Analysis of Research Article

What Happens to Precocious Readers’ Performance by the Age of Eleven?

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Discussion of Arguments Presented

The authors felt that a study of precocious readers would extend knowledge and understanding of the reading processes and factors that promote successful reading. They wanted to test the power of models of reading to see if they could account for the performance of children across the spectrum of individual differences. The authors feel that precocious readers present challenges to their teachers who have to consider how to meet their needs within the curriculum. The authors define a precocious reader as a child who achieved fluent word reading skills at or before the age when most children in their society begin to receive literary instruction. At an early age, their reading ability stands out but as other children progress, their ability stands out less.

The authors looked at research into early predictors of success in reading. They identified knowledge of the alphabet, exposure to print and phonological awareness at as the most significant. They acknowledge that the first two predictors have high environmental influence, I.E., parents an pre-school experiences. Research shows that there is evidence that phonological awareness may also be biologically determined. Even though teacher programs may help readers, the biological phonological deficit may remain.

The authors feel that precocious readers are so because of their environmental experiences and use an early phonological awareness to teach themselves how to decode words. Precocious readers show a higher level of performance on tasks designed to used their phonological skills than same-aged children who are not precocious readers. The authors predict that the high performance of precocious readers on tasks that use phonological awareness in the early stages of literacy should remain stable even when non-precocious readers become skilled because it is biologically based.

In early stages of learning to read, accuracy of word recognition differentiates between good and poor readers. Word reading is predicated on decoding skills, which are dependent on phonemic awareness. As most children learn to read, accurate decoding may be less of a pacemaker in determining reading level. Individual differences may be more determine by motivation and comprehension.

The authors sited a causal model of reading development. Phonological awareness helps decoding. Decoding determines word recognition. Word recognition, along with listening compression, determines reading comprehension. Based on this model, the author predict that superior words reading skills found in precocious readers as they grow older will correlate with superior comprehension.

The authors wanted to do a medium-term longitudinal study of precocious readers that could identify the pattern of progress in later primary years. They proposed three possible patterns of progress. Non-precocious readers were assumed to be making steady progress. The authors wanted to see if precocious readers would be able to maintain their superior reading skills throughout their time in primary school and whether there were any lasting benefits of their early skills, particularly in relations to vocabulary and reading comprehension. They also wanted to find out if individual differences in phonological awareness remained stable and correlated with reading performance by the end of their primary years.

Discussion of Results Presented

The study group was 28 children with a mean age of 11y 5m. They were divided into two groups: Young Early Readers and Non Early Readers. Also, 18 young adults took part in the phoneme reversal task. The young adults were used as a control group because earlier studies led the authors to believe that the young early readers would be performing at adult equivalent levels by the age of eleven. The young early readers were 14 children that had not been explicitly taught to read by their parents. They were identified as such at age 5y. The non-early reader group was 14 children who were not reading fluently before they began their school education. They were matched to the first group by age, gender, receptive vocabulary, socioeconomic status, and pre-school experiences. The literacy activities in the home were very similar between the two groups.

The results showed that differences in reading and phonological awareness were not the result of higher levels of general cognitive functioning. The group differences were also not only because of the differences in receptive vocabulary. The precocious readers maintained an advantage in reading by the end of their primary school years when matched to same aged children who should have achieved fluent independent reading skills. This included word reading, reading rate, and reading comprehension. They also maintained an advantage for the skill of phonological awareness.

Both groups of children had high levels of word reading accuracy but children who start school with a high level of reading ability maintain the advantage. School did not appear to give added value in terms of accelerated progress. The young early reader group’s rate of progress in reading was predicted from the normal passage of time, but at a higher level than other readers. The differences between the two groups were stable over time and individual differences were stable over time.

The data support the fact that phonological awareness is an important determinant in learning to read. The study supports reading development that encourages phonemic awareness in word reading. It also supports the notion that performance on tasks of phonological awareness may be a biologically determined cognitive process. The better one is in manipulating phonemes, the better one is at reading. The young early reader children maintained their advantage at the same level. The data also suggests that reading increases a child’s vocabulary.

The reading skills of the young early readers were self-sustaining throughout their primary school years. They also continued to read widely. Although the early readers maintained their advantage, they did not necessarily maintain high achievement in schools.

Reactions to Arguments Presented and Results Found

I found this article interesting because it focused on children who taught themselves to read before they had formal instruction in school. I was curious to find out how and why that happens and what happens to them as they go through the school process. It was interesting that all of the children who taught themselves how to read had several things in common. One was a print-rich environment at home. I imagine that their parents read to them from books appropriate to their age. Another thing they all had in common was a fully developed knowledge of the alphabet. The last thing they all had in common was a high rate of phonological awareness. The authors suggest that phonological awareness may be biological. That is something that I hadn’t heard before so that was also interesting.

The main results of the study left me wanting to know more. Although the group of children who were not precocious readers learned to read at a high level, the early reader group still maintained their advantage. My questions are: what do we do for children who already read at a high level since so much time is spent on children who do not? How do we keep those children engaged in the learning process when it comes to language arts classes? In other words, if they already know the skills that we are teaching, how do we keep them engaged? Most of the higher reading level texts that I have seen would not be of interest to younger children. Are there appropriate materials and content at higher reading levels for these children? Another question is, is there a way to increase phonological awareness to a greater degree in young children if part of it is biological?