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The development of literacy: Implications of current understanding for applied psychologists and educationalists

Much recent scientific research in the field of literacy has been reasonably devoted to understanding the trajectory of development of children and young people. This work has provided considerable knowledge of both normal and abnormal cognitive development in this domain and where some of the possible barriers may lie. It is possible that many applied psychologists have struggled to keep pace with these scientific developments and the possible implications for assessment and intervention.

We hope that the papers in this issue of Educational and Child Psychology provide a bridge between the work of academic and applied psychologists that will inform all applied psychologists about recent work in the field of children’s literacy. Thus, with a view to enhancing evidence-based practice, the papers may support increased understanding of current theory and science as well as highlighting practical implications and questions that arise in the domain of literacy development.

Over the past twenty years or so considerable attention has been given to investigating the role of phonology in the development of literacy. We do not wish to suggest that field has been exhausted (several important questions remain) but, as is illustrated here, we consider that other important matters – such as ethnicity, vision, vocabulary, and social factors also deserve and reward attention.

The work reported here falls into three areas.

Firstly, we present papers that provide an overview of work to date. In the first of these Chris Singleton discusses how Visual Factors may be overlooked and prompts teachers and educational psychologists to be mindful of these as possible sources of disruption in the process of reading.

Next, Robert Savage and Yolande Pompey apply the question ‘What does the evidence really say about effective literacy teaching’ across the areas of reading accuracy, reading comprehension, spelling, and educational technologies. They suggest that the evidence base that informs practice is important but still rather modest.

Fiona Duff then provides a review of relevant work in relation to reading difficulties. She discusses the ‘Response to Intervention’ model in contrast to other notions of reading difficulty, draws implications for practice and stresses how continuing research is needed to help develop understanding of what works best and for whom.
In the first of a set of empirical studies presented here, Peter de Jong presents findings that illustrate possible inter-relationships between phonology, orthographic knowledge and memory and how this may vary across orthographies.

Speed of recognition (or naming) is a feature of that paper and also of that by Kees van den Bos. Inevitably perhaps, given the lack of any consistent and scientifically validated notion of what constitutes dyslexia (see Elliott and Gibbs, 2008 for further discussion of this point), Van den Bos takes a rather different approach from Fiona Duff to the concept of dyslexia. He reports a study in which a ‘double deficit hypothesis’ was investigated. Van den Bos concludes by proposing that the double deficit hypothesis may have utility in helping to delineate dyslexia.

Finally in this section, but also working from a Dutch perspective, Aziza Mayo and Paul Leseman report a study in which ethnicity is a major factor. In the context of the implications for the development of literacy, their study examined the relationship between language learning and vocabulary development across children who are native and non-native first language speakers. Their findings suggest that both home circumstances (language and literacy experience) and classroom characteristics were related to the growth of vocabulary and, by inference, the development of literacy. They note, however, that classroom experiences were not, unfortunately, necessarily in favour of those who needed most help with vocabulary.

The final group of papers address aspects of intervention. Maureen Myant and Wendy Armstrong report work in which music, with its emphasis on pitch and rhythm, was considered as potentially helpful to the acquisition of phonological awareness. Given the scale of the work they undertook, the authors are cautious about their findings, suggesting that while music teaching may have beneficial effects, they cannot be clear whether there are direct effects on phonology and/or reading, or if the potential benefits for children’s literacy may arise from other consequences such as increased attention.

Arjette Karemaker, Nicola Pitchford and Claire O’Malley provide an experimental investigation into the effects of a computer-aided intervention designed to promote orthographic, whole-word skills. They found significant gains in both word recognition and in rhyme awareness were evident after just a short period of intervention. They conclude that the multimedia features of ICT may be exploited to good effect in the support of literacy development.
Jonathan Solity and Laura Shapiro next report two studies that demonstrate how phonological training can be integrated into real classrooms with benefits for all children – not just those at risk of reading failure. They also point out implications for educational psychologists, particularly in terms of the models of psychology that might underpin their work with children perceived to have difficulty with literacy.

Sandra Dunsmuir and colleagues report the evaluation of a writing programme for primary school children. The intervention involved phoneme awareness training, cued spelling and an element intended to support the development of compositional skills through teacher scaffolding of metacognitive skills. This work (along with other papers in this collection) also demonstrates how a group of educational psychologists were able to develop an experimental study (by Berninger et al, 2002) into something still experimentally rigorous, but also ecologically valid and applicable in real schools.

Finally, Laura Phillips and Deborah James present a single case study of a young boy with phonological difficulties, using a theoretically grounded developmental intervention. They found that the significant immediate post-intervention improvements (compared to pre-intervention scores) in syllable segmentation and other aspects of phonological awareness and word finding (lexical retrieval) were maintained in follow-up 3 months after therapy had ceased. Phillips and James suggest their findings endorse aspects of developmental theory in relation to the trajectory of phonological awareness. However, they add that while ‘more work needs to be done to explore the sequence and type of interventions that might help… it seems likely that the identification of [each child’s] cognitive and linguistic levels… provide the basis for intervention design.’

We hope that the papers in this issue cumulatively provide findings that will help inform educational psychologists and others in that enterprise: to find ways of intervening that make a real difference for each and every child who faces the socially and educationally important task of becoming literate. The task of becoming literate is, as the papers here attest, highly complex and affected by a range of influences including cognitive, instructional, cultural, social and emotional. These are all domains in which educational psychologists may legitimately operate. There is, then, an implied (though still too rarely explicated and accepted) responsibility for psychologists to be informed and sufficiently skilled to evidence and evaluate work in this area. It is to assist in that task that we present the papers for attention.
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Guest Editors
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References
