Aston Literacy Project: Reading and Vocabulary in Secondary School

We have been working with a large group of pupils since school-entry, measuring their progress in reading and vocabulary. Some of our participants will start Year 7 at your school in autumn 2018 and we would like to invite these pupils to continue to take part. The project will be conducted by Research Assistants who will visit your school in autumn term 2018, summer term 2019 and autumn term 2019. Before you decide, we’d like to explain why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for your time.

What is the purpose of the study?

Once children are able to read on their own, their reading activity provides valuable opportunities for building vocabulary knowledge. However, children vary in the amount of time they spend reading, and they also vary in their reading ability. We don’t know which of these two factors are most critical for learning new words. Children who read frequently will gain more opportunities for building vocabulary, and so they may learn more words. However, more able readers may be better at using text to learn the meaning of words, even if they don’t read very often. The outcomes of this research will indicate how reading can support vocabulary. Should we prioritise improving reading ability itself, or focus on encouraging children to read more at school and at home?

Why have my pupils been chosen?

Some of your pupils took part in the Aston Literacy Project in primary school. We would like to invite these pupils to continue to take part. It is important to work with previous participants so that we can look closely at progress in the same pupils. This will allow us to make firm conclusions about how reading influences vocabulary.

Do I have to allow my pupils to take part?

You are under no obligation to agree for your pupils to take part and are free to withdraw your school from the study at any time. We are immensely grateful for the support of our participating teachers and pupils, and recognise that there are many pressures on your time.

What will happen if I take part?

If you agree, we will ask you to distribute information sheets to participating pupils and their parents. We already have consent from parents of participating pupils but we will inform them about the study again and explain that they can stop at any time. Research Assistants who hold clear DBS checks will conduct the research in your school. We will ask you to indicate suitable times for the assessments and provide a space for us to work. We can conduct our assessments in a single session of up to 60 minutes or in two shorter sessions, whatever fits best with your timetable. The assessments will measure reading ability and vocabulary knowledge (general vocabulary as well as vocabulary specific to the science curriculum). To measure the amount of time children spend reading, we will include a questionnaire asking about how many books they have at home, how often they read outside and inside school and what they think about reading. Some assessments are done verbally (e.g., reading out loud) and some are done on a computer, with headphones (e.g., in the vocabulary assessments, children hear the words through headphones and point at the corresponding
picture on the screen). For all activities, we record pupils’ responses directly onto a spreadsheet on a computer. We will also invite parents to complete an optional, additional questionnaire about the home literacy environment, and to give their consent for their child to complete a reading diary requiring 5 questions per day for 7 days (10 minutes). Together with the questionnaire we conduct in school, these measures will provide a comprehensive picture of the amount of reading your pupils do at home.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

You may be concerned that participating in this research will interrupt important school activities. We will try to avoid this by working together with teachers to find an appropriate time to conduct our assessments and keeping the assessments as short as possible.

You may be concerned that some pupils will be anxious about the assessments. We find that almost all pupils enjoy doing our activities. But some pupils might feel anxious when they get to difficult items. We try to avoid this by using standardised tests designed for this age group. These tests start with easier items and progress to more difficult items, then stop when the child makes a certain number of errors. Our Research Assistants are experienced in working with children, trained to conduct the assessments in an age-appropriate manner, and to be aware of any signs of reluctance or distress. They will make sure pupils know that they are free to stop at any time. We also make sure pupils know that these assessments are separate from their normal school work, and that we won’t tell anyone how well they did.

You may be concerned about confidentiality. We enter all scores into a spreadsheet labelled by participant numbers instead of names and with a code-number for each school. We store the list of child and school names separately and securely to keep our data spreadsheet anonymous and all information will be processed in accordance with the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). We will produce feedback reports for each school, summarising the range of scores achieved by participating pupils. These reports will not include information about individual pupils and will not be shared with anyone apart from the school and our research team. The names of all participating schools will be listed on our website, but we will never distribute reports detailing school-specific findings to anyone except our teacher contacts from the specific school involved.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Your participation will help us find out how reading influences vocabulary learning and inform future research into ways in which we can support vocabulary learning. We might find that more able readers learn more vocabulary, even if they don’t read very often. If so, then this would suggest that future research should focus on how best to support basic aspects of reading (e.g., decoding / fluency) in secondary school. Alternatively, we might find that pupils who spend a lot of time reading learn more vocabulary, regardless of their reading ability. This would suggest that future research should investigate ways of encouraging pupils to read as much as possible, at school and at home.

We will send you a feedback report soon after we complete the assessments in your school. This will show how the pupils we worked with performed on our standardised assessments of reading and vocabulary, indicating how your pupils are performing, compared to expected levels for UK schools. At the end of the study, we will send you final reports outlining our findings from the full sample, written separately for teachers, parents and pupils.
What happens when the research in our school is finished?

When we finish our assessments in your school, we will add the scores for each of your pupils to our large spreadsheet containing their scores from previous data collection periods. We will then analyse our data, produce reports for participating schools and pupils, write up our findings for publication and present our findings at conferences aimed at academics and practitioners. Anonymised research data will be archived on the UK Data Archive in order to make them available to teachers and other researchers in line with current data sharing practices. No identifiable personal data (e.g., names of pupils or schools) will be shared outside the research team and all information will be processed in accordance with the provisions of the GDPR. We will keep you informed of our activities on our website, and send you any publications arising from the research.

Who has reviewed the project?

The research has been reviewed and received a favourable opinion by Aston University's Ethics Committee.

Who do I contact if something goes wrong or I need further information?

Your main contact is the Principle Investigator, Dr. Laura Shapiro: L.R.Shapiro@aston.ac.uk, 0121 204 4052. You can also ask our Research Fellow Sanne van der Kleij (s.van-der-kleij@aston.ac.uk) who is supervising the data collection, or the Research Assistants working in your school, who will put you in touch with Dr. Shapiro if they can’t answer your question.

Who do I contact if I wish to make a complaint about the way in which the research is conducted?

If you want to make a formal complaint about any aspect of this project, please contact the Director of Governance for the Life and Health Sciences Ethics Committee, Professor John Walter, on j.g.walter@aston.ac.uk or telephone 0121 204 4869.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This project is led by Dr. Laura Shapiro (Principle Investigator; Aston University) and Sanne van der Kleij (Research Fellow, Aston University), in collaboration with Prof. Adrian Burgess (Aston University) and Dr. Jessie Ricketts (Royal Holloway, University of London) and Natalie Walsh (PhD student, Aston University). Project website: www.aston.ac.uk/alp

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