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Reading research in the UK

Briony Train
Research Fellow, University of Central England in Birmingham
Birmingham, UK

Abstract

This brief paper summarises current key trends in current reading research in the UK. It focuses on two areas in particular – literacy and reader development, and provides examples of ongoing research in both fields. Recent literacy-based research has been influenced by the implementation of the Government's National Literacy Strategy, and by subsequent initiatives such as the National Year of Reading and the National Reading Campaign. Reader development activity has grown significantly in recent years, to the extent that the Government has allocated two years of funding specifically to projects in this area, and widespread research is ongoing to investigate the outcome of these projects. The paper concludes with a brief examination of research methodologies, and of a possible increased recognition of the efficacy of qualitative data to demonstrate the value and impact of reading.

During the previous decade, a number of major changes occurred in British thinking about the teaching and development of reading and writing. The themes most widely debated that predominated research during this period were:
- teaching methods in reading
- family literacy
- the role of the new technologies in reading.

In the United Kingdom today, there appear to be two major strands of research within the area of reading: literacy and reader development. The significant growth of these two areas has taken place as a direct consequence of recent government initiatives. A large proportion of government funds has been allocated

both to raising literacy standards in schools, via the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy[i], and to promoting reading as a leisure activity, via the Public Libraries Challenge Fund.[ii]

Literacy

The National Literacy Strategy was implemented in England and Wales in 1998, a key focus of the Government's drive to raise literacy and numeracy standards in schools.

An element of this strategy is the Literacy Hour, which was introduced into primary schools (for children aged 4-11 years) in September 1998. Each school is required to spend a minimum of one hour per day with the following specific, sequenced structure:

- 15 minutes of whole-class text level work
- 15 minutes of word level work and word and sentence work
- 20 minutes of group and independent work
- 10 minutes of whole-class reviewing and consolidating.

Research is ongoing in this area in order to investigate the impact of the strategy on teachers' thinking and classroom practice. For example, the universities of Durham and Newcastle are working on a joint project entitled 'Whole class teaching in the literacy and numeracy hours'[iii], which aims to highlight examples of good practice currently being used in whole-class settings in order to support future policy initiatives, teacher training and research.

This year's International Conference of the United Kingdom Reading Association (UKRA[iv]), held in July, was entitled 'Just let me think', and focused on language learning and literacy. This is a further example of a means by which good practice can be shared, as the conference highlighted many examples of current research investigating teaching, creativity and imagination in literacy learning and teaching.

In 1998, the National Year of Reading (September 1998-August 1999) began, a key aim of which was to raise the reading standards of both adults and young people, by involving the whole of society in a wide-ranging campaign to encourage and promote reading. The former Government Department for Education and Employment (now the Department for Education and Skills[v]) contracted the National Literacy Trust to coordinate the National Year of Reading on its behalf.[vi]

Over the year, £800,000 (over $1,000,000) was provided by the National Year of Reading to fund 86 local and national projects, and the impact of the programme was monitored and reported in the National Literacy Trust report 'Building a nation of readers,'[vii] and in the Library and Information Commission research report 'Rediscovering reading: public libraries and the National Year of Reading.'[viii]

In addition, the Trust hosts a number of conferences, for teachers, practitioners and policy makers. Its annual conference is held in November, and in 2000 focused on the 'Early years: building the foundations for literacy', and will this year discuss the arts and literacy.

The Government offered a degree of support to the National Literacy Trust in developing the continuation of the National Year of Reading, the National Reading Campaign (NRC). The NRC acts as a channel through which details of successful initiatives throughout the UK are disseminated, with the eventual aim of achieving long-term, sustainable change.

Information concerning current literacy research, publications and resources is available in the Literacy Trust's quarterly magazine, 'Literacy Today.'[ix] More comprehensive information about ongoing and

completed literacy-based research in the UK is available on the National Literacy Trust website[x], to which researchers are also invited to submit their own research outlines.

Reader development

Reader development, with adult readers in particular, has experienced a dramatic growth in recent years, yet definitions of the term are sometimes unclear. Reader development is often confused with reading development, but the two are very different. Whereas reading development focuses on the acquisition of reading skills, reader development focuses on the reading experience itself. Van Riel[xi] (1998) defines the term as:

> '…[an] active intervention to open up reading choices, increase readers' enjoyment and offer opportunities for people to share their reading experiences.'

The increase in reader development activity means that public library authorities throughout the United Kingdom are now involved in a wide range of project-based promotional events and programmes. Arguably the most significant of these to date is **Branching Out**, a three-year English initiative (1998-2001) from the Society of Chief Librarians, funded by the Arts Council of England. 33 local authorities plus the National Library for the Blind have been selected to take part in specially devised training to enable public librarians to develop new methods of involving adult readers in contemporary literature. A key objective of the project is to raise the status of reader development within and beyond all 150 English library authorities through a series of regional networks. The University of Central England (UCE) is conducting the evaluation of Branching Out, which focuses both on the impact on the readers, but more significantly on the participating librarians.

Evaluative methods have included:
- Learning reviews – qualitative surveys that enable participants to monitor their personal and professional development throughout the project; and
- reader development skills audits – conducted at initial and final stages in order to monitor skills development.

Formative research findings have been reported on the project website[xii] and via a number of publications in the professional press (see website for further details). A final research summary will be produced as the project ends in September 2001, and will be available for distribution to all UK public library authorities and other interested parties.

Over the last two years, the growth of reader development activity has become sufficiently widespread that the Government, via its Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), has allocated two years of its Public Libraries Challenge Fund (2000-01, 2001-02) specifically to reader development projects[xiii]. The projects are targeted at both adults and young people, and many aim to reach socially excluded groups. All work is monitored by external evaluators, and research into the overall impact of the programme is being conducted by academic departments.

Details of the projects evaluated by the University of Central England are available on our website,[xiv] and details of all projects are listed on the DCMS site.[xv] The results of the 2001-2002 round of funding were released at the end of July 2001, although at that time full details of successfully funded projects were not yet generally available on the DCMS website. However, one example of a project that will commence in Autumn 2001 is 'Caring with books', a project involving a consortium of 10 library authorities across the West Midlands region in England, which aims to bring public libraries and reading to children in public care, to their carers and foster families. The University of Central England will conduct the evaluation of this important reading project.

Research methodologies

Both of these key areas of current reading research result in the collection of qualitative data. This is inevitable, as when investigating the value of reading it is critical that people's experiences and perceptions are used to measure the impact. However, it has generally been the case that policy makers placed a greater reliance on quantitative as opposed to qualitative data, but there may be indications that they are now more willing to use qualitative data in order to inform political decisions.

Research conducted for programmes such as the National Year of Reading and Branching Out has provided many data with which to link reading to key initiatives on the government agenda, such as lifelong learning and social inclusion.

Qualitative techniques used to collect these data would require further promotion in order to make explicit to policy makers the value and impact of reading.

Notes

[i] National Literacy Strategy details: http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy/

[ii] UK Government Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) website, with details of the DCMS/Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund: http://www.culture.gov.uk/heritage/index.html

[iii] Project title: Whole class teaching in the literacy and numeracy hours.
Research teams: Durham and Newcastle Universities
Sponsors: Economic and Social Research Council [http://www.esrc.ac.uk/]
Duration: 2001-2002.

[iv] United Kingdom Reading Association website: http://www.ukra.org/

[v] The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) website: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/index.htm

[vi] The National Literacy Trust, an independent charity 'dedicated to building a literate nation.'
Citation from the National Literacy Trust website: http://www.literacytrust.org.uk

[vii] National Literacy Trust (2000) Building a nation of readers: a review of the National Year of Reading. National Literacy Trust for the Department for Education and Employment.

[viii] Streatfield, David, Tibbitts, Dianne, Jefferies, Greg, Downing, Richard and Swan, Ray (2000) Rediscovering reading: public libraries and the National Year of Reading. Information Management Associates for the Library and Information Commission. Library and Information Commission Research Report 30.

[ix] 'Literacy today': http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/pubs/literacytoday.html [Includes subscription details and sample articles to download]

[x] National Literacy Trust – details of current research projects:
http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Research/ongoing.html

[xi] Van Riel, R. (1998), *Creating the readership for literature in translation*, presentation to international conference at University of East Anglia, British Centre for Literary Translation.

[xii] The Branching Out project website: http://www.branching-out.net

[xiii] A complete list of 2000-2001 projects and contact details for the DCMS Reader Development Programme is available at: http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/dcms-wolfson.html

[xiv] Details of current projects conducted by the Centre for Information Research, University of Central England in Birmingham, UK: http://www.cie.uce.ac.uk/cirt/current.htm