



Route to Reading. Promoting Reading through a School Library: Effects for non-Western Migrant Students

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ROUTE TO READING

PROMOTING READING THROUGH A SCHOOL LIBRARY: EFFECTS FOR NON-WESTERN MIGRANT STUDENTS

Ethnic inequality in school performance is an urgent issue in the Netherlands, as in other Western countries. Primary school students with a non-Western migrant background – who make up a considerable proportion of the total Dutch school population – often face educational disadvantages, especially in language and reading proficiency. This is a cause of concern considering the importance of good language and reading skills for participating successfully in society. The national program *the Library at School* (“de Bibliotheek op School”), which comprises a structural cooperation between public libraries and schools, seeks to promote reading among students by creating high quality libraries in schools and improving the collaboration between public libraries and schools. The program is directed at promoting reading enjoyment, encouraging children to read more, stimulating the students’ reading and language development, and improving their information skills. Although ample studies – mostly conducted outside the Netherlands – have addressed the impact of school libraries, revealing positive outcomes, there is still a lack of clarity as to the effects on children from migrant groups in the Netherlands.

The present research aimed at providing insight into the effects of an integrated library facility in a Dutch primary school’s curriculum on the reading attitude, reading behavior, and reading and language skills in students with a non-Western migrant background. This research consisted of a literature review (Chapter 2) and three empirical studies (Chapters 3, 4, and 5). For the empirical part, we conducted a longitudinal study with a quasi-experimental design, involving 143 students with a non-Western background (grades 2 to 6) of two Dutch primary schools: one with an integrated library facility (i.e., the experimental school, $n = 72$) and one without such a school library (i.e., the control school, $n = 71$). Central was a children’s library in a multicultural neighborhood in the city of Gouda in the west of the Netherlands. Data were gathered over three successive school years (2011/2012, 2012/2013, and 2013/2014), using questionnaires (i.e., the national Monitor the Library at School and additional surveys) and tests (i.e., nationally standardized tests from the pupil monitoring system devised by Cito, the National Institute for Educational Measurement). We first investigated whether the school library had an effect on the *reading attitude and reading behavior* of the students. Secondly, we analyzed whether the school library led to better *reading and language skills*. Thirdly, we focused on the *relationships* between the students’ *reading attitude, reading behavior, and reading and language skills*. When discussing the (effectiveness of the) school library, we basically refer to the school library concept as a whole, which comprises a broad collection, library visits, the presence of a reading and media coach, reading promotion lessons, and reading logs (see Appendix A).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature study, discussed in Chapter 2, aimed to pinpoint what was known and what was as

yet unknown about reducing learning disadvantages through school libraries. According to the literature, it has been established that access to books, as provided by school libraries, results in higher levels of reading. Given the positive relationship often suggested between reading behavior and proficiency in reading and language, school libraries are expected to have the potential to improve these skills. In line with this, a considerable amount of research conducted outside the Netherlands has shown that school libraries are related to better learning outcomes for students in general. Furthermore, it has been established that an increased access to books is related to a higher reading enjoyment, and school library users have been found to hold a more positive attitude toward reading than non-users. Studies conducted outside the Netherlands stress the importance of adequate school library staff and other attributes such as funding, flexible library access, and adequate collections. The relatively limited amount of research on school libraries in the Netherlands has also shown positive outcomes, such as more leisure reading among children, a higher reading comprehension level, and a more positive attitude toward books and reading as well as a growth in youth memberships and book loans.

Despite what we know from these previous studies on school populations in general, as yet little is known about the effects of school libraries’ reading promotion efforts on ethnic minority students in particular. To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that explicitly focused on the impact of school libraries on migrant students in the Netherlands. Research conducted in the United States has suggested that “success factors” of school libraries apply to students of various racial/ethnic backgrounds, and minority student seem to benefit proportionally more from strong school library programs. However, it is not self-evident that these findings apply across different cultural and educational contexts. Moreover, literature that indirectly sheds light on the effects of school libraries on children with a migrant background is not unambiguous. On the one hand, studies have indicated that the home environment – which is usually not that favorable among migrant families in the Netherlands – is of utmost importance, suggesting only a limited impact of (interventions taking place at) other socializing institutions. On the other hand, there are studies suggesting that, besides parents, public libraries and schools do play an important role, and that these institutions can even compensate for a reader-unfriendly home climate. Given the hitherto ambiguous research results, it was not possible to draw firm conclusions about the effects of school libraries’ efforts on non-Western migrant students in particular.

EFFECTS ON READING ATTITUDE AND READING BEHAVIOR

The empirical study presented in Chapter 3 examined whether an integrated library facility in a Dutch primary school had an effect on the reading attitude and reading behavior of non-Western migrant students. On average, the students of both the experimental and control school had a quite positive reading attitude and read fairly often in their leisure time, as assessed through student questionnaires. The *reading attitude* scores on the *utilitarian subscale* were somewhat



higher than those on the *hedonic subscale*, meaning that the students considered reading somewhat more useful than enjoyable. Storybooks and comic books were the most popular reading materials at both schools, whereas picture books and poems and verses were least often read out of six different types of *reading materials*. Non-fiction (informative) books and magazines scored in between. With regard to *reading duration* and *diversity in reading preferences*, children of both schools reported reading on average approximately half an hour a day and they liked four to five different topics on average. Of the thirteen topics presented to them, the children most often preferred to read about sports, creepy things, friendship, animals, and humor.

The study demonstrated a positive effect of the school library on the utilitarian component of the students' reading attitude: Over time, students attending the experimental school considered reading more useful than students attending the control school. Although the experimental school students also considered reading more fun over time, this difference was not statistically significant. We were not able to detect an effect of the school library on the students' reading frequency, nor with respect to their reading duration and diversity in reading preferences. A possible explanation may follow from the fact that the experimental school students were not allowed to take home the school library books they borrowed during school hours.

With regard to the background characteristics of the children it was found for the reading frequency of the six types of reading materials taken together that at the experimental school, the reading frequency of older children increased more over time than that of younger children, whereas the opposite was true for the control school. Furthermore, we also found several direct effects of background factors on both the students' reading attitude and reading behavior. For instance, younger children had a more positive reading attitude and girls scored higher on the hedonic aspect than boys. There were also gender differences with respect to reading preferences and the reading frequency of the different types of reading materials, as well as an age difference in the reading frequency of magazines. The students' reading climate at home was found to be an important predictor of both their reading attitude and reading behavior, with children from families with a more reader-friendly home environment reporting more reading and a more positive attitude.

EFFECTS ON READING AND LANGUAGE SKILLS

Chapter 4 described our second empirical study, which examined whether the integration of a library facility in a Dutch primary school led to better reading and language skills in non-Western migrant students. The students of both the experimental school and the control school scored fairly low on nationally standardized tests assessing their vocabulary size, reading comprehension level, and spelling skills. The results showed a statistically significant positive effect of the school library program on the students' *vocabulary* level, with a higher increase in vocabulary test scores over time for the experimental school than for the control school. However, no effects were found

on the students' *reading comprehension* and *spelling* skills. The positive effect on the vocabulary scores may be related to the reading promotion lessons that were part of the school library program, incorporating components that are suggested to be positively related to vocabulary size, such as reading aloud to the children and creating a word web together. Moreover, when teaching world orientation subjects in class (e.g., history and geography), teachers of the experimental school more often read a book aloud than control school teachers. Perhaps it may also be argued that free reading in class, which happened at both schools, was more strongly related with the students' vocabulary size than with their reading comprehension level and spelling skills, as only their vocabulary scores increased over time regardless of the school.

With respect to the students' background characteristics, the results showed a main effect of age and language spoken at home on the students' skills. As the students progressed through primary school, their performance in reading comprehension and spelling declined compared to the national reference group. Students speaking Dutch at home, or Dutch together with another language, performed better on spelling than students only speaking in a non-Dutch language with their parents. Furthermore, the results showed that the reading comprehension skills of experimental school students growing up in lower educated families improved more over time than those of children from higher educated parents, whereas the opposite was found for control school students. The effects of the school library on the students' vocabulary level and spelling skills, though, did not differ for categories of parental educational level, nor for categories of gender, age, reading climate at home, and language spoken with parents.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN READING ATTITUDE, READING BEHAVIOR, AND READING AND LANGUAGE SKILLS

Research has often shown that the central outcome variables discussed in our two previous studies are reciprocally related, suggesting an upward spiral of causality: Children who hold more positive attitudes toward reading will tend to read more, which translates to a higher reading and language ability. Strikingly, non-Western migrant students – in general as well as the ones involved in our study – report a quite positive reading attitude and read fairly often, although they attain quite low scores on tests assessing their reading and language skills. In our final empirical study (Chapter 5), we examined whether there were relationships between the students' reading attitude, reading behavior, and reading and language proficiency.

We found the children's *attitude toward reading* to be positively related to their *reading behavior*. Students who thought reading is fun and important were more likely to read more frequently and to spend more leisure time on reading. This was especially true for the reading frequency of storybooks. The hedonic component of reading attitude was more important for the students' reading behavior (and vice versa) than was the utilitarian aspect.

The relationships between the students' reading attitude and behavior on the one hand with



their reading and language proficiency on the other, however, were far less evident. With regard to the students' *reading attitude* and *reading and language skills*, we found that children with a higher reading comprehension and spelling level were more likely to consider reading a fun activity. However, after controlling for background factors most results were no longer significant. Furthermore, vocabulary scores were found to be unrelated to the students' reading attitude. Thus, a high or low language and reading ability did not necessarily imply a particularly positive or negative attitude among the students. Our findings with respect to the relationship between the students' *reading behavior* and *reading and language skills* showed that students with a larger vocabulary, and higher reading comprehension and spelling scores reported a higher reading frequency and duration, but most relationships were not statistically significant. We did find that better spellers tended to spend more time on leisure reading, and that students who read more minutes had larger vocabularies, although these significant relationships did not hold after taking into account several background factors. All in all, it was hard to explain variance in the students' language and reading proficiency. Several explanations were put forward, such as a certain language proficiency level that may be needed in order to benefit from reading individually at home, as well as a leisure reading environment at home that may not have been ideal.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Apart from summarizing our main findings, the final chapter (Chapter 6) discussed limitations of the research project and its scientific and societal contribution, as well as implications for future research and practice. Besides several limitations noted around the sample and measurement instruments, it should be kept in mind that the implementation of the school library program in the experimental school could be improved. The library books borrowed during school hours were not allowed to be taken home, a decision made by the school management, while providing reading materials that can be taken home is an important aspect of the national program the Library at School.

In order to get a better understanding of the effects of reading promotion through a school library, for migrant students and students in general, future research should focus on the effects of an optimally implemented school library program. In line with this, future research could examine which aspects of school library programs influence the reading attitude, reading behavior, and reading and language skills. Moreover, it would be advisable to also include native students in the sample to compare the effectiveness of a school library for non-Western migrant children and native Dutch children. Future research could compare migrant students from different ethnic backgrounds as well. The finding that there was hardly any relationship between leisure reading and the students' language and reading skills also calls for more research.

This research underlined the importance of implementing a strong school library program for students with a non-Western background, including providing appropriate books that can be taken

home, the presence of a reading and media coach, and organizing reading promotion activities. Furthermore, our findings suggested that independent leisure reading, as assessed in our study, was not sufficient to significantly improve the reading and language skills in non-Western migrant children. Extra attention for (the most) disadvantaged students in education is and remains important – given that children may need a certain threshold language and reading proficiency in order for reading for pleasure to be effective – and attention should be paid to the 'quality' of the children's leisure reading experiences. Finally, our research stressed the importance of parents as partners for schools and libraries when it comes to reading promotion. Children with a non-Western background are more likely to grow up in less reader-friendly families than native Dutch children. Opportunities should be taken to strengthen the students' reading climate at home and it is advisable to structurally incorporate this element in the school library program. Overall, this research project has contributed to the research literature in different scientific fields and it has provided implications for future research and practice, which can be used to implement more effective reading promotion efforts.