

**University of Southampton**  
**Doctoral Programme in Educational Psychology**

**Title:** Reading Schemes and Real Books: Implications for Skill  
Development and Motivation

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### **Abstract**

Reading schemes have been widely accepted as providing the most appropriate opportunities for the application of early reading skills. However the evidence informing this position has been largely based on research examining the cognitive abilities of proficient readers. Recent perspectives from instructional psychology have shifted the focus from an understanding of individual differences in cognitive development to examining the properties of the texts themselves, in order to determine which materials most effectively support the development of reading skills. This essay examines the finding that real books offer greater opportunities for children to develop phonic skills and sight vocabulary than books drawn from a reading scheme, and the implications of this for selecting appropriate materials for reading instruction. In addition, the impact of reading scheme texts on children's attitudes towards reading and perceptions of the reading process are considered. The essay concludes that reading schemes, when used in isolation, do not provide greater opportunities for children to apply their reading skills than real books, and may even discourage some children from wider reading, through a negative impact on motivation. It is therefore argued that reading instruction is most effective where teaching makes use of a wide range of literature, and is supported by direct instruction and support for autonomy. Potential implications for Educational Psychologists (EPs) in relation to supporting reading development are highlighted.

### **Reading Schemes and Real Books: Implications for Skill Development and Motivation**

The question of what works best in terms of reading instruction has traditionally been an area of much debate, taking on renewed relevance since the publication of the Rose Review of Early Reading (Rose, 2006) and the controversial introduction of a phonics screening check for Year One pupils in England (DfE, 2010). Central to this debate is the issue of which reading materials most effectively promote children's reading development. Arguments concerning the relative effectiveness of 'reading schemes', as compared with 'real books', have typically been polarised, with different beliefs about the respective roles of phonics versus whole-language approaches underpinning the debate (Solity & Vousden, 2009). Despite the privileged status of phonics teaching within the Primary National Strategy (DfES, 2006) only 32% of six year olds reached expected levels in the pilot phonics screening check (DfE, 2011). Recent contributions from instructional psychology call for reconsideration of the materials used to support early reading development, claiming that the use of reading schemes should be "explicitly rejected" in favour of real books (Solity & Vousden, 2009, p.497).

With this in mind, this essay will consider factors which have contributed to the widespread use of reading schemes, and outline key criticisms of their use. It will then examine opportunities provided by each type of text for skill development, specifically in the areas of phonics skills, sight vocabulary, and, more broadly, vocabulary knowledge. Insights from instructional psychology are extended to consider the possible impact of reading schemes on children's perceptions of themselves as readers and, crucially, their motivation to read. This essay concludes that real books appear to offer greater opportunities for skill development than reading schemes. However, the criticisms which have been made of reading schemes relate to their use in isolation. Therefore, opportunities for skill development

and motivation occur where reading schemes are used in conjunction with a wide range of literature and supported by direct instruction. Implications for Educational Psychologists are highlighted.

### **Use of Reading Schemes**

Research suggests that reading schemes remain a prevalent feature in the teaching of reading in British schools (Stuart, Dixon, Masterton & Gray, 2003; Masterton, Stuart, Dixon & Lovejoy, 2010). Attempts to quantify this have been variable, however most recently it has been reported that teachers of 20% of pupils in England make use of reading schemes every day (Twist, Schagen & Hodgson, 2007). This suggests that reading schemes certainly remain in continued, if not prevalent, use by a significant proportion of teachers.

It is therefore necessary to consider the evidence underpinning the assumption that reading schemes provide the most suitable starting point for beginning readers. According to Solity and Vousden (2009), reading schemes consist of “a series of specially written books... sequenced or graded according to their level of difficulty” (p.470). Such schemes aim to provide young readers with a controlled vocabulary, offering regular opportunities for exposure to phonically regular and high-frequency words. In doing so, the use of reading scheme texts promote an emphasis on decoding as the most important skill in early reading, so that, “although children might encounter words they do not understand, they are not given texts they cannot decode and are therefore not expected to infer words from context or syntax” (HMSO, 2005, p.14).

Several factors can be seen to have contributed to the emphasis on teaching reading through phonics and the widespread use of structured reading schemes. Evidence has shown that children who display good phonological skills demonstrate better outcomes in reading

than children who do not (Hatcher, Hulme & Snowling, 2004; Torgesen et al., 1999). Solity and Vousden (2009) acknowledge that such findings have led to a general view that teaching phonics skills is essential for ensuring progress in reading. This view is supported by findings that children achieve higher reading outcomes when taught through programmes which place an explicit focus on the teaching of phonics skills, compared with those based on whole-language approaches (Fuchs et al., 2001).

In addition to the research background, it is essential that the influence of national education strategies is examined in order to understand the continued use of reading schemes. Following the publication of the Rose review, approaches based on “high quality, systematic phonic work” have been emphasised as the primary means through which early reading skills should be developed (Rose, 2006, p.3). This has been reinforced through the Primary National Strategy (DfES, 2006) and ‘Letters and Sounds’ (DfES, 2007), which emphasises phonics as the main method for effective reading instruction.

The review advocates the ‘simple view of reading’ (SVR) (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) as a conceptual framework, in which both word recognition (decoding) and language comprehension are seen as equally central components of the reading process. Although some researchers have suggested that the SVR is incomplete (Kirby & Savage, 2008), it is generally considered to be useful in conceptualising core skills and informing teaching. The model therefore provides justification for the identification of decoding as a priority focus in the teaching of reading, alongside language comprehension. Stuart, Stainthorp and Snowling (2008) emphasise that language comprehension skills should not be overlooked, acknowledging that this skill is more difficult to teach than decoding. The use of reading schemes is therefore supported by the SVR, however it may be argued that these place a disproportionate emphasis on decoding relative to comprehension.

The assertion that “synthetic” systematic phonics approaches offer “the best route to becoming skilled readers” (Rose, 2006, p.19) is supported by evidence from an extensive meta-analysis conducted by the National Reading Panel (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl & Willows, 2001) which found systematic and direct approaches to the teaching of phonics to be more effective than non-systematic approaches. A research review (Torgerson, Brooks & Hall, 2006), however, reported no significant difference in effectiveness between synthetic and analytic phonics instruction. Additionally, this review found no evidence of a significant effect of systematic phonics instruction on reading comprehension. Wyse and Goswami (2008) argue that the Rose review provides “no reliable empirical evidence that synthetic phonics offers the vast majority of beginners the best route to becoming skilled readers” (p.691).

The strong commitment to systematic synthetic phonics advocated in the Rose review is therefore highly significant when considering reasons underlying the widespread use of reading schemes. This is noted by Levy (2009a) who considers that “it seems likely that this will result in an even greater use of books with controlled vocabularies, such as scheme texts, given that many of the popular synthetic phonics schemes feature such books” (p.364). This is arguably reinforced by the fact that the government currently provides up to £3,000 of matched funding to schools for the purpose of purchasing phonics resources (Ofsted, 2011).

### **Real Books**

Solity & Vousden (2009) note a number of distinctions between real books and reading schemes. Firstly, real books are selected on the basis of interest, with the aim of increasing motivation to read. Selection is not based on perceived level of difficulty. Crucially, real books do not deliberately attempt to control for frequency or consistency of exposure to phonically regular and high-frequency words. For this reason it has traditionally

been thought that real books may provide fewer opportunities to apply early reading skills than reading schemes.

Traditional support for the use of real books has come from proponents of a 'whole-language' approach to early reading instruction. This view holds that children learn to read most effectively through engagement with meaningful texts, and that reading schemes are, by comparison, artificial in their structure and insufficiently engaging (Smith & Goodman, 1971). Thus "the best instructional materials are the real world ones: real children's literature" (Smith & Goodman, 2008, p.64). The process of learning to read is referred to as a 'psycholinguistic guessing game' (Goodman, 1976), in which the focus is not on decoding but on the use of context to predict and draw inferences from text. In this way, the view is that children will acquire an extensive knowledge of sight vocabulary through repeated exposure to words in texts. This view has been heavily refuted. For example, Stuart, Masterton and Dixon (2000) found that children learned sight vocabulary more effectively through explicit, out of context teaching, than from repeatedly reading words in text.

Although proponents of instructional psychology and the whole-language approach appear to hold similar views regarding the most appropriate materials for beginning reading instruction, Solity and Vousden (2009) highlight fundamental differences, namely the emphasis that instructional psychology places on the use of real books within the context of direct and explicit teaching of sight vocabulary and phonic skills.

### **Opportunities for Skill Development**

Research from instructional psychology has offered new insights into the relative opportunities provided for skill development in both reading schemes and real books, from the viewpoint that the question of which materials most effectively support reading is best

answered through an analysis of the literature itself. Instructional psychology draws upon rational analysis (Anderson, 1990) and direct instruction (Engelmann & Carnine, 1982) in which emphasis is placed on the influence of the environment on cognition. This approach has therefore focused on analysing the learning environment and the impact this has on reading development, specifically through comparing the demands made on children's sight vocabulary and phonics skills in different types of text.

To make such a comparison, Solity and Vousden (2009) aimed to identify an optimal level of high-frequency words and grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) to compare. This is based on the theory that an optimal amount of instruction will lead to maximum generalisation. Their analyses indicated that the first 100 high-frequency words can be seen to provide the greatest utility to beginning readers, because the most frequent items account for the largest proportion of information to be learned (Vousden, 2008). Beyond this, words occur so infrequently that there is little utility in teaching them. Analysis of a word database including English reading schemes and storybooks provides support for teaching the 100 most frequent words by sight (Stuart et al., 2003). Furthermore, Gershkoff-Stowe (2002) found evidence that young children are sensitive to word frequency and are able to make use of these regularities in the context of learning new words.

Further analyses enabled a comparison of the prevalence of such high-frequency words and GPCs within adult literature, children's real books, and two reading schemes (Rhyme World and Oxford Reading Tree). Contrary to the expectation that reading schemes are likely to contain more high-frequency words and common GPCs to enable young readers to apply their skills than real books, results showed that these occurred as frequently in adult literature and children's real books as in the reading schemes. In fact, the 100 most frequent words accounted for the least text within the Rhyme World scheme.

These findings suggest that real books provide a better basis for reading instruction than reading scheme texts, but that direct, out of context, instruction based on the units which occur most frequently and therefore provide the greatest utility to learners, should form the basis of instruction within this context. This view is supported by the finding that intensive instruction in high-frequency words had a higher impact on reading attainment and fluency than systematic synthetic phonics methods (Watts & Gardner, 2012).

Solity and Vousden (2009) highlight additional ways in which the use of reading schemes may disadvantage beginning readers. They underline the importance of acknowledging the “broader goals of reading”, including opportunities to develop children’s vocabulary knowledge (Solity & Vousden, 2009, p.499). When comparing the real book version of ‘The Three Billy Goats Gruff’ (Sharatt & Tucker, 2004) with the phonically regular version ‘Billy the Kid’ from the reading scheme ‘Read, Write Inc.’ (RWI, 2008), the authors note eight synonyms for the word ‘said’, compared with none in the reading scheme version, out of eleven instances in each text. It would be interesting for future research to consider opportunities to develop grammatical knowledge, for example through comparison of the range of clause types within each type of text (Jardine, 1992).

Frequency of word occurrence may not be the only factor that influences the extent to which reading materials support reading development. Adelman, Brown and Quesada (2006) found that the number of contexts in which words were experienced determined word accessibility as measured by response times in word naming and lexical decision making tasks. Adelman et al. (2006) argue that contextual diversity is more important than the frequency with which words are presented. The implication of this is that it is important to for children to see new words presented in a range of diverse contexts in order to enhance

retention. It may be argued that, relative to real books, reading schemes are likely to present words in more restricted contexts. This would certainly be a valuable area for future research.

### **Motivation**

This essay has so far highlighted concerns surrounding opportunities for skill development in reading schemes, compared with real books. These have focused on the statistical properties of the language within such texts, from the perspective of instructional psychology. Although such arguments acknowledge other potential limitations of scheme texts, including their impact on motivational factors, these are only afforded brief consideration. Further investigation of the extent to which reading schemes impact on children's motivation to read is therefore necessary. This section will examine the research evidence suggesting that reading schemes, when used in isolation, impact negatively on children's perceptions of themselves as readers, and crucially, their motivation to read.

As noted previously, reading schemes are intended to provide beginning readers with a significant level of early independence, through controlled exposure to words which are readily decodable. Ofsted (2004), however, noted limitations of the use of schemes for lower attaining pupils. This report noted that higher achieving pupils tended to progress through the scheme quickly, at which point they were able to select books freely according to interest. A high proportion of children who were struggling with reading, however, remained with the scheme for longer. As a result, many children saw the scheme as "something to be worked through until they became a 'free reader'" (Ofsted, 2004, p.12). In this way, children who are already experiencing reading difficulties may experience a further decline in attitudes towards reading through a lack of choice in reading material, in comparison with their more able peers.

These observations are significant when considered in relation to the national context. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) investigated international comparisons in the reading attainment of ten-year-olds in 41 countries in 2006. The study reported a fall in the reading performance of English children since 2001 (Twist, et al., 2007). Additionally, it was found that attitudes towards reading had declined, and were poor compared to those of children in many other countries. English children reported reading for pleasure less frequently than children in other countries, and positive associations were reported between the amount children read for pleasure and reading attainment.

Research has suggested that children's level of engagement in reading is influenced by motivational factors. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) found that intrinsic motivation predicted amount and breadth of reading more strongly than extrinsic motivation. This is supported by a subsequent study, which found that reading for enjoyment was most highly predicted by motivation, after controlling for previous reading attainment and strategy use (Cox & Guthrie, 2001).

These findings have implications for selecting reading materials which effectively promote children's motivation to engage in reading regularly. Cox and Guthrie (2001) describe reading for enjoyment as an "autonomous, self-determined behaviour" (p.127). Their findings are consistent with self-determination theory (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991), in which such behaviours are "positively influenced by motivational variables" (Cox & Guthrie, 2001, p.127). Within this theory, supporting autonomy has an important impact on children's motivation and self-determined behaviours. The notion of restricting children's choice until the point at which they can be considered 'free readers' therefore requires important consideration in relation to the impact this may have on motivation. This provides a potential mechanism for understanding the observations noted by Ofsted in

relation to the impact of reading schemes for low attaining pupils. If schemes are to be used, awareness must therefore be given to the potential impact that their use in isolation may have on motivational factors influencing children's level of engagement in reading.

A further, but related, view is that choice of reading material may influence children's perceptions of both the purpose and nature of the reading process. Luke, Carrington and Kapitzke (2003) argue that scheme texts place "limits on vocabulary, lexical density and syntactic complexity" (p.252), further suggesting that reading schemes can be highly influential in shaping what "counts as literacy" (p.255). Solity and Vousden (2009) express a similar view, noting that an emphasis on decoding means that it "may not be apparent to children that the associations they are making between phonemes and graphemes have anything to do with the process of reading" (p.501).

It has been observed that young children develop sophisticated constructions of reading based on their experiences with a range of texts, but that their definitions of what constitutes reading narrow as early as the first year of school (Levy, 2008). This is attributed to the "narrow and constraining discourse" adopted by schools, in which definitions of reading typically refer to the need to decode printed text (Levy, 2009b, p.90). The very fact that book texts continue to be the primary material for supporting the teaching of reading has been questioned by those emphasising the range of texts now available to young readers, including the prominence of digital media within "new textual landscapes" (Carrington, 2005, p.13). This has prompted researchers to encourage schools to adopt broader definitions of reading (Bearne, 2003) which extend beyond alphabetic print literacy (Hassett, 2006).

In line with this, Levy (2009a) aimed to examine how choice of reading material influences children's wider perceptions of reading. A longitudinal case study approach was used to examine the perceptions of two cohorts of Nursery and Reception children. A variety

of age-appropriate interview and observation techniques were used to obtain information directly from the children themselves.

In one activity, a glove puppet, 'Charlie Chick' was used to elicit children's understandings of concepts, as children took on the role of 'expert' to explain to the character their thoughts on a range of ideas relating to reading. When asked to show Charlie Chick what 'reading' was, several children selected a reading scheme book over a range of other books available. Some children also reported that the reading scheme book would be the one their teacher would most like them to read. The perception shared by many children was that the main function of reading schemes was as a tool to teach reading, and that these should be read in a different way to other children's books, with a primary focus on decoding in which it is essential to "read every word" (Levy, 2009a, p.371). This was supported by the observation that children did not apply wider reading skills such as picture reading within the context of scheme texts. Furthermore, the ability to decode print emerged as a key factor in determining children's perceptions of a person's status as a 'reader'. Several children referred to the coloured level of their scheme book, which typically determined perceptions of proficiency in reading, and in some cases reinforced negative self-perceptions. In line with Ofsted (2004), children viewed progression beyond the scheme as a significant achievement, and the point at which one became a competent reader and able to access books outside of the scheme.

This has implications for children who are less confident in their reading abilities, who may believe that a minimum level of competency is required before they are able to read anything outside of a scheme. In line with this, the study found that this belief actively discouraged some children from reading widely as they did not believe they possessed the necessary skills. More recent evidence has suggested that children hold more positive views

of scheme books whilst also engaging enthusiastically in wider reading (Capper, 2012). However, this study was based on a small sample within a single primary school. Further research is therefore required to delineate children's attitudes towards reading scheme texts and the relationship this has to wider reading.

### **Implications for EP Practice**

This essay has highlighted several considerations relating to the selection of reading materials for beginning reading instruction. An EP is well placed to communicate such issues to educational settings to support effective reading instruction at an organisational level.

The findings from instructional psychology, coupled with reports highlighting the negative impact for lower achieving pupils of remaining tied to a reading scheme (Ofsted, 2004) have implications for EPs working with children considered to be experiencing literacy difficulties. In such cases, EPs could assist schools in considering the texts used to teach reading, highlighting the importance of motivation in promoting children's engagement in reading and the role that real books can play in supporting this. In particular, the role of autonomy in increasing motivation could be emphasised. Interventions such as 'Paired Reading' support this principle, as children select their own reading material based on interest (Topping, 1995).

In line with a focus on inclusion, EPs may need to address the ways in which literacy is being taught at a whole class level, focusing on supporting differentiated, whole-class teaching, in line with first wave provision (Rose, 2006). The benefits of this for EP practice include the wider application of psychology to meet the needs of all ability levels (Solity & Shapiro, 2008).

This is supported by findings from a six-year experimental study, the Early Reading Research (ERR). Children were taught the 100 most frequent words as well as 62 high-frequency GPCs, as part of a classroom based 'framework for teaching reading' involving the application of principles derived from instructional psychology. Two studies demonstrated significant improvements in children's reading across all ability levels, in comparison to usual classroom methods (Solity, Deavers, Kerfoot, Crane & Cannon, 2000). The implementation of the ERR was supported by EPs working collaboratively with schools. This suggests a role for EPs in delivering training to support the implementation of psychological principles of teaching and learning at a whole school level (Solity et al., 2000).

Levy (2009a) suggests that more research is required in order to gain a better understanding of the ways in which children read multimodal texts. EP involvement in contributing to the research in this area would have an important role in informing policy on the teaching of reading in an increasingly digital age.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has examined the common assumption that reading schemes provide the most suitable starting point for beginning readers, and found this to be unsubstantiated by the research evidence. Specifically the essay has addressed the finding that real books appear to provide greater opportunities for children to apply their early reading skills (Solity & Vousden, 2009). Additionally, it is proposed that reading schemes are likely to have a negative impact on children's perceptions of the purpose of reading and motivation to read, when used in isolation (Levy, 2009a).

The implication of these findings is that reading schemes provide some support in the development of early sight vocabulary and phonic skills, but to a lesser degree than real

books. Given that reading schemes are widely available resources which traditionally carry a high level of funding, the argument that they should be “explicitly rejected” (Solity & Vousden, 2009, p.497) is considered impractical. Instead, it is argued that EPs can have a role in promoting the use of a range of literature in conjunction with existing use of reading scheme texts. For this to be most effective, it needs to be supported by the use of direct instruction in phonics and high-frequency words, and attention to the role of autonomy in promoting children’s motivation to read. As arguments concerning the negative impact of reading schemes on motivation relate to the use of reading schemes in isolation, such an approach should, by consequence, mitigate several of these concerns. In this way, the role of the EP in promoting effective instruction in reading is likely to benefit not only those experiencing literacy difficulties, but a wide range of ability levels.

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