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# Fostering children's reading comprehension: the importance of fiction reading

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**Abstract** Despite its importance, many students have severe difficulties in the acquisition of effective reading comprehension. In addition, an increasing number of students tend not to read for intrinsic reasons. In this article, we refer to different strands of research and summarize literature from the perspective that fostering children's engagement in reading fiction is an important and promising way to promote reading comprehension. With reference to the Matthew-effect, we assume a reciprocal relation between reading comprehension and fiction book reading. Therefore, starting in preschool age, children should be motivated to read. Furthermore, in this article the role of fiction reading for digital literacy is discussed. Finally, possibilities for how parents and educators can encourage students to spend more time in fiction book reading are illustrated.

**Keywords** Fiction reading · Reading comprehension · Joint-book reading · Reading motivation · Reading behavior

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## Zur Bedeutsamkeit des Lesens literarischer Texte für die Förderung der Lesekompetenz

**Zusammenfassung** Trotz der hohen Bedeutsamkeit der Lesekompetenz weist ein bedeutsamer Anteil der Heranwachsenden erhebliche Defizite im Lesen auf. Darüber hinaus geben viele von ihnen an, nicht oder wenig intrinsisch motiviert zu lesen. Vor diesem Hintergrund werden im vorliegenden Beitrag theoretische Annahmen und empirische Befunde diskutiert, welche die zentrale Bedeutung des Lesens literarischer Texte, wie z. B. von Romanen und Erzählungen, – auch unter Berücksichtigung sich verändernder Herausforderungen angesichts der zunehmenden Digitalisierung – für die Entwicklung von Lesekompetenz verdeutlichen. Unter Bezugnahme auf den Matthäus-Effekt ist eine reziproke Beeinflussung zwischen Lesekompetenz und dem Lesen literarischer Texte anzunehmen. Folglich sollten Kinder schon sehr früh, beginnend im Vorschulalter, zu der Beschäftigung mit literarischen Texten motiviert werden. Daraus ableitbare Empfehlungen für eine Förderung des Lesens literarischer Texte sowie Desiderata für die zukünftige Forschung bilden den Abschluss des Beitrags.

**Schlüsselwörter** Fiktionale Literatur · Leseverstehen · Gemeinsames Buchlesen · Lesemotivation · Leseverhalten

### 1 Introduction

Despite the necessity of effective reading comprehension, a substantial number of students in secondary school have difficulties in reading. For example, within PISA 2018 about 22.6% of the 15-year old students across participating OECD-countries did not reach the reading proficiency level 2 and therefore are considered to be low performers in reading. This was especially true for boys and children from socially disadvantaged families (OECD 2019). Moreover, students often report being unmotivated to read (OECD 2019), and a decreasing number of students read books for pleasure whereas more time per day is spent online (Twenge et al. 2019). In this article, we summarize research from the perspective that the activity of reading—with a focus on fiction reading—was and still is of primary importance for the development of children's and young adults' reading comprehension. In contrast to non-fiction or factual books, fiction books refer to a fictitious reality, at least in parts. Throughout this article, fiction book reading primarily denotes activities with respect to the reading of literary texts, e.g., novels, narratives or tales characterized by the element of telling a story of one or more protagonists. Furthermore, fiction books are often read from an aesthetic stance, in which the reader becomes connected and emotionally involved with the characters and engaged in the story world while reading (Galda and Liang 2003). Finally, when we refer to the reading of fiction books, and if not further specified within the article, we do not discriminate between different modalities, e.g., print format or some other digital format, especially e-books.

## 2 Fiction reading and the development of reading comprehension

Although it seems obvious that the activity of reading contributes to the development of students' reading skills, in this section we explore the underlying demands, processes and theoretical argumentations related to this assumption. This helps to understand the importance of fiction reading for reading comprehension, which we define as the individual capacity to extract and construct meaning from written text (RAND Reading Study Group 2002).

First, the activity of reading contributes to the development of reading comprehension by improving students' decoding skills (Kuhn and Stahl 2003). Students typically read unknown or unfamiliar words using a print-to-sound translation process (phonological recoding) that is comparatively slow and requires considerable cognitive resources. Through repeated reading of these words, students build up and expand their orthographic lexicon, which finally allows words to be read directly through a process of visual word recognition (Share 1995). Second, by reading, students learn new, formerly unknown words (Krashen 1989; Mol and Bus 2011). In comparison to oral language, written text contains more different and unique words, which increases the probability of encountering and learning new words within the appropriate context. Consequently, vocabulary knowledge develops. Third, prior knowledge supports text comprehension and reading is an efficient way to learn new information (Sparks et al. 2014). In addition, it can be assumed that frequent reading may lead to a better knowledge of narrative structures and concepts characteristic of narratives (Hamilton et al. 2021).

Besides these findings of positive effects of reading on students' reading skills, research on different text types and book genres has revealed various associations between reading time, reading volume and reading skill development. Whereas strong positive associations between the reading of fiction books with reading skills have been reported, no or less strong relations have been found for the reading of newspapers, magazines and non-fiction books with reading skills (Jerrim and Moss 2019; Pfost et al. 2013; Spear-Swerling et al. 2010). This may be due to the following reasons: in comparison to other text genres, fiction books are typically longer and often quite complex, due to their use of linguistic devices such as metaphors, intimations or ambiguities (Gehrer and Artelt 2013; Jerrim and Moss 2019). This requires the reader to derive inferences and interpretations, to relate ideas across larger text parts, and finally to spend more time reading—in a deep and concentrated manner. The reading of fiction can also trigger motivational and emotional processes, which promote reading comprehension, reading engagement and social competences. For example, fiction books typically contain different characters with individual thoughts, motives, and emotions situated in an imaginary world. Therefore, the reading of fiction is often accompanied by a state of transportation in which the reader is taken from his or her reality and is transported to and immersed in a narrative world, which is strongly tied to feelings of enjoyment (Green et al. 2006). In addition, while immersed in the narrative story and its characters, students' interpersonal skills such as empathy and perspective-taking may be improved (Bal and Veltkamp 2013; Kidd and Castano 2013). Ultimately, higher level interpersonal skills lead to improved mental representations of real world events and facilitate

processes of reading comprehension (Dore et al. 2018). We argue that further research on individual differences in fiction reading in comparison to the reading of other types of text and reading comprehension is required. These studies should apply experimental and longitudinal designs that control for potential confounding variables such as the amount of reading.

### **3 The Matthew-effect—a model for the explanation of the development of individual differences in reading**

The Matthew-effect describes individual differences in reading development by relying on two principles (Pfost et al. 2014; Stanovich 1986). First, individual differences in reading skills may follow a cumulative developmental trend. Children who start school with better reading skills tend to improve their reading skills faster than their schoolmates who do not have these skills. Therefore, individual differences in reading skills between children increase as students grow older. Second, the mechanism behind this developmental trend is reciprocal causation or a positive feedback loop. That is, students who show better vocabulary and reading skills experience more enjoyment from reading and develop better competence beliefs, leading to higher levels of reading motivation and more reading. Finally, the activity of reading itself contributes to the development of students' vocabulary and reading skills.

Whereas empirical studies have not painted a clear picture regarding the above described assumption of increasing individual differences in reading as children grow older (the cumulative developmental trend; Pfost et al. 2014), they have provided evidence of a mechanism of reciprocal causation between reading skills, reading motivation, and reading behavior (Harlaar et al. 2007; Morgan and Fuchs 2007; Sparks et al. 2014). In addition, there is evidence that the relation between reading skills and reading behavior seems to change with the age of the students. As van Bergen et al. (2020) showed, for beginning readers primarily reading skills, especially prereading skills and reading fluency, influence reading behavior. After Grade 3, however, the influence of reading behavior on reading skills, especially reading comprehension, is more pronounced. This changing pattern of reciprocal influence corresponds to the idea that independent book reading, at first, requires a minimum level of reading skills in order to initiate the upward spiral between reading motivation, reading behavior and reading comprehension (Northrop 2017). In sum, as reading tends to follow a (cumulative) pattern with reciprocal causation, it is important that young children make a good start with reading. This start is often promoted by their parents and caregivers. Therefore, we discuss joint reading activities next.

### **4 Parent-to-child joint reading activities**

Already in the first years of life, most parents are engaged in joint reading activities with their children (Niklas et al. 2016). In addition, various studies have shown that joint book reading activities are related to children's oral language (e.g. vocabulary) and reading achievement (Bus et al. 1995; Grolig et al. 2019; Mol and Bus

2011; Sénéchal 2006), although such relations may also reflect maternal language or genetic effects (Puglisi et al. 2017). Specifically, families engaged in joint book reading activities lay the foundation for the development of oral language and reading skills, which in turn affects reading motivation (Toste et al. 2020), and students' own reading for pleasure (Sénéchal 2006; Tremblay et al. 2020). Besides the frequency of interaction, the type of parent-child communication during joint reading activities is crucial (Haden et al. 1996; Whitehurst et al. 1988). For example, extra-textual talk between parents and children characterized by an active involvement of the child and open-ended questions promotes children's oral language skills such as vocabulary (Mol et al. 2008), and these language skills are in turn linked to later reading comprehension (Scarborough 2002).

## 5 Reading motivation

Earlier in this article we argued that reading, and especially the reading of fiction books, is closely related to students' reading skills. In addition, the Matthew-effect as an explanation for the development of individual differences was introduced. A critical variable in this model is reading motivation, that is, the tendency to mobilize energy in order to engage in specific reading activities. Within reading research, self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000) is one of the most prominent theoretical frameworks that explains individual differences in motivation. Therefore, the following discussion refers to self-determination theory and specifically to the differentiation between autonomous/intrinsic reading motivation (initiating reading activities because reading itself is experienced as rewarding) and controlled/extrinsic reading motivation (initiating reading because of external demands and rewards; see de Naeghel et al. 2012). Empirical findings unambiguously stress the importance of intrinsic reading motivation in the prediction of students' reading skills (Becker et al. 2010; Toste et al. 2020), the frequency and time spent reading (Becker et al. 2010; Schaffner et al. 2013), students' choice of reading materials (e.g. fiction, nonfiction, comics as well as reading text online; McGeown et al. 2016) and knowledge of efficient reading strategies (Miyamoto et al. 2019). Therefore, intrinsically motivated readers are not just better readers, they also read more printed books and less social media text and have better knowledge about efficient reading strategies. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, has been found to be less related to favorable outcomes such as the development of students' reading skills or their engagement in out-of-school reading activities (Becker et al. 2010; Schaffner et al. 2013). Consequently, developing a high level of habitual intrinsic reading motivation and enjoyment in pre- and primary school and maintaining this high level of intrinsic motivation during the course of secondary school is of particular importance for literacy development.

However, two trends might raise concerns about students' intrinsic reading motivation and should not be overlooked in this discussion: First, trend analyses of PISA-data between 2009 and 2018 (OECD 2019) have shown that an increasing number of students in secondary school do not read for intrinsic reasons. For example, between 2009 and 2018, the number of students across the OECD-countries who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I read only if I have to" significantly increased

by 7.8%. Although the reasons for this change require further research and may include, for example, effects of the digitalization of communication, this trend is clearly discernible. Second, studies examining age-trends in intrinsic reading motivation have shown that high levels of intrinsic motivation in primary school children tend to decrease with age (Miyamoto et al. 2020; Smith et al. 2012; Wigfield et al. 2016). Therefore, albeit that large numbers of young children enjoy reading, this positive motivation often does not persist as they grow older and during later school years. The reasons behind these trends are multifarious, e.g., literature classes where there is poor student motivation and a lack in the choice of reading material, or frequent assessment and teaching practices that promote social comparison (Wigfield et al. 2016).

## 6 Fiction reading in the face of new technologies—still worth doing?

New technologies have led to new modes of engagement with written text. Text content is no longer merely consumed but also created and shared (Coiro 2021). In addition, because texts are often written in non-linear hypertext format, readers are confronted with new and different cognitive demands. These include employing efficient navigation skills (Hahnel et al. 2016; Salmerón et al. 2018); integrating information across different texts (Magliano et al. 2018); and taking the source information of a specific text into account (Bråten et al. 2018; Magliano et al. 2018). In the face of these challenges, it seems worth asking whether the reading of fiction is still important. Two arguments underline the continuous importance of fiction reading:

First, reading comprehension of traditional linear text, as found in reading fiction books, is also used when reading digital text. As stated above, the reading of (fiction) books is one of the major predictors of students' oral language, word reading skills, and reading comprehension (Mol and Bus 2011). Furthermore, empirical research on the reading of digital texts containing hyperlinks and other non-linear elements have shown close associations between comprehension of digital text and students' word reading skills (Fesel et al. 2018; Kannianen et al. 2019) and their reading comprehension of linear text (Hahnel et al. 2016; Kannianen et al. 2019; Salmerón et al. 2018). Consequently, fiction book reading via the pathway of word reading skills and reading comprehension also contributes to students' digital reading skills.

Second, in comparison to book reading, common online reading activities, especially social online activities, such as chats or online forums, are only of minor importance when it comes to the development of students' reading skills. For example, when examining the effects of the frequency of internet use for social purposes, Salmerón et al. (2018) found no relation to students' print reading or their online reading skills. Similarly, Naumann (2015) examined digital reading skills and navigation behavior and found positive relations between task adaptive navigation and reading online for information purposes, but not for social online reading activities. These findings align well with results by Pfof et al. (2013) and Torppa et al. (2020), who showed that book reading positively predicted the development of students' reading comprehension, whereas online reading activities such as e-mails and

social media contributed less or even in a negative manner to students' reading comprehension. Although the causes of this are not well understood and require further clarification, one reason suggested in the research is the tendency to process textual information superficially in online environments (van der Weel and Mangen 2022).

## 7 Conclusion

The ability to read and to comprehend what has been read are core competences children need to acquire on the path through primary and secondary education. For many children, this path is a story of success. However, other children struggle. As we have illustrated in this article, it is the reading of books, and especially the reading of fiction books, that is crucial for a positive developmental outcome. Despite this conclusion, it has to be kept in mind that reading is a complex interaction between the reader, the text and the purpose of reading, and not every reader profits equally from reading the same book. However, research on this complex interaction of reading books with different text characteristics (e.g. text complexity, lexical density, the number of characters and exposure to different perspectives within a specific text) and readers who differ in motivational and cognitive resources is still in its infancy. Questions regarding the requirements of different types of texts and the learning processes they initiate in reading comprehension have mostly remained unresolved. In addition, digital formats provide new opportunities for authors, publishers and readers of fiction books. These topics should be addressed in future research.

## 8 Recommendations

In this article, we have summarized research that has shown that reading fiction is a promising way to foster children's reading comprehension. Consequently, parents, caregivers and educators should motivate their children to read fiction books. Several approaches to this challenge have been developed, but few have been adequately evaluated (Wigfield et al. 2016). Therefore, it is not easy to say what works best for whom. Based on understandings from self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000) and applied in formal educational settings, reading motivation may be supported by a combination of several elements (e.g., De Naeghel et al. 2014; van Steensel et al. 2017). First, support autonomy, for example through the provision of access and choice. This also encompasses options with regard to text topic or the protagonists' gender, as situational interest in reading, especially for boys, appears to be sensitive to such characteristics (Lepper et al. 2022). Second, enhance interests and feelings of competence, for example by supporting students to choose books that match their individual interests and competence. Third, support social motivation, for example by providing opportunities for peer communication (see McBreen and Savage 2020, for other motivation intervention approaches). Furthermore, as independent reading requires sufficient reading skills (van Bergen et al. 2020), targeted instruction for struggling readers should be provided (Northrop 2017). While we recommend including such elements, fostering children's intrinsic reading motiva-

tion is a complex task and studies that evaluate the introduction and development of these elements are needed.

In addition to supporting their motivation, readers need age-appropriate and interesting books to read. There is evidence that when children are offered a wide selection of books to read together with their parents, for example via libraries or book giveaway-programs, then literacy skills and interest in reading improve (de Bondt et al. 2020). Furthermore, book giveaway-programs might be expanded by school and community support measures such as family literacy events (e.g. Kim and Guryan 2010) or reading activity programs in public libraries. However, such measures have rarely been the focus of research and more data on their effects are needed (Dynea et al. 2015). In addition, providing sufficient opportunities for book access to social disadvantaged families and addressing the varying interests of children within socially and culturally diverse communities remains a challenge (Mackey 2022). Finally, successful reading careers start early in life. Therefore, both children and parents should be encouraged to engage in joint reading activities. For example, promoting a positive affect during parent-child interactions by viewing reading as a source of pleasure and entertainment (e.g., using a lively reading style that mimics the voices of various characters) has been found to be important (Baker et al. 1997; Sonnenschein and Munsterman 2002).

Promoting fiction reading is not contrary to the recommendations to teach students digital reading skills (e.g., Bråten et al. 2018; Hahnel et al. 2016), rather fiction reading promotes effective reading comprehension, which remains foundational to reading and learning in today's world. Therefore, even today, parents, caregivers and educators should encourage their children to read fiction books.

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