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Chapter Nine

Literacy, Language and Wellbeing

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'We have always known by intuition that reading is valuable.' (Nikolajeva, 2012)

Abstract

In this chapter we explore the way that different aspects of language, literacy and literature contribute to wellbeing. Focusing on reading, we show how readers use texts for a variety of purposes, how texts shape the way readers think about themselves and the world they live in and the beneficial effects this thinking can have both on readers' lives and on society generally. We look at how reading is taught. We consider the choices teachers make in the way reading is positioned in the minds of the children and in the way the teaching is organised. Referring to a wide range of literature on the importance of learning through talk, we consider talk practices around reading in the classroom and show how these advantage some children more than others. Finally, we highlight the importance of seeing reading as social practice and show how an emphasis on this will enhance the social, emotional and intellectual wellbeing of pupils.

Introduction

Ask any committed reader, and he or she will tell you that reading is good for you. People who choose to read do so for many reasons: to escape from the humdrum reality of their daily lives, to relax, to imagine, to explore new worlds, new people, new ideas, new ways of being. Readers, quite simply, find reading worthwhile. It is only recently, however, that research evidence has enabled us to relate that 'worthwhileness' to emotional and social wellbeing. Some of this evidence comes from studies of adult mental health. Billington (2015) shows that those who read for pleasure report fewer feelings of stress and depression and Dowick et al., (2012) tell us that being part of a

reading programme can help reduce depressive symptoms in sufferers. There is even evidence (Billington, 2013) that dementia can be alleviated in those who read. This sounds impressive: but if it is to be seen as relevant to *children's* reading and wellbeing, we need to delve beyond the surface relationship of cause and effect and ask why this is happening. What is it about reading and what readers do that lifts mood and opens possibilities to wider thinking?

The aim of this chapter is to explore some of the ways that reading actually makes a difference to wellbeing. We do this by showing how texts can change the way readers think about themselves and how texts that challenge readers' thinking can help them think about the world they live in differently and understand people, and the motivation of people, better. We look at the way reading is taught in schools. We look first at the conversations that children have *around* texts in school, and consider whether these advantage some children more than others. We look at the way the teaching of reading is organised and ask teachers to remember the social and emotional implications of what they do and how their practices impact on reading identity. Finally, we highlight the importance of seeing reading as social practice and show how an emphasis on this will enhance the social, emotional and intellectual wellbeing of pupils.

Main Findings

Reading

A first and obvious answer to the question: "How does reading contribute to wellbeing?" might be that reading is relaxing. As readers engage in story, their minds shift from the concerns of their day-to-day lives to the different places, different times, or different people in the story. Reading, in effect creates a mini break in the mind, an escape from real life. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called this state 'flow' (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). It is a state where the reader becomes so engrossed in reading that they put aside their sense of time, space and other people. The poet and writer Jack Ousbey draws our attention to how another writer, John Gardner describes this in a 1977 novel 'October Light'

'The real world lost weight and the print on the pages gave way to images, an alternative reality more charged than mere life, more ghostly yet nearer, suffused

with a curious importance and manageability ... By degrees, without knowing she was doing it, she gave in to the illusion, the comforting security of her vantage point, until whenever she looked up from her page to rest her eyes, it seemed that the door, the walls, the dresser, the heavy onyx clock had no more substance than a plate-glass reflection; what was real and enduring was the adventure flickering on the wall of her brain, a phantom world filled with its own queer laws and character.'

Because readers invest in this intellectual and emotional engagement, it would be wrong to think of reading as the cognitive equivalent of basking on a sun lounger. Reading is not an absence of activity. In fact, it is the presence of mental activity, of thinking, as a person reads that makes reading especially powerful in terms of wellbeing. For while a good story might take the reader away from his or her own worries, it is very likely to take that reader into somebody else's. This is a good thing. By engaging with another person's experience, the reader learns how fictional characters cope with danger, with worry, or with fear, for example, and by reading about these, his or her own repertoire for coping with these emotions and with difficult situations develops.

Seen in this way, reading achieves two purposes. First, it helps the reader make sense of his or her own experience. The young child who reads a picture book such as Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, (1963) sees the main character, Max, get sent to bed as a result of his naughtiness. The reader recognises first his or her own experiences of naughtiness and the emotions that go with it, and second that others have experienced these emotions too. There is learning here about the reader's place in the world, about human experience and, perhaps the most important of all, the beginnings of empathy - the ability of one person to 'think' into the mind of another. In terms of wellbeing this is important because people who can empathise are developing emotional intelligence. They understand the motivation and emotions of others.

Nikolajeva (2012) acknowledges the wonder of this. It is truly astonishing that fictional characters - inventions of an author's imagination and realised only through marks on a page - can have power in developing a person's ability to recognise emotional states and to empathise with real people and real situations: but there is now tangible evidence to show that they do, and that reading is perhaps even more powerful than life in this

respect. Cognitive scientists Kidd and Castano (2013) studied the responses of adult readers to a variety of texts: non-fiction, popular fiction and literary fiction. They found that reading any fiction positively impacted upon the ability to recognise and infer thoughts and emotions, what psychologists call 'Theory of Mind'. This was so for all readers, but that for those readers who read challenging, literary fiction, the changes were long lasting. The researchers suggest that literary texts changed not just *what* readers thought about people and situations, but fundamentally changed *how* they thought, that is, it changed the approach they took in their thinking. They were more open to understanding the complexity of motivation and the social and political implications of what they read.

This is an important idea, and it has a number of implications. If reading is so powerful that it can change the patterns of thought in adults, then we need to ask what might it do for children, whose patterns of thinking are not yet established. We need to ask too about texts. Kidd and Castano show that texts matter: texts that challenged readers' thinking were more effective than easy 'holiday reads' in developing long-lasting understandings of others.

The question then becomes, what is the equivalent of literary fiction for a nine year old? Is it a reading scheme? Is it a book such as *The Diary of A Wimpy Kid* (Kinney 2008) or *Captain Underpants* (Pilkey 2000)? What do we need to know about texts to help us decide? And then, how do we balance a need to entertain and motivate with the need to develop emotional literacy? Finally we need to ask, what are the effects of any of this?

Paterson (2009) provides one empirical answer to the question of the effects of reading on children. His review of the evidence from longitudinal studies into civic values shows that young people who report reading for pleasure at the age of 14 years grow into adults who are more likely to contribute to society than not: that is, they vote more, volunteer more and play an active part in their communities. Reading, it seems, is good for the wellbeing of society itself!

The earlier questions about what constitutes quality fiction for young children seem to be much more problematic. It is not clear that the features that mark quality adult fiction are important in the same way for children's fiction, not least because children's minds are different: they are still, by definition, in a state of development. Nikolajava's

work on cognitive literary theory continues to ask how children who are still grappling with the complexity of decoding engage with the demands of texts that challenge them emotionally and cognitively (2014).

We do know that experienced and committed readers of fiction think that genre matters. They know that different types of story provide different rewards for the reader: the satisfaction of a neatly solved whodunit, the vicarious thrill of an adventure story, the rosy glow of light romance. In children's literature, genre is just as important, and as with adult readers, different genres afford different experiences for child readers. Some of these genres seem to be especially useful in encouraging emotional wellbeing in young readers.

Fairy Tales provide a good place to begin, for, though to us in the twenty-first century, they seem to be a natural, and perhaps anodyne starting place for children's engagement with literature, they have at times been at the cutting edge of thinking and controversy. Back in the late eighteenth century, for example, Sarah Trimmer, educationalist and writer herself, disapproved of them. She found them irrational, and of questionable morality. She thought they were likely "excite an unregulated sensibility" in the child reader (Rowe 2005). Concerns about the moral wellbeing of children who might be influenced by fairy tales persisted into the twentieth century, albeit on rather different grounds from Trimmer. Zipes, for example, (1999; 1987) considers the versions of the tales made popular by Disney. He is concerned by the *lack* of moral ambiguity they display: the stereotyped gender roles, the supremacy of cleanliness and housework, the unproblematic 'happy ever after through marriage' endings. What sort of expectations for real life do these certainties set up in young readers thinking, he wonders.

Bettelheim (1976) gives another perspective. A Freudian psychologist, he was interested in how the underlying themes of fairy tales spoke to the unconscious needs of readers as they negotiated their roles and relationships in the family. Tales of good mothers and wicked step-mothers, for instance, helped children accommodate the inevitability of their own mothers becoming angry with them at times, and stories such as Jack and the Beanstalk showed that even the youngest and most powerless of people

can outwit authority. According to Bettelheim, fairy tales were *necessary* for the psychological health of children.

There is still another way in which fairy tales contribute to children's wellbeing: they show children that there are alternative ways of being and thinking. The child who reads fairy tales 'buys into' a world where animals talk, where beans turn out to be magic and where christening gifts are prophecies. It is not that the child actually believes any of this, rather, he or she takes on a different sort of logic, and accepts, for the duration of the story, a set of assumptions about how the world works that are different from those he or she lives by. This is important and prompts two tangible cognitive benefits. First, taking on a different system of logic encourages alternative paths of thinking. The child who is able to think divergently can be creative and the connection between creativity and wellbeing is well established (Barnes, 2015; Burnard & Dragovic, 2015). Secondly, this thinking is important because it allows children to perceive that those assumptions on which their moral compass is set *might not* be the only ones, or indeed, the best.

Jan Mark's novel for older children, *Riding Tycho* (2005) illustrates this process rather well. This is the story of Demeter, a girl who lives in a remote, bleak, island community with her mother and brother. As the novel begins, the reader has no thought that Demeter's world is different from our own: so much is the same. There is a village and a school, a community sustained by fishing and craftwork, and a family where the usual sorts of sibling and parental relationships can be played out. It looks like social realism, of a geographically remote kind. Then the reader learns more. There is a prison on the neighbouring island, and though drowning is the most likely outcome of escape attempts, these attempts happen, regularly. Political prisoners are billeted in households in the village and harsh rules regulate their lives. The reader is not told why, or what these people have done, but the idea begins to develop that the political system underlying this society must be different from our own.

Gradually, more emerges. The reader discovers that in Demeter's village, school is different. Boys learn navigation and seamanship, and girls learn knitting. For girls, knitting is more important than reading and although Demeter is already a better reader than her teacher, this counts as nothing. The status of boys and girls is different.

In every respect, in this community, boys are superior to girls. Brothers can boss, bully and strike their sisters, and where there is no father, their mothers too. This is not only accepted behaviour, it is expected. Most interestingly, everybody knows one indisputable truth: women are physically unable to swim.

Eventually the reader realises that this is actually science fiction. The action takes place on an earth-like planet where the seas have no tides and most importantly to the plot, there are no birds or insects. It is because a political prisoner tries to explain the concept of flight to Demeter that the denouement of the novel comes about. Demeter is the focaliser of *Riding Tycho*. It is through her eyes that the reader sees this world. What happens to Demeter is that she gradually learns to question the assumptions and the unfairness that govern her life and, as she does so, she takes the reader with her. It is a small step for the intelligent reader to ask the obvious question: so what are the assumptions that my society relies on? Are they fair and are they grounded in truth? The reader who asks these questions is developing a political conscience.

Talking about Texts

It is also clear is that the socio-emotional context for reading is likely to matter for young children as much as the nature of the text. Young children learn to read and make meaning in negotiation with an adult who guides and scaffolds the interpretation. The research question that matters in this context is not 'what makes a literary text' but 'what makes a literary *conversation* about a text'. What we learn from children and parents reading books together is that the ways that different communities regard texts, and how they talk about them, is socially determined. Heath (1983), in her seminal work *Ways with Words* points out that whereas many middle-class communities see reading as a source of relaxation and enjoyment, and texts as artefacts to be discussed, disputed, explained and elaborated, other communities see different purposes (or little purpose at all) in reading and have normalised having different kinds of conversation, or no conversation at all, about texts. For teachers and others who work with young people, this means recognising that the sorts of conversations about books that happen in classrooms are likely to be more familiar to some children than others and that work needs to be done to make talk about stories accessible to those who are less familiar. The adult behaviours that are helpful here are scaffolding, inviting children to contribute, listening carefully to what children say, prompting them to tell more, and

generally being clear that everyone's opinions matter and should be taken seriously. Teachers need to show that they value children's responses because doing so builds self esteem, and helps children think of themselves as people with good ideas. The 'talk skills' that develop as a result of such interactions build confidence and identity, resilience and growth mindsets. This is both socially and emotionally important.

Patterns of talk and implications for learning

Oral language abilities affect how children participate in the learning and social activities in class and often how they are regarded by teachers and other children. This in turn affects their social and emotional wellbeing because the ways that children are positioned by others impacts on how they feel about themselves and about school. The more general linguistic and behavioural traits promoted by middle class parenting have been well documented by researchers such as Lareau (2011) and Wells (1986). Lareau looked at families with children aged 10 and followed them up years later, talking to some when they were adults aged up to 21 years. In her study of the 10 year olds, she found that the logic of middle class parenting was one of 'concerted cultivation'. It engendered a strong sense of entitlement in the children - entitlement to have their opinions heard, to expect adult assistance and co-operation, and generally to be able to organise their world in ways that suit them. Middle class adults expected their ten year old children to take centre-floor in conversations, to give extended answers, to interrupt and to disagree. The adults adopted conversational styles that trained their children to do this, often answering a child's questions with more questions, requiring extended reasoning and coaching their children on how to engage with other adults and new situations, rehearsing what they might say and how they might speak. Children from working class and poor families on the other hand had experienced a 'natural growth' logic of parenting. In these families there was a stronger division between adult and children's lives which, although it made the children more independent and better at organising their time, did not breed a sense of entitlement. Conversations between parents and children in working class and poor families tended to be shorter and more focused. The children were more respectful of adult opinions and less likely to challenge or interrupt. Lareau argues that these conversational differences are just one example of how the sense of middle class confidence and entitlement positions children to do well in school and get the most from their teachers. It links to classroom research

showing that confident middle class pupils take more than their fair share of talk time in school, improving their talk skills even further (Martlew et al., 2010). It also links to ethnographic classroom research showing that middle class five and six year olds are more assertive in ensuring teachers' help with their work (Calarco, 2011).

The ability to communicate clearly and precisely in school confers a general learning advantage because strong oral language skills allow learners to recall, compare, explain and elaborate. This helps to ensure that children have a positive experience of learning, of school, and that others –school staff and pupils- see them in a positive light. Promoting oral language development is not just about individual skills, however; progress is affected by the collective skills of the class because children learn from each other. Martlew et al (2010) found that children in classrooms with many high-poverty pupils tended to have less individual and collective linguistic resource upon which to draw. The children spent less time talking to each other than children in mixed or middle-class classrooms and the researchers recommended that it is particularly important that the adults in high-poverty classrooms provide overt modelling and adopt collaborative conversational styles and that they structure collaborative tasks in ways that require children to talk to each other. These recommendations build on the work of Wells (1986), studying children aged 18 months to 7 years, who found that children who developed strong language skills tended to have parents who adopted a collaborative style of talk. These parents followed the conversational agenda of the child and built on the child's choice of topics and comments. In schools, he found that very few teachers adopted this conversational style; most expected young children to follow the adult's conversational agenda. For teachers and others working with children and young people therefore, the message is that literary experiences, quality of talk and narrative matter. Impacts are long-term and more than advantage learning; they help to regulate and develop emotional, empathy and theory of mind.

Learning to read and the impact on wellbeing

Given what is now well-accepted evidence that the structure of the brain changes according to how it is used (Goswami 2016), this may not seem so surprising. The neuropsychological evidence is certainly strong enough to encourage all those who work with children and young people to direct their attention to both *what* children

read and *how* reading is framed and taught. For many children, early experiences in learning to read appear to be effortless; successful, playful affairs that offer social, emotional and linguistic riches. Ousbey (2003) describes how his granddaughter, Jenny, weaves reading and rhyme through her play, her imagination and her relationships in ways that are fluid and informal. He writes that she engages in literary play situations so that the language seemed to have 'entered the echo chamber of the head', where without conscious effort it was held available in its entirety, alongside but separate from all the other units of story language (Ousbey, 2003, p. 30). For other children, however, learning to read is a less joyful, more disjointed, disconnected and altogether a more socially and psychologically dangerous experience. Stanovich (1986) describes how schools and the 'literacy' curriculum can make certain skills both highly visible and highly desirable whilst keeping others hidden. For Stanovich, the mastery of phonics was one such visible practice. Marie Clay (1985; 1991) identified another in the way that schools identify reading attainment groups and book levels without differentiating the nature of instruction. Stanovich (1986) pointed out that those who experienced early success entered an upward spiral in which their early advantage bred confidence, further practice opportunities, development and mastery. Their school experience of literacy formed a virtuous circle which contributed to positive reader identities. However, those who took just a few weeks longer to 'catch on' entered a downward spiral and became less and less confident. They read more slowly and falteringly, were offered (and took) fewer opportunities to read, and consequently got less practice. As the difference between the fluent and less fluent became more salient, those who were less fluent began to actively avoid reading, getting even less practice, which further slowed their progress. Teachers often attempt to deal with this divergence in progress by organising children into reading groups, which makes the differences even more visible and can often enshrine attainment differences, affect friendship and work patterns and reinforce low esteem. Marie Clay (1991) notes that those who are already beginning to struggle may need a different approach but are instead asked to do the same tasks as their more successful peers - only later, more slowly and less successfully.

And there are important socio-emotional side effects of this sort of organisation that teachers sometimes overlook. It is true that seen through one lens, putting children into reading groups that reflect their cognitive skills at a particular point in time makes

sense; it allows teachers to tailor instruction and resources to meet children's needs. However, seen with a different lens, such overt positioning of young children can have detrimental effects and damage self-esteem: everyone knows who is in the 'bottom group'. There is strong evidence that developing a positive learner identity is an important influence on learning (Dweck, 2000; Lamb, 2011). It affects a child's confidence and sense of self, their willingness to 'have a go' at new tasks, and to persist with challenging tasks. It can also affect their friendship groups. With this lens, being five or six months into the first year of school and finding oneself in the 'bottom group' for reading is not a positive start to a child's school career, their view of schooling, of reading or of themselves. Teachers and parents need to be more aware of this.

Community: the importance of belonging

Reading, often portrayed as a solitary activity is however fundamentally social in nature. What children choose to read is often determined by the interests of their social group and reflects the image that they want to portray to others. We can all remember children who would wander round clutching a huge tome of a book - one that they couldn't actually read - because they wanted to 'look like a reader' to others. Fostering reading as a social activity in the classroom requires a fine balance between teaching structures or interference and allowing sufficient social space for children to find or create their own reading communities. Moss and MacDonald (2004) used library-borrowing records to show that, in classrooms where teachers afforded children the social and intellectual space to choose their own books and networks, there was clear evidence of children talking about books, swapping books and developing both their own reader identities. They had intrinsic social motivation for reading and their membership of a particular friendship group in the class was signalled by their reading choices. In classes where the teacher had strong views about what was appropriate for particular children and exercised tight control of what children should read - by prescribing the type of books (genre) and the amount of time they had to finish a book, reading was seen less as a self-directed pleasure and more of a chore. It was not part of the social fabric of the classroom and pupils lacked genuine engagement. The message for teachers is that, in creating reading communities pedagogical attention needs to focus on developing a healthy classroom 'ecology for reading', too much control can

stunt development just as much as too little control, and that it is important to recognise when ‘the sum may be greater than the parts’.

Central to forming a healthy reading ecology in class, therefore, is an empathetic understanding of the social dynamics around reading, the effect of this on how children feel about themselves as readers and how it affects the choices they make. In an earlier ethnographic study, Moss (2000) observed how social status with peers affected book choices. In particular she noted that boys who were struggling readers tended to select non-fiction books as reading material. She interpreted this, not as boys having a natural preference for non-fiction (skilled boy readers preferred fiction), but as boys trying to protect their social status within the class. Selecting a novel would broadcast (through the larger print, fewer words per page, the greater number of pictures) that the child was a low-status, struggling reader. The design principles of non-fiction texts make acceptable the existence of illustrations and fewer words per page, making reading competence much harder to gauge. What this illustrates more than anything else is how important status is to children: their emotional wellbeing depends on it. Teachers need to remember this and consider it as they shape the reading curriculum for the children in their class.

Future directions

We began this chapter by suggesting that reading is never a passive activity and that the texts we read have a real effect on our thinking about ourselves and our society. They contribute to wellbeing by helping us to understand the world and to act in it. We ended by suggesting that the way we teach reading matters too. Practices that forefront the emotional and social needs of children as well as their developing cognitive abilities are more likely to be successful than those that do not, because they build self-esteem, reading identity and growth mind-sets. In designing a literacy curriculum for wellbeing, we need to think about whether we are teaching the reader or the text. We need to think about whether we teach reading skills or a person who is going to become an engaged reader. Dilemmas such as these are serious and fundamental in every curricular area. We have illustrated them in terms of literacy, but we could equally have chosen science, physical education, mathematics or any other area. How teachers choose to teach determines the opportunities we give our pupils but also the opportunities they take up.

These choices can create the spaces that allow our pupils to exercise their agency and grow, or they can constrain and limit what pupils become. We need to make sure the spaces we allow for pupils to grow are big enough, and we need to understand how the nature of the space shapes how and what children become. It is, quite simply, as important as that.

Summary of key findings

- Reading is not just about relaxation. The real benefits in terms of reading and wellbeing come through the thinking we do around the texts we read.
- Challenging texts are more likely to encourage this sort of thinking than others
- Conversations around texts are important, because they are where children learn to think about texts. Teachers need to make sure that ALL children are included in them and that their voices are heard.
- Reading in school is a highly visible social practice: how children think of themselves as readers and how they think others see them as readers really matters.
- Practices that forefront the emotional and social needs of children as well as their developing cognitive abilities are more likely to be successful in encouraging readers than those that do not, because they build self-esteem, reading identity and growth mind-sets

Reflective tasks

- How do texts feature in the curriculum? Are they places where children practice reading skills, or are they places where children learn to think, reflect and wonder?
- Does the range of texts available to children challenge them to think emotionally, socially and politically? What do teachers need to know about children's literature to enable them to answer this question? How and when are they able to learn it?

- Who talks most in the classroom? Whose opinions matter? How do children, already disadvantaged by socio-economic status, and who perhaps have fewer books at home than others, and different home talk practices, learn to engage confidently in literary conversations?
- How does the curriculum and the way it is implemented position children as readers? To what extent does an emphasis on cognitive skills obscure the social and emotional aspects that make reading worthwhile and life-changing?

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