when I had a daughter that opened the books and read - I was like 'wahoo'! And everything just came easy to her and it always has. You asked about, is it an advantage at school if they come in and it is easy? It is huge. It is massive.'

Other mothers discussed how children in their families had a range of interests and that the reading interests of the parents did not appear to influence their child's attitudes. For example, one mother described that the children in their family had different interests and abilities in reading regardless of the parent's interest in reading. She said:

'Because I have three [children] and the middle one is not a big reader, I think there is some sort of nature in it as well, but definitely, it is like anything - sporting families give great sporting opportunities to their children. We [my husband and I] are readers so we give reading opportunities to our children.'

One or both parents' abilities in reading and interest in reading for pleasure appeared to have been significant in encouraging and giving confidence for their child to read.

3. Library use

The mothers tended to strongly support the use of the local libraries to encourage their children to read. Two mothers explained how they regularly took their children to the library.

'We tend to go to the library during the school holidays so they have something to look at, at home.'

'I encourage them by making sure they go to the library regularly, by making sure they take out library books.'

When asked about use of the library, another mother of a child who was succeeding in reading

explained that although they used the library her children accessed books in a variety of other ways too. She said:

'Yes, [we use the library] lots. The children swap books amongst themselves as well. I noticed there was a big pile of one of her friend's books on the bookshelf. There are lots of bookshelves at home. They each have one in their rooms. There's one in the lounge and one in the entrance way. For a long time there we didn't use the library, we just used our books because I also have boxes and boxes in the garage. So, as they have gone through different stages, the books have come out of the garage or gone back in.'

Some of the fathers had explained how they accompanied their children to public libraries when time permitted, even if in most cases they said they left this to their wives due to work commitments. One father said:

'Yes, I go with them but because of my workload. I find it a bit hard sometimes now.'

One father, recently arrived from the United Kingdom was impressed by the library at his daughter's school, an intermediate. He said:

'It is almost like an adult sort of coffee room with sofas everywhere. It's brilliant!'

Another father when asked about library visits explained:

'They do regular class visits to the library so they are encouraging library books to be taken home and read. Despite knowing this, he said he did not talk about reading or books with his son. Interestingly however, when asked who took most accountability for supporting reading at home, most fathers interviewed thought they took an effective role. Bedtime reading seemed to important for most fathers and they

also modelled reading as a pleasurable pursuit whether this was reading the newspaper daily or picking up novels to read regularly. As a group they had a focus on the need to be accountable and to take an interest in their son or daughter's current reading activities.'

Just two fathers felt capable of recommending titles and authors to their children even though there was a sentiment that it would be good if libraries and schools offered catalogue lists of books to move children further than their favorite author or series. All fathers ranked the library as highly important in providing high-quality, free reading texts and saw this as a crucial element to support reading. A minority bought books for their children although some children borrowed or swapped books with their peers. As well, the group collectively rated reading as very significant as a success factor in adult life and a motivating and pleasurable leisure pastime. Most fathers focused on success factors and opined that these were most important. A typical comment which was reiterated by several fathers was:

'I think that's [reading] the basic foundation for any career. I don't believe that you can do anything in your life if you can't read or grasp it.'

A mother of a child in a rural area explained how that although they had used the community library that now it tended to be in the holidays because of other commitments. She said:

'We do, do the library. It is not a regular thing. The library tends to be holidays now because there is so much else on. They always bring books home from the library here at school and we buy them.'

Clearly schools having well stocked libraries where children can borrow books to take home was an advantage to children when their parents are not able to regularly take them to the community library. A number of fathers described the process of book selection by children and the discussion that resulted. One father said:

'They get a book from the library and then they've got to write about that book.'

Another father (a Pasifika and widower) whilst viewing the library as important, did not visit it with his five children. He was a member of the Board of Trustees at his children's school and worked fulltime. Only one of his children went to the library and although he did not accompany her, he took the view that he was not pivotal in this regard. He maintained that the older children in his family who were more fluent in English could assist the younger ones. His heavy commitments in school governance and work responsibilities precluded him from taking a more active role.

Two families where the children were underachieving in reading did not go to the library often. Neither parent could bring to mind seeing their child read anything apart from magazines. They were not able to name their child's preferred authors or books but knew the names of the magazines they read. The father said that he had read to his children when they were younger and now when talking about his daughter had:

'Set up a special little reading lamp on her bed, rather than wait up, so she knows she can go to bed and read.'

The father read primarily for information and this approach had followed through into his reading exchanges with his child. He did not rank himself as being an exceptionally involved parent in supporting with reading at home. He classed himself as an above average reader but said his wife was most involved with the children because:

'She wasn't particularly well read too, and does have ... less reading comprehension than me, so she is very acutely aware of making sure all the children read well.'

A mother of a child whose father rarely read, described how her son who was not successful in reading had an aversion to visiting the library. She said:

'I have to drag him in [to a library]. Because he is a reluctant reader he does take a while to get through a book.'

These findings concur with other researchers (see, for example, Grenfell, 2009; Lai, et al., 2009; Macfarlane, 2010) who concluded that when a child's own family background and experiences, including visiting libraries and reading for leisure, are congruent with that of their schooling they are more likely to have a positive attitude to reading and learning in general.

4. Reading for your future career

All the fathers of children believed that being a good reader connected more to doing well in education and long-term employment rather than reading being a pleasure or an exciting way to learn new things. Three fathers, similar to the other fathers, said:

'I can say that [reading well] is the basic foundation for any career. I don't think you can achieve anything if you can't read and grasp what they've read.'

'I think it's important to know how to read. It's important because she'll go for a job interview.'

'Well, it's the basis of everything you do in school and afterwards, isn't it? You can read, you can understand, and knowledge is everything.'

These fathers saw reading as a way of achieving with an end product of high literacy skills ensuring their children would succeed in their career prospects.

Overall, the mothers did not emphasize the link between reading attainment and future career prospects to the same extent as the fathers. Nevertheless, one mother described how her son's passion for books and interest in history would likely influence his future career. She explained:

'I think the other thing as well is his reading choice ... he will voluntarily pick a book and he likes to go to bookshops and actually one of the offshoots will be he will be a professor of history because he loves it.'

The mothers tended to be more aware of the importance of reading so they could succeed in their current and future years of schooling rather than articulating how reading skills would influence long-term career prospects. For example, when asked about the importance of teaching reading in the later years of primary schooling one mother said:

'I think it is very important. This is where they can slip through the gaps as well.'

On the other hand another mother, while recognising the immediate importance of improving reading skills during the school years did acknowledge the long-term influence this would have on her child's career prospects. She explained:

'I think it is paramount. I know that these days, kids can get away with texting and not having spelling. But I really do think they need that grounding and the rules to go and be built on year by year... They might be able to read but you can always take it further so they will get more enjoyment and they will be able to read more fluently and widely and research properly for later on in their careers.'

Overall, the mothers appeared to be more cognizant of the currency of their child's schooling and their leisure activities while the fathers perceived that success in reading was vital chiefly as a vocational tool to build up employable ability.

Conclusions

This research study explored the partnership between fathers and mothers and their young adolescent children when learning to read. The children who were reportedly average or above average in reading, had a parent who was more likely to view reading as a pleasurable pastime, rather than a requirement for instructional advancement in education. Additionally, these parents demonstrated knowledge of the genre and authors their children preferred, encouraged trips to libraries and participated in them regularly when work schedules permitted. In contrast, some of the parents of low ability children had less successful experiences educationally, were not recreational readers, viewed reading as an information requirement only, and did not visit libraries regularly with or without their children.

Teachers and school leaders both within New Zealand and internationally could consider the evidence put forward in this study when organising information sessions about classroom reading programmes. They could also encourage parents to take a greater role in their children's reading by arranging school meetings in the local public library at times when parents would be more likely to attend.

This research investigation highlights the importance of encouragement of and interest in reading in the home environment. Teachers, teacher librarians and teacher educators need to take more cognizance of the critical role parents play in supporting and influencing their child's attitude to, and ability in, reading.

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