

LITERACY MATTERS –THE 21ST-CENTURY CHILDREN’S OPINIONS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LITERACY

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Abstract

Although teaching of reading skills and the prerequisites of literacy are extensively studied, children’s opinions on learning to read are not. The aim of this research was to reveal children’s opinions on learning to read at the time they start school. Forty-three children (23 girls, 20 boys), aged six and a half years, were interviewed preceded by measurements of their level of literacy. Children were divided into three groups: the good readers (n= 8, 19 %) who were able to read easy texts; the ones who recognized some words (n=16, 37 %) or letters but were not exactly able to read; and the non-readers (n=19, 44 %) who recognized some letters but were not able to read words. Data were analyzed with the phenomenographic method. Learning to read appeared as a surprising and pleasant experience, but also demanding. School entrants showed strong belief and trust in their own abilities to learn to read and were careful and realistic when evaluating them. A challenge of today’s teaching is to pay attention to all children with their various skills and learning perceptions to secure each individual child’s learning, especially when instructing them with new methods and means. Multiple literacies are considered necessary for succeeding in the postmodern world.

Key words: literacy, reading, reading comprehension, children’s perceptions, learning to read.

Introduction

In Finland, people read a lot, and literacy is highly appreciated. Furthermore, children and youngsters are the most active readers of Finland (Statistics Finland, 2007). In a classic work of Finnish National Author Aleksis Kivi, “*Seitsemän veljestä* [Seven Brothers]”, Finnish men go into woods hiding their Finnish teacher for years. Eventually, after they have learned to read, the brothers become accepted as community members and are allowed to get married (see Jokinen, 2010). Korkeamäki (1996) interpreted that the process of the seven brothers learning to read symbolizes Finnish literacy: children are expected to learn to read at least at the beginning of school and the good ability to read is the key to education, social acceptance, and personal success.

According to the National Core Curriculum in Finland (2004), one target of preschool is to prepare children to know what reading is and what the alphabets are. Later on, during the first and second grades at primary school, the main target is to learn to read; that is learning lexical reading skills and the basics skills of comprehension. Teachers in Finland are free to choose their teaching methods. Mainly, they use alphabetic or mixed methods (e.g. Lerkkanen, 2003; Tivnan & Hemphill, 2005).

Nowadays, the concept of literacy includes not only reading and writing skills but also the skills that are learned at school at the latest; namely, listening and talking. These skills have so much in common that it is relevant to dissect them in a holistic manner (Riley, 1996; Wilhelm, 2000; Wray & Medwell, 1991). Becoming a reader and author is a part of other linguistic development (Korkeamäki, 1996). During the various phases of linguistic development, a child

learns those information processing codes that will later constitute the elements of literacy (see Goswami, 2002; Street & Lefstein, 2007). Nowadays, the elements of linguistic awareness—orthographic, phonological, and phonemic awareness—are considered the key factors for learning to read as they are the means of re-presenting features of language in visual graphic mode (Ahvenainen & Holopainen, 2005; Riley, 1996; Seymour, Aro, & Erskine, 2003).

Researchers (e.g., Ahvenainen & Holopainen, 2005; Garton & Pratt, 1998; Poskiparta et al., 2003) emphasize the significance of environment for learning as the awareness of written language develops implicitly if and when someone reads to a child and a child follows reading. Knowing letters is a typical learning outcome. Becoming aware of sounds means in practice that a child has the ability to hear the length of a word, its syllables, the first or the last sound of a word, take off these sounds and replace them with some other sounds or combine sounds into a word. This linguistic awareness is regarded as the basic skill for a beginning reader, as a bridge from speech to reading and writing.

There are plenty of studies on teaching reading skills (Aro, 2004; Kiiveri, 2006; Snow & Juvel, 2007) and on the prerequisites of literacy (Adams, 1990; Taube, 2004) but not so many on children's opinions on the process of learning to read (Harter, 1996; Vauras et al., 1994). Likewise, research on children's motivation and attitudes is minimal (Murphy & Alexander, 2002) but according to the studies (e.g., Korpinen, Jokiaho, & Tikkanen, 2003), children who start school already have a conception of themselves as readers. Furthermore, the collection of research data based on people's experiences and observations of their own learning and performing is even more challenging among small children as they do not have much experience of learning and studying academic skills. Moreover, children's limited linguistic skills may impede data collection (cf. Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2011a).

What Are Children's Attitudes toward Literacy Based On?

In the 2000 and 2003 Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA), Finnish youngsters' reading appeared the best among OECD-countries and relatively uniform in international comparisons (Linnakylä & Sulkunen, 2005). Regardless of the success, there was a notable difference between the best and weakest readers. Especially, free time reading activity seemed to have a significant effect on children's reading skills.

A pupil who reads well is usually an active reader, too, and reads much in free time. Therefore, his or her reading and vocabulary are improving. On the other hand, a pupil with weak reading skills is not happy to read anything unless he or she has to. This is how the differences between children's literacy increase. It would be important to provide children with pleasant reading experiences to make their attitudes to reading more positive (Sanacore, 2002).

Children's attitudes toward reading are evident quite early (Merisuo-Storm, 2003). If a child is read abundantly and he or she sees other family members reading, the child will learn a positive attitude toward reading (Bråten, Lie, & Andreassen, 1997). How parents view reading, how much they appreciate reading (Darling, 2005), and how actively they influence their children's ability to read (Hoover-Dampsey & Sandler, 1997) affect how children adopt the practices of reading (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Morrow & Young, 1997). Fan and Chen (2001) noted that parents' expectations of their child's capability to learn and adopt academic skills are strongly connected with the child's academic performance. It is also known that parents' perceptions on their child's cognitive capability can affect parents' rearing habits and parenting (Phillipson & Phillipson, 2005).

Bouffard and Hill (2005) conducted a longitudinal study to find out how mothers' early perceptions of their children's reading and math skills affected the children's academic competence from pre-primary education to the fourth grade. Bouffard and Hill (2005) viewed the phenomenon from three perspectives: they were interested in (1) the parents' perception on

their children’s contemporary skill level, (2) the parents’ perception on how challenging school is going to be for their children, and (3) the parents’ perception of their children’s natural ability. The hypothesis was that parents’ perceptions are significant factors because children form their self-image by reflecting their own experiences with the messages about themselves and their skills they receive from others. The researchers’ hypothesis was proven right. This finding implies that parents’ perceptions can mold a child’s cognitive and affective attitudes toward school and his or her own performance already before the child starts school. Attitudes toward literacy are a part of them, too.

In addition, both the reading material provided at school and at home affects the arousal of motivation to read (Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003; McQuillan & Au, 2001). The selection of classroom and school libraries should offer a diversified range of reading both by themes and levels of difficulty (Cole, 2002).

Likewise, peers’ opinions affect children’s attitudes toward reading. Negative ones are easily adopted (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993): several studies have shown that boys’ reading is hindered by their peers’ attitudes (Merisuo-Storm, 2003). The texts used in teaching are not relevant or interesting enough from the point of view of boys’ life (Arnot et al., 2001; Brozo, 2002; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). At school, pupils read mostly books, while outside the school reading is related to digital media, videos, television, song lyrics, and pop magazines (Hyatt, 2002).

In this research, children’s opinions on learning to read when they start school were studied. Learning to read is a sum of several factors. Adults who support and teach a child to read see the development but only a few know what the child thinks of his or her learning and how significant or useful literacy is. Our assumption is that when starting school children have already contemplated school and various learning tasks they might have there and are able to express their opinions on them.

This study concentrates on the following question: How do children perceive the significance of literacy?

The following sub-questions were set for this study:

- (1) How do children assess their ability to read when starting school?
- (2) How hard do children think learning to read will be?
- (3) How interesting do children consider reading in the first place?
- (4) For what purposes do children think they will need literacy?

Methodology of Research

Theoretical Framework of the Study

A phenomenographic analysis seeks a “description, analysis, and understanding of ... experiences” (Marton, 1981, p. 180). A research participant is considered an active subject who constructs and creates about the surrounding phenomena. When the aim is to understand someone’s experiences of learning, it is crucial to realize the nature of the learning process: learning is active information processing and new experiences and perceptions always ground on previous processes (Uljens, 1993).

Additionally, phenomenography adopts clearly an empirical orientation as phenomenographic studies are focused on everyday experiences and thinking. The purpose is to research phenomena through these perceptions. From a phenomenographic point of view, human beings’ thinking is considered holistically and multidimensionally connected to consciousness. (Ahonen, 1994.) In this study, it was considered important to find out children’s opinions on the phenomena under investigation—reading in general and their own reading, and the factors related to learning when they move from the context of home to the context of school (see Marton, 1981; Uljens, 1993, 1997).

Sample of Research

The data in this research were collected by interviewing school entrants at the beginning of their first school year. Several phases preceded the interviews and eventually 43 children were interviewed. The children were pupils at small country-side schools in northern Finland and the schools were already familiar to the first author of this article due to her teaching training work among teachers of these school. Otherwise, the schools were ordinary Finnish elementary schools and thus, they were regarded suitable for the purposes of this study. The children's teachers and parents gave permission for interviews but also the children expressed their willingness to talk about their opinions and experiences.

Before doing the interviews, the pupils were informed of the research. Before implementing the actual research interviews, some preliminary interviews were carried out to refine the questions and become familiar with children's world. 23 of the children were girls and 20 were boys. On average, they were aged 6.5 years.

Instrument and Procedures

The interview method was a theme interview: the same themes were discussed with every child but not necessarily in the same order. The themes discussed in the interviews were events of reading, learning to read, and teaching. The questions were not preformatted but the topics discussed in each interview covered the research themes. Questions were kept simple and followed children's way of speak and they were to intrigue children to describe their experiences and opinions widely. Instead of questions that could be answered by "yes" or "no", children were encouraged to answer questions that begin with "why", "how", and "please, tell..." The interviews lasted between ten and fifteen minutes and were carried out in the familiar school environment during the first school days either in an available classroom or teachers' work premises. As a transcript, the interviews constituted about 350 pages altogether.

The children's level of literacy was measured preceding the interviews (Reading test for a school entrant, University of Oulu 1970, Finland). In addition, the children's teachers evaluated the children's ability to read partly as it already is a natural part of their work (and they would do it anyway) but it was also considered necessary as their evaluations could complement and support the reading test results. Therefore, their evaluations were regarded important for deciding how to group the children based on their levels of literacy.

Based on the results of the literacy test and teachers' evaluations, the children were divided into three groups: the good readers (n= 8, 19 %) who were able to read easy texts; the ones who recognized some words (n=16, 37 %) or letters but were not exactly able to read; and the non-readers (n=19, 44 %) who recognized some letters but were not able to read words. The literate children consisted of six girls and two boys. Of those 16 who recognized words, nine were girls and seven boys. Those 19 illiterate children consisted of eight girls and eleven boys. Thus, there were more boys than girls among illiterate school entrants.

The participants were encoded so that every child had a serial number (1-43), a marking of gender (g/b), and finally the information whether a participant at the beginning of school year was a non-reader (A), had recognized words or learned some sorts of basics of literacy (B), or literate (C). For example, g1A means a girl whose number among the participants was 1 and who could not read when starting school.

In order to have some kind of picture about the children's linguistic ability in relation to the levels of literacy, the children were tested with LARR-test (A test for linguistic comprehension, University of Oulu, 1980). The overall results of the test supported the level of literacy so that the illiterate school entrants performed extremely poorly in the test while the ones who knew the basics of reading and the literate ones almost had maximum scores.

Data Analysis

Children’s qualitative perceptions were analyzed from the second-level perspective and they were regarded as experience-based, subjective knowledge about the studied phenomenon. Therefore, phenomenographic method was considered suitable for investigating the qualitatively different ways in which children experience or think about learning to read (Marton, 1981). The interview data was analyzed with the qualitative methods, especially the phenomenographic method (Marton, 1981; Marton & Pong, 2005; Svensson, 1997).

Children’s opinions on reading, learning and teaching reading were considered as developing information structures. Children’s perceptions are dissected both horizontally and hierarchically in relation to the context of learning (Uljens, 1991, 1993); in other words, they were analyzed based on learning to read and theoretical views on it. Children’s perceptions were used when forming categories, for example, of their own assessments about themselves as readers. Furthermore, attention was paid on the perceived importance of literacy. Finally, children’s ability to express their opinions was analyzed. This was relevant also for the evaluation of the study.

Results of Research

Children’s Assessments of their Reading Skills

Most of the children considered themselves as non-readers at the time of starting school. Their hopes for learning were evident in the opinions they expressed. Many of them told that they could “read a little bit” (e.g. g1A) or “I can’t properly yet but somehow...” (e.g. b16A). In practice, these children already recognized letters and assessed that they could read somehow. Only one girl considered herself totally illiterate but she also told that she knew some letters. Based on the initial reading test, she could, however, already recognize words (g5B).

Most of the children who recognized words when starting school were as realistic as the non-readers when evaluating their own abilities: “I can already read a little bit. Here, I’ll learn to read even better” (e.g. g30B). One girl described her skill in more detail: “I can already read familiar words...” (g3B). Three boys expressed their opinion on their skills almost with the same words: “I can read...only small sections” (b14B), “I can already read a little bit” (b29B) and “I can’t read very well...” (b38B). One girl evaluated her own learning and teaching: “We were taught at the preschool but I only learned to write there” (g5B). The assessments of these children were based on their experiences and seemingly correct, too.

The good readers reported quite correctly that they can already read. Many of them remembered the time when they had learned to read: “I learned already a long time ago” (b20C), “I learned to read at home already when I was five” (g8C) and “I learned to read with Lisa before the school started” (g37C). Some of them also paid attention to their future learning: “I learn to read more and better at school” (g12C, g26C).

Learning to read appeared as a surprising and pleasant experience in the opinions of good-readers: “I was really surprised when I noticed that now I read. I was interested in reading and when I recognized the letters I thought that now I learnt to read. When you read for the first time, it is like.... like you would go for the first time to a roller coaster; I got so madly excited then too!” (g31B). One girl said: “When I learned, I liked to read everything!” (g37C) Their expressions illustrate insight and realization, becoming surprised when figuring out what reading really is. The experience has been very positive for these children and it can be expected to lead to a permanent interest in reading.

Children's Assessments of the Easiness of Learning to Read

When asking about the children's opinions on whether they will learn to read, even the answers of the non-readers showed strong belief and trust in their own learning: "I trust that I'll learn!" (g4A) and "There's no doubt that I will learn to read" (b17A). On the other hand, some children were careful in their estimations: "I think that I'll learn to read" (e.g. g1A). Some children were doubtful of the difficulties in learning to read: "It is quite hard, I think" (g1A, b40A). Uncertainty of the forthcoming learning task and its challenge made them hesitate. However, they had some trust in their own learning.

Those children who already recognized words had some grounds for evaluating their own learning: "I'm sure that I'll learn to read!" (g22B) and "I'm sure that I'll learn to read properly!" (b28B, b38B). They even waited for the joy of learning: "I guess it's quite fun" (g5B). On the other, even the basics of the learnt skills did not convince all of them: "It won't be easy" (g7B).

Knowing the basics of reading and writing skills reassured some children when it came to the difficulty of the task: "I can already read. I guess, there's nothing anymore..." (g30B, g31B). A girl, who was a good reader, stated calmly: "It wasn't hard." She also thought learning better reading and writing skills as a communication tool: "I don't know penmanship yet but I can understand it quite well when my friend writes me letters" (g8C). Another good reader assessed her progress: "I guess I can learn to read faster" (g37C).

Children's Opinions on How Interesting Reading Is

The children said that they looked at and read books. Already, that is a sign of interest. Indeed, their answers hinted about their points of interest. Regardless of their level of reading skill, several children were interested in reading Donald Duck: "I always grasp the Donald Duck first!" (g1A) and "I look and read Donald Duck" (g5B, g13A, g4A, b16A, b23B, b28B, g37C, b38B). It is obvious that a beginning reader is interested in a magazine where colorful pictures and short texts are combined in a comic-strip-like and exciting manner.

A girl who came to school as a non-reader related looking with written text: "I look at something that I don't understand; those small books and small words" (g2A). Those girls who recognized words told: "I look at and read sorts of small books" (g31B, g32B). A boy from the same skill level evaluated his reading skill as looking at short words and expressed his motivation to learning by telling that he asks his mom about things concerning reading: "First, I look at sorts of small, short words... in a book and sometimes I ask my mom" (b28B).

A boy who already recognized some words told: "I look at animal books" (g7B) and a non-reader boy said: "I look at fish books" (b34A). A girl who recognized words combined her interest, a reading assignment, and her reading skill when she answered: "I always look at the pictures and every time when I pick up our mail I'm allowed to read whose mail it is" (g3B). Two boys who could read a few words connected books and their own reading skills: "I have books at home; I always read them" (b29B) and "I have so many books [at home] that I can't remember them now but I read them" (b32B). Both the previously mentioned boys' opinions can be interpreted also so that interest in reading directs them with reading. They also have something to read at home.

When coming to school, a good-reader boy clearly used the word "to read" when telling about his reading: "I read animal books" (b20C). A good-reader girl described her reading the same way: "I read storybooks" (g12C).

Children’s Assessments of the Usefulness of Literacy

The importance and versatile use of learning to read were manifested in the children’s opinions. The children suggested several reasons why they have to learn to read. Some of them who started school as non-readers noted about the usefulness of literacy: “You can read yourself and you don’t have to listen to reading anymore” (g13A) and “I can read to my little sister/brother then” (g4A, g10A, g25A). A boy who already recognized words had a concretized view about the usefulness of literacy and the immediate benefit from learning to read: “The ability to read is needed for reading that ABC book” (b29B). Many children had quite a common idea of the necessity and usefulness of literacy: “You can read all the books” (b19A, g6C, g31B, g37C).

Two girls who were non-readers predicted the development of their own reading skill clearly trusting in their learning: “I’ll learn to read better and better” (g4A, g39A). The other mentioned the possibility to continue studies after learning the skill as her goal: “Then, I’ll go over there, to high school”. Furthermore, ability to read and write was interconnected in her thoughts and she added: “...so that you’ll become a good writer” (g4A). Two boys stated as the reasons for their learning distinctively: “Reading skill is needed for writing” (b20C, b34A).

Some non-reader children were thinking of road signs and the texts in these signs when they said: “I have to learn! If you are for example alone somewhere and see some sign and you can’t read, you don’t know where you are going” (b9A). One boy expressed his interest by assessing his reading skill in a target-oriented manner: “When I learn, I am going to use it for reading fishing books” (b42A). Two girls stated about the usability of the talent the same way: “Then, if you call someone, you’ll know the number” (g1A). A boy who recognized words found a reason for learning to read as well: “You can read from the signs where you are going” (b23B) and two girls from the same skill level: “If I get a letter and it has to be read and mom or dad isn’t at home...” (g3B) and “Then, I can read those subtitles on TV” (g31B). A good-reader girl thought of using literacy wider for acquiring information when stating: “You need it for all such things; for example reading things on a paper” (g8C).

The children’s own future was mentioned as a reason for learning to read: “...to be able to read when adult” (g10A). Although the children were somewhat afraid of the difficulty of learning, they still kept in mind the importance of learning to read: “It is quite important, I think, to learn and to be able to read well when you grow up” (g39A) and “I will learn; it is so important” (g7B).

Others thought of the important tasks that they will have when adults: “It is important; you can’t go to work otherwise” (b14B) and “You have to learn; reading skill is needed at work” (b23B). In addition, they evaluated the significance of reading for taking care of matters more carefully: “You have to learn to read so that you can do all the important things that you must do through reading” (g5B).

Children’s evaluations highlighted the pleasure that follows learning. One girl answered the question why they have to learn to read: “...it’s fun to learn” (g1A). Several other children considered the reasons for learning just nice. A girl who recognized words had, despite the joy that follows reading, a clear plan for using the skill in the future: “Oh, I like Donald Duck -magazines so much now, so I’ll read them then! They have those boxes and balloons. And then sometimes I’ll read those magazines and hardbacks” (g22B). A boy who recognized words expressed similar opinions and feelings: “After I learn, it’s fun to read comic books!” (b23B) and a girl from the same skill level: “Then, I’ll love to read those small books” (g30B). One good-reader girl pointed out: “It feels nice when you can read things from the store windows in town” (g33C) and other one brought out her reading hobby: “I tend to read a lot” (g26C).

The children’s opinions revealed not only the pleasing nature of reading but also its significance for learning other languages. One boy told: “... I have to learn to read the train

books and for that, I have to learn German and Swedish.” (b40A). Besides finding learning to read agreeable, he also assessed that learning the skill would be beneficial. Similarly, a girl said: “When you learn to read, you can learn to read in English too” (g41B).

Some children who recognized words or were literate told they would use their improving reading skill for finding information and entertainment: “I’ll read the text on TV” (g33B) and “I’ll watch the films that include that text the most then” (b14B) and furthermore: “I’ll read if it seems that the TV-program has something interesting” (g37C). However, the children fretted about the speed that reading subtitles required: “Some of them go too fast; I don’t have always time to read everything” (b14B, g37C, g33B). One boy expected to advance his skill towards reading texts in foreign languages: “When I learn really well, I can watch for example programs in English on TV” (b28B). A girl mentioned the same: “...then I’ll read *Ally McBeal* for example” (g31B). The difficulty of keeping up with reading the subtitles aroused a follow-up comment: “First, I want to learn English and then Finnish” (b14B).

In all, while non-readers’ perceptions seemed to focus on the overall importance of knowing how to read (the instrumental skill), children who already could read a little or were good readers, were able to name specific uses of literacy. They knew what they wanted to do with the skill more specifically (e.g. read subtitles or texts in store windows) as they already had the idea of the usefulness of the skill. They realized that there is much to read around them and that the skill is therefore extremely beneficial and necessary. All children, regardless of their skill level, were aware that literacy is required in adulthood: you have to know how to read to be able to study and work.

Discussion

Defining reading is an extremely multidimensional and complex task. When reviewing the children’s opinions on reading and learning to read, Hämäläinen’s and Niemi’s (1995) definition of reading as a skill that includes the recognition of words, comprehension, motivation, and meta-cognitions was mostly leaned on. Besides knowledge about reading and learning to read, it involves children’s meta-cognitions—in other words, their ability to observe their own cognitive and emotional processes.

Can children talk about the process of learning to read whilst they are doing it? What kind of opinions do they have on these issues? Based on this research, we decided to trust in the perception as well as in our experience that school entrants were capable of expressing their opinions and feelings (Vauras et al., 1994). School entrants have already adapted considerable amount of information about their learning and remembering that can be expressed verbally. Their ability to talk about and assess their learning develops all the time (e.g. Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2011b). Awareness and knowledge about themselves develop at the same time as children learn to observe their own functions. After having developed sufficiently in self-regulation, a child will be able to define the meaning and goal for his or her actions. (National Research Council, 2004; Vauras et al., 1994.)

Learning to read and literacy are important for an active member of a social community. It is more important than we literate people usually realize. The significance of reading skill is increasingly emphasized in the modern society as the demands for it have diversified. At the same time, it has been noticed that weak reading skills, even the imprints of illiteracy, often lead to exclusion (Kiiveri, 2006). For example, American Researcher Brozo (2002) and Australian Alloway and Gilbert (1997) highlight the negative influence of illiteracy may have on the success in life. Active members of society have to have the ability to use and read a variety of texts.

Every child wants to learn to read and they will not lose their interest in reading if reading tasks are inspiring and provide experiences of success and positive reading moments.

These experiences will lead to confidence in reading and the discovery of the joy of reading. The learning process requires of the teacher and learner both time and bothering as well as an accepting atmosphere where the child can practice the skill safely feeling supported (Merisuo-Storm, 2003).

Therefore, children with their skills and learning perceptions should be taken into consideration when instructing them. Furthermore, new means and methods should be developed to secure every individual's learning. Children should be introduced various materials so that everyone would find the way of reading that interest them the most. Humor, adventure, comic books, movie- or TV-based books, or special magazines can ignite the inspiration and positive attitude toward reading (see Millard & Marsh, 2001; Sciezka, 2002). The text material at school should be widened: reading books is not the only way of reading (Hughes-Hassel & Rodge 2007). In addition to basic literacy, new reading skills are needed, including internet and computer literacy, media literacy, and pictorial literacy. The meta-concept is "multiliteracies" (Cope & Kalantzias, 2000). Due to the change in the information society, the requirements of literacy are increasing and therefore, the positive attitude toward reading that is created already in childhood is more important than ever.

Conclusions

In this study, children's opinions on literacy were studied. Although their opinions may seem childish, the data gave reasons to conclude that the children had been thinking about the event of reading already quite diversely. Their opinions were connected to the level of their skill and its contents: reading was something where one uses eyes and light is needed, sometimes one uses one's mouth and voice but mostly one uses a book or something else that can be read—according to some children, pictures can be read perfectly well, too. These observations seemed to be typical of children of that age: the factors of reading were perceived quite concretely. First and foremost, reading appeared in children's opinions as observing, recognizing words, and understanding them (Hämäläinen & Niemi, 1995): it is a meaningful interpretation or written symbols, a process through which one understands (Ahvenainen & Holopainen, 2005; Vauras et al., 1994). Furthermore, children observed their own learning.

Moreover, the results suggested every child, regardless of gender, was certain that he or she will learn to read. Those children who recognized words or were good readers said that they will learn to read better than before. Learning was also considered joyful. In addition, the children considered learning to read important and even significant for the future. The children's interest in reading occurred in many ways. The children watched TV-programs pursuing reading the subtitles. They looked for something to read from various sources and selected relevant reading in relation to their skills. The girls told they used to look and read storybooks and the boys mentioned books from special fields such as technical science or animal books.

When analyzed more extensively, literacy is, according to the children's opinions, beneficial for further education and learning foreign languages as well as for future jobs and all those tasks that involve reading. Several opinions included the pleasure that follows reading and reading as hobby after having learned the skill: "I tend to read a lot." The children's opinions involve some features of the concept of functional literacy, among other things in using literacy for studying, in a profession, and for entertainment.

In all, it seemed that today's children realize the importance of literacy and if they have the chance they are more than enthusiastic about learning the skill. Of course the sample was obtained in Finland which can be considered a developed country. It is pleasing to know that the children had such a positive attitude toward reading but what would the result be if the study was conducted somewhere else, for example, in a country with low literacy rate (e.g. Mali or Ethiopia with less than 30 % of literacy rate, UN Human Development Report, 2011)?

The problems concerning children's literacy are inevitably different although the necessity of possessing the skill is equally necessary in order to succeed in the postmodern world. In Finland, one of the concerns is related to the fact that first-graders vary greatly in their level of literacy: the primary purpose of school is to teach children to read but how are those good-readers that start school taken into account in teaching arrangements? Would it be possible to group children based on their skill levels so that they were taught with appropriate materials and methods?

Furthermore, this is a question of teacher training. Elementary school teachers need skills and mastery of themes of special education increasingly as the world changes. Classrooms include ever-diversifying groups of learners and therefore, teaching of reading skills cannot be performed in the same way than before. Teachers have to be prepared to face new kinds of problems when it comes reading skills and learning, and they have to be ready to adjust their teaching in new kinds of pupil groups.

Learning to read and the mastery of reading skill is an important ability if one wants to participate actively and fully as a member of his or her surrounding community. It is more important than we often realize: illiteracy often leads to exclusion. To sum, new methods and teaching arrangements should be developed to meet the challenges of today and to guarantee each and every child's learning to read.

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