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“Does what and how I read have an effect on my learning across the curriculum?”: An exploration of year 4 pupils’ perspectives on independent reading

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Abstract

Reading is a fundamental skill that aids learning across the curriculum and is essential to success in school and beyond; indeed, in 2002 the OECD found that reading enjoyment surpasses even socio-economic status in its centrality to educational success. Using a questionnaire alongside semi-structured interviews of a selected sample, this study enquires about children’s feelings towards independent reading and its relation to their schoolwork. It finds that the choice of material available to them and the presence of a supportive reading role model in the shape of a parent, most often a mother, are crucial extrinsic factors in their reading lives.

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Introduction

In a report published in 2002, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that being an engaged reader can be more of an educational advantage than having well-educated parents, resultantly suggesting that “finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change” (Kirsch et al., 2002, p.3). The study also notes that reading literacy is “seen as a necessary foundation for performance in other subject areas within an educational context” (Kirsch et al., 2002, p.3); it was the former point that drove me to investigate the independent reading habits of a group of children in a maintained, non-selective British primary school, as I was motivated to explore their differing perspectives on such a fundamental skill. The latter point helped me to form the title and focus of my research as it seemed pertinent to explore the influence of this skill on children’s learning across the whole curriculum from their perspective. Year 4, where the children are aged eight and nine, seemed a logical home for the study as the children are old enough to have developed independent reading habits and it has been argued that the process of learning to read continues up to age seven (Rose, 2009). If we could not develop our proficiency or interest in reading beyond the age of seven, however, the purpose of this study would be clouded; would we be able to use the findings to encourage further independent reading in a positive, constructive manner? According to Ross, McKechnie and Rothbauer (2005), it is never too late to become an independent reader even though the foundations that make one are often laid in our early years. I wanted to explore children’s feelings towards independent reading and whether they feel that their reading habits (or lack thereof) affect their learning in various areas of the school curriculum with the aim of forming a greater understanding of the mindset of children of varying gender and general attainment level.

As such, I decided on the following research questions:

1. What are the reasons that pupils choose to read independently or choose not to read independently?
2. How do children feel their independent reading informs their learning across the curriculum?
3. What do pupils feel would further encourage children to read independently?

The inclusion of the second and third questions provide the opportunity for opinions to be voiced on how different reading habits affect learning across the curriculum and thus for the fullest reflection of the children's attitudes towards independent reading to be depicted. The third question in particular is important so that the study may shed some light on how we can help less enthusiastic readers to develop their independent reading habits.

Literature Review

To clarify the term "independent reading" as used here, its definition is not limited to reading books or reading at home, but extends to cover any substantial material, be that newspapers, magazines or comics, and includes the time children spend reading independently at school, whether that is time prescribed for this activity by the class teacher or reading undertaken of the child's own volition. This differs slightly from what Cremin (2014) describes as "reading for pleasure" in the Teachers as Readers research, though there is a significant overlap; Cremin writes that reading for pleasure "can involve any kind of text – novel, magazine, comic, non-fiction – in electronic as well as in printed form. It can take place anywhere – at home, at school, in the community, on a bus (or any other form of transport), on a beach, in the park (or any other leisure location)", but in contrast also limits reading for pleasure to be solely defined by "the reader's volition, their agency and desire to read" (p.5). Similarly, Clark and Rumbold (2006) define pleasure reading as an activity that "typically involves materials that reflect our own choice, at a time and place that suits us" (p.6). While I made clear to the children involved in this study that they were discussing the reading they do at any place and any time, the term "independent reading" in this study is not restricted to the times they choose to read and may include times they read alone because they are instructed to do so by the class teacher. This was intentional, as one of the established routines of the classroom where the study was conducted was that the children sit and read alone after completing their morning tasks at the beginning of the day and again when they come back into the class after lunchtime. They were permitted to select their own material at these intervals, and this could be material brought from home if desired. As such,

“independent reading” as referred to here should not be confused with the term as used in some studies from the US, where it is sometimes used to describe activity more in line with Cremin’s definition of reading for pleasure, often interchangeably with “free voluntary reading” (Krashen, 2004).

But why is such reading important and why seek pupil perspectives on it? Since 2014, reading for pleasure has been a statutory requirement in England as a result of independent choice-led reading being determined to be a strong predictor of reading attainment (Department for Education, 2014; Cremin, 2019). With reading attainment being so crucial to other areas of the curriculum (Kirsch et al., 2002), it seems pertinent to enquire about pupils’ perspectives on their independent reading. If we understand their motivations, we may be more effective in our encouragement of a positive attitude toward independent reading; this should be a priority of primary teachers given the importance of reading skills (Guthrie & Cox, 2001). Developing motivation is crucial:

Development of students’ demeanour toward reading is as important, if not more so, than skill enhancement. Unless reading attitudes are maintained and even bolstered, content instruction will not always reach the learner, nor will students use reading as an independent learning tool. Categorising attitudes is much more dynamic than grouping by those who like or dislike reading.

(Ortileb, 2015, p.161)

This use of reading “as an independent learning tool” is imperative throughout children’s daily life; it is one of the key ways in which we process information. Ortileb’s assessment that the spectrum of attitudes towards reading is more complex than a black and white judgment of like or dislike is also crucial; this was why I felt it important that “independent reading” in this study encompass all available formats in which children consume material and to conduct semi-structured interviews with the selected children, allowing them to elaborate on their individual thoughts about reading.

Attitudes towards reading, of course, can be influenced by extrinsic factors. Previous studies have found that some children feel encouragement from both school and home is important to their enjoyment of reading (Clark & Foster, 2005; Clark, 2007) and that incentives such as rewards or recognition from teachers and parents can be motivating factors (Becker, McElvany & Kortenbruck, 2010). Enjoyment itself is a crucial motivating factor for independent reading (Capper, 2013), albeit more of an intrinsic influence; Capper notes that children’s access to material “very much depends upon the environment they live in” (ibid., p.98), an extrinsic factor that could be disabling if there is a paucity of available material, hence the importance of such material in school. This study seeks to

explore pupil perspectives on motivations around independent reading and their perspectives on what might be an effective motivator.

Aside from children's independent reading habits, this study seeks to uncover their perspectives on how their reading affects their learning across the curriculum. Much of the relevant research and several academics that have written on the subject emphatically agree that there is a positive effect (Cremin, 2019; Guthrie & Cox, 2001; Kirsch et al., 2002; Krashen, 2004; Logan, Medford & Hughes, 2011; Whitten, Labby & Sullivan, 2016). However, there are also arguments that increased independent reading will "not turn children into better readers and brighter students in a direct way" (Mol & Bus, 2011, p.289), though that same study agrees that "poor readers' basic reading skills profit most from reading books in their leisure time" (ibid.). Logan, Medford and Hughes opined in 2011 that "academic success for children is usually founded on their ability to read proficiently, as most subjects across the school curriculum rely, to varying extents, on reading skill" (p.124). It is true that even a subject like maths, which ostensibly requires less reading skill for success, includes verbal reasoning questions or verbose problems during testing that demand a certain level of literacy. This hypothesis is corroborated by the analysis of a set of students' exam results carried out by the Institute for Education; it was found that those who read independently enjoyed a 14.4% advantage in vocabulary and a 9.9% advantage in maths, compared to just an 8.6% advantage in spelling (Sellgren, 2013). While an advantage in vocabulary would seemingly benefit a child across the curriculum, proficiency in spelling seems more limited to academic success in English; the benefits of independent reading may have a larger impact on children's holistic learning than previously believed (Whitten et al., 2016) and the findings of the Institute for Education support this.

With all these findings, one may question the purpose of seeking pupil perspectives on this matter. In their discussion of a study of pupil perspectives on literacy teaching, Wray and Medwell (2006) write that "in trying to understand literacy teaching in classrooms, and thence hopefully to improve it, a crucial step to take is to gain some insight into what the learners are making of the experiences they are offered" (p.204). Why limit this to literacy teaching? The attitudes, motivations and overall perspectives of learners could be invaluable to teaching across the curriculum and may be used to inform planning and pedagogy both for specific children or classes and more generally. Gathering this information can correct the misconceptions of teachers and clarify what it is that children enjoy about certain tasks (Wray & Medwell, 2006). In direct reference to independent reading, it seems pertinent to study the perspectives of children in order to determine what material they prefer and how they feel various materials of differing subject matter affect their learning across the curriculum

so that this may be utilised to the benefit of the learning as well as helping children to metacognitively engage with it.

Methodology

I carried out this small-scale case study in a year 4 class at a maintained school in the east of England. In the first part of the study, a questionnaire was given to all thirty pupils of the class to complete at the end of the autumn term. I chose to administer a questionnaire because my reading around research methodology indicated it would be useful in gathering “information that learners are able to report about themselves, such as their beliefs and motivations about learning” (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p.77); what is described here is exactly the information I wished to extract. A blank example of the questionnaire I constructed can be seen in Figure 1. Its purpose was to provide the study with some general quantitative and qualitative data that drew broadly from a range of year 4 pupils, encompassing children of varying backgrounds, identities and attainment levels and to provide information on the class’ reading habits from which a concentrated sample of six children could then be chosen. I opted to omit a question about how independent reading could affect learning across the curriculum from the questionnaire, instead centring the questionnaire on independent reading habits. This was because of the limited flexibility a questionnaire allows in answering such a complex question (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007), a problem ostensibly exacerbated by the fact the participants were children, some of whom had limited facility in terms of writing and reading comprehension. Pre-empting perfunctory written responses to this expansive question, which may have only provided slight data of finite importance (Wagner, 2010), I decided to concentrate this area of the research into the interview section of the study. This made sense in terms of maintaining the questionnaire’s simplicity, and therefore accessibility, with concise, straightforward questions (Newby, 2014).

Of the thirty children that completed the survey, fifteen were boys and fifteen were girls, providing a balanced sample in terms of gender. The answers of the questionnaire were used to select six pupils that had varying perspectives on independent reading and were generally attaining at different levels as defined by the class teacher and school assessment data. The sample consisted of three male and three female children in order to ensure any differences between the sexes were observed and given equal attention. I chose to conduct a semi-structured interview with each of the six pupils, asking them to voice more detailed opinions on their independent reading habits and how they felt reading

did or did not affect their learning across the curriculum. I chose to interview because this method generally allows for more in-depth answers from the participants than other approaches to data collection (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Semi-structuring the interviewing was chosen because I felt it would allow consistency across the questions put to the children, but also flexibility in terms of giving a platform and opportunity to dissenting voices; Burns' (2010) writing on research methodology gave me confidence in this assessment, as Burns opines that "the aim of a semi-structured interview is to enable you to make some kind of comparison across your participants' responses, but also to allow for individual diversity and flexibility" (p.75). Mackey and Gass (2016) feel that semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to "elicit additional data if initial answers are vague, incomplete, off-topic, or not specific enough" (p.225); this seems especially salient in a study where the participants are children, some of whom may find the subject matter of the interview uninteresting. I felt that this openness was imperative to the effectiveness of the qualitative data collected, allowing the possibility of unexpected ideas emerging from the discussions (Peterson, 2019).

I analysed the quantitative data retrieved from the questionnaire to determine general trends in the perspectives on independent reading and its effect on learning of children in this age group. I approached this via charts and tables, choosing the most appropriate type of analysis for each of the questions in the questionnaire, which differed in nature (see Figure 1). The qualitative data from the written questions of the questionnaire was also looked at to establish patterns or anomalies in the sample. I moved on to analyse the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews via thematic analysis to give a deeper insight into the perspectives of a range of different children from the class, exploring themes related to all three research questions.

Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure that all aspects of this study were ethical and correct, I looked carefully at the ethics checklist constructed by the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge and made sure that each of the requirements was met, including the reading and subsequent application of the research ethics issued by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018).

With regards to the consent of all the participants, I spoke to each member of the senior leadership team of the school where I was conducting the study and with their approval, I sent out a letter seeking parental consent for each of the children. The letter informed of the purpose and nature of the study,

explained who I am, how and why I was conducting research and what the data would be used for. It gave details of the manner of research and clarified that all the recorded material would be destroyed at the end of the academic year, while all references to the school and children would be anonymised. Each of these letters were returned with signatures.

In order for the interviews to be entirely confidential, I interviewed the children individually in a quiet room in school. The first three interviews took place in a small room off a year 2 classroom, where the sound of the interview was not audible, but the interviewee and myself were visible to the class and their teacher through a window. This room was not available for the remaining interviews on a subsequent day and instead these were carried out in a larger room occasionally used for staff meetings. In order to ensure privacy and confidentiality, I sought permission and exclusivity for this room from the senior leadership team and advised school staff of the timings of the interviews. The interviewee and myself were also visible through a window in this room, on this occasion from the staff room.

Before each interview I made it clear to each participant the reasons and nature of the study to ensure that they understood why I had asked to speak to them. I clarified that everything would be kept confidential and anonymous, explaining the effective meaning of this in simple terms. Prior to beginning, I always clarified they could withdraw at any time; while no pupil chose to exercise this right, two pupils asked to change the time of their interviews so they could do other things, which I was happy to oblige.

In summary, the study was carried out with the utmost importance afforded to ethical considerations and all the participants understood lucidly the nature of the study, the reasons for their participation and that said participation was entirely optional. Hammersley (2015) writes that “research should not be carried out on children but instead with or by them” and that “informed consent must be obtained from them, not simply from their carers” (p.575); while this study followed the conventions established by the university, I feel that my rapport with the participants and the clarity surrounding their optional participation in the study, combined with the relaxed, informal nature of the questionnaire and semi-structured interview meant that the children enjoyed their participation and knew their input was valued. Some made comments that reflected this.

Presentation and Discussion of Data

Questionnaire

The questionnaire on independent reading habits was administered to the whole year 4 class at the end of the autumn term. A blank copy can be seen below as Figure 1, in the exact form given to the children.

Independent Reading Questionnaire

Name: _____

Do you like reading by yourself?

Yes No Sometimes

Why?

What do you like reading? You can tick more than one box if you like.

Books Magazines Newspapers

Things on the internet Other

If you ticked "other", tell me what you like reading and why. If you chose anything else, tell me why you chose it:

If you have any favourite books/magazines etc, tell me about them here:

Figure 1: Example of questionnaire as administered to children

The questionnaire was designed to be accessible and straightforward while allowing a complexity of responses that satisfied the study. The responses to the first question, “do you like reading by yourself?”, are collated below in Figure 2, organised by gender

Of the thirty children that completed the questionnaire, 18 answered the question positively (60%). Only one pupil answered no, while 11 others responded with “sometimes” (37%). This suggests that independent reading was generally looked upon favourably as an activity, with 60% of the pupils saying they liked to do it, and contrasts sharply with the wider national picture and surveys carried out towards the beginning of the decade, which had found substantial negativity around general attitudes towards reading (Clark, 2013; Twist, Sizmur, Bartlett & Lynn, 2012).

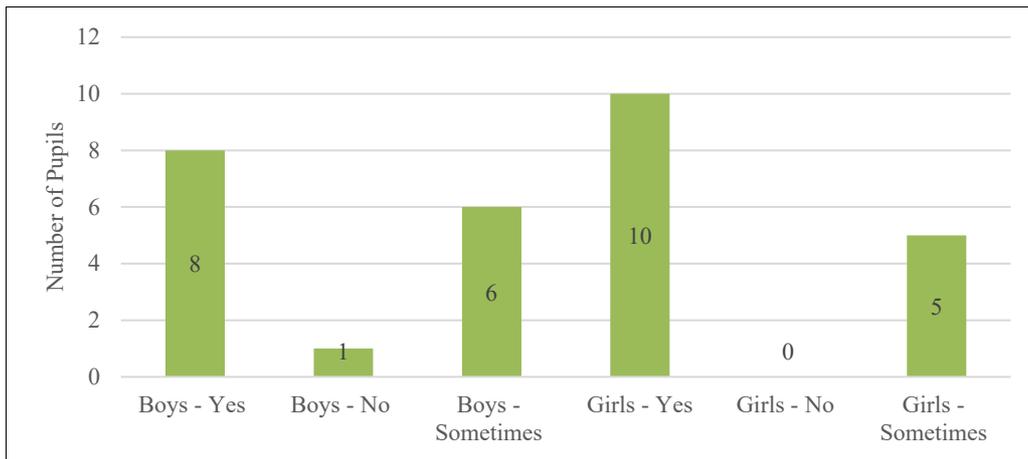


Figure 2: Responses to “do you like reading by yourself?” from written questionnaire

This may be because the class teacher schedules time dedicated to independent reading with a choice of material, which is not the case in all classrooms (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009). The variation between boys and girls is very slight, though the trend seems to show that girls are more likely to enjoy independent reading; this mirrors previous findings, which have shown the gender gap to be widening in this direction (Clark & Douglas, 2011). Although the responses here suggest that the disparity in this class is less obvious, it is nonetheless present; some research has shown parents can be more likely to read to girls than boys, and this may have had an impact in some cases (Baker & Milligan, 2016).

The second question asked the participants to justify this initial answer, and it is from here that we may draw more meaningful ideas for further investigation. The answers are collated below in Figure 3.

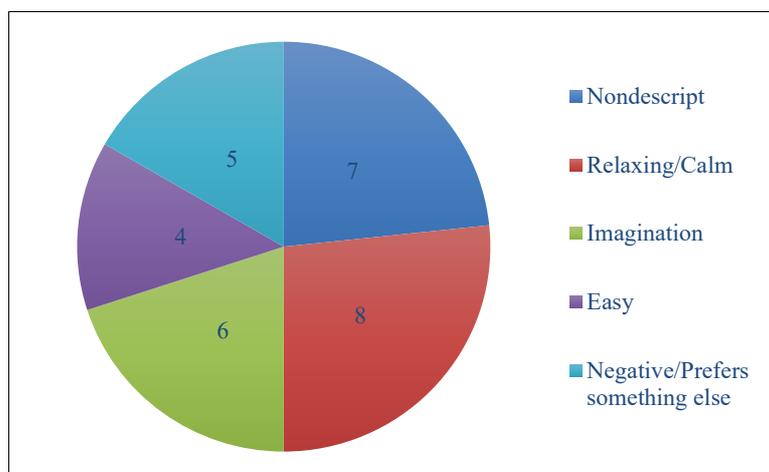


Figure 3: Responses to “why?” from written questionnaire

While the responses varied greatly in terms of the vocabulary and specific ideas used, they were broadly divided into five distinct categories which I have coded as follows: those that gave a nondescript answer without any particular reason for liking reading, generally repeating their answer to the first question; those that wrote about how it helps them to relax or feel calm; those that feel it helps them to escape into and explore their imagination; those that feel it is easy or unchallenging and finally those that made a negative comment about reading alone or voiced a preference for a different activity e.g. reading with a parent.

The answers I have classified as “nondescript” were generally some variation of “I like it” or “because it’s fun” and did not give any nuanced insight to the participant’s perspective on independent reading. These seven children (23%) generally gave limited answers to the subsequent question about favourite texts or decided not to answer it. The most popular answer was that independent reading helped the children to feel calm or relaxed, being mentioned explicitly as the main reason for doing so by eight respondents (27%). The third most popular theme was that of imagination being exacerbated by independent reading or escaping into your imagination while reading alone, with six children writing about this (20%); the development of a child’s imagination could be linked to them being read to by a parent in their formative years (Waugh, 2018). The idea of it being an easy task was mentioned by four children (13%), though it is important to note that none of these children linked the supposed ease of independent reading to relaxing. Nonetheless, this feeling could be seen as encouraging for their future as readers because reader engagement may not be heavily predicated on reading challenging material (McGeown, 2015). Finally, five children (17%) either made a negative comment about independent reading or stated that they preferred to do something else, the latter being a factor that reading has to compete with increasingly in modern times (Clark, 2012; Laurenson, Mcdermott, Sadleir & Meade, 2015). The only child that stated they didn’t like reading alone gave the justification that “if you read alone you’ll be lonely” (spelling changed), while the other divergent responses were all from children that had answered “sometimes” to the first question and included statements like “I kind of like reading to other people”, “when you read with your parents they can tell you what words mean” and “I don’t really get the book when I read alone”. These statements do not suggest an opposition to or dislike of reading, but a general preference to read with someone else.

The next question centred on the children’s preferred reading materials, the findings of which are presented below in Table 1. As children were permitted to select more than one option for this question, the total does not accumulate to thirty.

Reading Material	Number of Pupils
Books	28
Magazines	17
Newspapers	5
Things on the internet	12
Other	8

Table 1: Responses to “what do you like reading?” from written questionnaire

Books were by far the most popular material, with all but two children ticking the box to select them (93%). Reasons for preferring books given in the subsequent question range from statements like “they are longer” to “they might give me a moral”; Clark and Douglas (2011) write that it may be because “literacy attainment in schools is defined by relatively traditional book-based activities” (p.9) and it was especially true of this class that a plethora of fiction and non-fiction books were available. Magazines received the second-most mentions (57%), though some confusion over what is considered a magazine may have influenced this, with several children mentioning publications such as “The Beano” as a magazine they liked, while other children named comics, specifically “The Beano”, as a material that came under the “other” category. Newspapers were only selected by 5 children (20%), but there was a single reference to “articles” under “other”. 12 children stated they liked to read things on the internet (40%) and specifically mentioned websites like Wikipedia and National Geographic (which was also highlighted as a magazine) in the space below. Just 8 children selected the “other” option (27%), with 3 (10%) mentioning comics as their favoured material. Other materials brought up under “other” included leaflets and Christmas cards, the latter of which seems unlikely to have occurred had the study been conducted earlier in the year.

The final question asked whether the respondents had any favourite texts or publications. The answers varied too widely to suggest a trend or pattern, but the most popular author or writer was David Walliams, whose name was mentioned on four occasions. The “Tom Gates” series were the most commonly mentioned books, occurring three times, but no particular magazine, website or publication was mentioned by more than one child except “The Beano”, which occurred three times; this may have been influenced by the fact one pupil had recently brought a box of old editions of this publication into the class. Ten pupils either chose not to answer, stated they did not have a favourite or appeared to misunderstand, providing an answer that did not logically fit the question.

Semi-structured Interviews

From the findings of the questionnaire, six children were selected for interviews on the basis that they had provided a varied insight into the sample, having given a variety of answers in the questionnaire and being mixed in gender and general academic attainment. The questions in the semi-structured interview sought to delve deeper into the independent reading habits mentioned in the questionnaire and then probe the pupils' perspectives on whether they felt their reading affected their learning in school. The names of the children discussed here (Caitlin, Heather, Isabel, Jack, Francis and Timothy) are pseudonyms, obscuring the true names for ethical purposes. These six children were chosen to provide a well-balanced sample: at the time of the study, Caitlin and Jack were considered by the class teacher to be two higher-attaining children, Heather and Francis to be generally attaining around the median level of the class and Isabel and Timothy's work showed them to be generally attaining below the expected level at the time the study was carried out. Prior to the recording beginning, it was impressed upon the children that everything they said would be kept confidential and anonymous and as such they should answer as truthfully and honestly as possible. While the analysis of the data from the questionnaire was handled quantitatively as much as possible and presented in charts, the interview data will be dealt with via thematic analysis.

Independent Reading Habits

The reasons and motivating factors the children gave for reading on their own varied greatly, with statements including references to both intrinsic motivations like "it makes me imagine like I'm in another world" (Heather) and extrinsic factors like "I read when my brother annoys me" (Timothy). Caitlin stated that she preferred to read with her parents than to read alone, saying "it's more fun to read with my mum and dad, I can relax without worrying about reading the words", one of several instances where "maternal and paternal figures predominantly featured as key social influences" (Merga & Roni, 2018, p.215). Francis said that he reads on his own "nearly all the time. Mostly when I'm in bed because it gets me to sleep really"; reading in bed or reading at night to relax was a recurrent theme, with Isabel saying "I usually read before I go to bed, when everyone's said goodnight and they're too tired to do anything with me. I just get one of my favourite books and start looking at the pictures or actually reading the book. Usually actually reading the book" and Jack saying "sometimes I do read my own books... just before I go to bed". Caitlin reading with her parents was also a bedtime activity; while some children did not mention bedtime specifically, every pupil seemed to view reading as a relaxing activity, even in the cases of Jack and Timothy, who expressed doubts

about their affinity for reading. Encouragingly, no one said they outright disliked reading, even if it was not their favourite hobby. Jack was the most explicit example, contradictorily stating that he reads his own books before bed and then saying he wasn't a big fan of reading. As with Caitlin, the motivating factor appeared to be the encouraging parent, at times reading to him and always supplying him with the material he needs to read independently (Merga & Roni, 2018). Interestingly, Jack and Caitlin were judged by the class teacher to be among the most literate pupils in the class. This suggests that the positive influence of parents is a significant factor in whether children enjoy reading and how easy or difficult it is for them (Merga & Roni, 2018; Waugh, 2018).

Effects of Independent Reading on Learning Across the Curriculum

Before conducting the interviews, I took samples of children's work in the three core subjects as well as a foundation subject to elucidate links between their perspectives on independent reading and their learning. It was interesting to note that some children seemed to have a very clear idea about how their reading influenced their learning, and this was often something that could be observed in their work across subjects as well as their participation in class. On the contrary, other children felt their reading did not affect their learning at all, while comparing their work with their preferred reading material appears to suggest the opposite; Francis's work showed that he writes in a comic book-inspired narrative voice, with sarcastic tone, use of capitals to show emotion and vocabulary like "duh". While he did not feel his independent reading had much impact on his work, he spoke at length about his enjoyment of reading comics. This was one of the most obvious examples of reading material's impact on schoolwork, which is supported by the idea that repeat encounters with particular vocabulary and lexical patterns influence writing skill (Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich & Share, 2002; Share & Shalev, 2004).

The divide in opinion on whether learning was impacted by independent reading seemed to be split by gender. Heather and Caitlin both felt it useful to apply the literacy skills they have acquired from reading to their English and science work. In Caitlin's interview, the influence of the parental figure resurfaced, again the mother, suggesting the influence of the parent on constructive reading (Waugh, 2018). Isabel was less cognisant about the advantages but was still able to elaborate on them. Unlike Heather and Caitlin, she was unable to think beyond English, reading and literacy in terms of her independent reading's influence on her learning.

In contrast to the girls, Francis, Jack and Timothy felt what they read didn't affect their learning at all. This could suggest girls are generally more self-aware and more able to metacognitively engage with their learning. It is worth noting the lack of confidence in Timothy's response to a question about when he reads independently, where he said that he often reads the "blue book" in class. To add context, the class all had dictionaries at their tables and were being encouraged to use them to look for spellings of words - it transpired later in the conversation that this was the "blue book" he was referring to, therefore not a true part of his independent reading.

Evidently, the children were split on this issue, with some leaning in the same direction as the research discussed earlier, while other children disagreed; while this was divided by gender, it is worth noting that it did not reflect how avid an independent reader the child was, with Francis, who said he reads on his own "nearly all the time" opining that his reading had little impact on his learning, while Caitlin, who prefers to read with an adult, felt the opposite. Overall, the children were not able to discuss a wide range of subjects in which they felt reading impacted their learning even when prompted, with the conversations largely limited to English and some references to science.

Encouragement of Independent Reading

Timothy and Jack, arguably the children that gave the strongest feelings of dislike towards independent reading, each referred to a lack of exciting material, or a desire for more, respectively saying "I don't really like the other books I have at home, or in our class. I'd like more football books, I like reading them" and "[I'd read more] if my mum got me a new bookshelf, and we had tonnes of new books, like David Walliams books and other children's books". With yet another reference to mothers, we may infer that "mothers are most likely to be perceived as reading models" (Merga & Roni, 2018, p. 218), as several of the children discussed their mothers in relation to the reading habits without being prompted to do so.

Caitlin, Isabel, Heather and Francis all also made references to what material is available, though they focussed more on choice, giving their input on what choices children that don't read much should make to help boost their enjoyment of reading, with comments like "if they started off with the easier books, and then got harder and harder stuff [it would be better]" and "I think that if you read more, you'll be able to know more and you'll be able to answer more questions. But also, choose the right books for you".

Critical Analysis of Methodology

In general, I feel that this case study has been successful in giving a number of children in the class a platform to discuss their perspectives on independent reading and its impact on learning. In doing so, it has brought to light several insights that may be used by the school in furthering the children's development of independent reading. The quantitative data from the questionnaire was useful, though the low number of "no" responses to the first question may suggest that children felt implored to give a positive answer on a subject they know is looked upon favourably by teachers (DeMarie, 2010). However, I do feel that the participation of the whole class in the questionnaire gave the study a comprehensive base to draw from, while my selection of pupils to undergo the semi-structured interview may have made its results slightly biased. While the selection was made to ensure a diversity of participants, randomising it may have ensured a more fully triangulated set of responses.

As with all qualitative research, the view of the researcher may have impacted the conclusions drawn (Bryman, 2008; Denscombe, 2003; Lichtman, 2009). While the use of the questionnaire was intended to limit this possibility (Bryman, 2008; Gray, 2009), the semi-structured interview inevitably allows for possible subjectivity on the part of the researcher due to the direct interaction involved (Cohen et al., 2011); this is further problematised by slight changes in the wording of questions due to the flow of the interviews, diminishing their comparability. On a more positive note, many questions elicited comparable answers and the open-ended nature of some questions meant an appropriate depth could be explored (Cohen et al., 2011; Drever, 2003; Xerri, 2018). My rapport with the children helped to put them at ease, though my role in the classroom as a trainee teacher may have affected their responses, possibly leading them to give more positive versions of their perspectives at some points (DeMarie, 2010). Focus group interviews may have been a way to empower them to speak with total honesty (Burns, 2010; Xerri, 2018).

While I believe my decision behind grounding the study in a year 4 class was sound, diversifying the participants by age may prove fruitful in terms of exploring the themes discussed here in more depth. On a similar note, the small sample size, particularly of the children that were interviewed, hampers the study in terms of its large-scale impact; the results are very specific to the school where it was carried out, and for an understanding of the wider national picture more schools should be accounted for.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Practice

In summary, the main reasons children said they chose to read independently were linked to relaxation, imagination and positive role models in the shape of their parents, specifically mothers. Girls felt that their reading helped them to learn new vocabulary and facts that translated to their school learning, while boys felt the two elements were separate. The participants were largely in agreement that the availability and choice of material was key in encouraging children to read more, both in terms of interesting content and appropriate levels of challenge. These are conclusive and useful answers to the three research questions posited in the introduction to this essay and they will have profound implications for my future practice; in encouraging children as developing readers I will be sure to enlist the help of their parents or carers whenever possible, imploring them to read with their children - as shared reading experiences can provide benefits as well as independent ones, as evidenced by Caitlin's success in school (Merga & Roni, 2018) - or to encourage their children to read independently, providing a wealth of material if they can. It is clear that pupils like Jack, who do not harbour an innate love for reading, can still enjoy the benefits in this way, but it is of course not possible for all parents, due to restrictions on time and finances (Merga & Roni, 2018); this makes it imperative that the classroom environment I engender be teeming with literacy and accessible, appropriate reading material. As for what that material should be, books were the most popular choice of the pupils in this study and have been shown to be the most beneficial (Baer, Baldi, Ayotte & Green, 2007; OECD, 2010, 2011). This idea is supported by my work with Francis in this study, whose preference for comic books does not appear to benefit his learning as much as books might.

As a class teacher I need to not only provide material and encourage children to read it, but allow them shared reading experiences, with myself and others, so that their interest in reading can develop and their learning across the curriculum can fully benefit. Following the interviews I conducted in this study, I will endeavour to illuminate my future pupils on the profits of both independent and shared reading, including the substantial cognitive benefits (Farrant & Zubrick, 2012; Hutton et al., 2015; Merga & Roni, 2018; Mol & Bus, 2011; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). This study has illuminated for me the potential riches of shared reading as well as independent, and in exploring the pupils' perspectives on the matter I feel better placed to spur their ongoing development both as readers and as learners. In a more general sense, the insightful comments and a high engagement of the children has exhibited the pertinence of pupil perspectives and I feel sure that I will seek them again in my future as a class teacher, in both formal research settings and informal conversations, to benefit my own classroom practice and the educational and social outcomes for the children impacted by it.

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