CONTENTS

Reading Books Underpins Digital Literacy Skills

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Earlier this month, a new Pisa report (OECD, 2021) was launched: *21st-Century Readers: Developing Literacy Skills in a Digital World*. The findings of the report relate to the literacy skills of 15-year-old school students in circa seventy OECD countries, and suggest that reading performance is not only of high relevance for education generally, but also for digital literacy. Digital literacy might be defined as follows:

> Digital literacy requires both cognitive and technical skills. It is an umbrella term that includes the ability to assess and create digital work, to navigate effectively in the non-linear medium of digital space, to critique digital content, to be alert to fraudulent digital activity, as well as to understand the social and emotional aspects of socializing and collaborating online. (*Glossary of Key Terms*, Bland, in press)

The OECD report finds that education can make a difference in helping adolescents cope with complexity and ambiguity, but also finds this training is limited or absent in many school contexts. A number of concerning issues have emerged that are relevant for the research area of *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, particularly regarding reading fiction and information literacy. *Information literacy* (in the OECD 21 report included under the umbrella term *digital literacy*) is an important research skill – the ability to recognize the need for objective information, the ability to track down and validate information, and effectively make use of the information found.

The following OECD 21 findings relate to reading in the language of schooling, but are also relevant for English language education and children's literature pedagogy:

1. Students who are not trained in detecting biased information when working online are not able to recognize bias, and consequently assertions become accepted as fact. Only 54% of students receive digital literacy training at school. The report found 'an average of just 9% of 15-year-old students in OECD countries had a sufficient reading proficiency level to be able to successfully distinguish facts from opinions' (Schleicher, 2021, p. 3).

2. The stronger the reader, the more likely they are to search for information by exploring a relevant source with focused attention, then create their own dynamic pathway by navigating to multiple sources in order to distinguish high-quality, credible information and to corroborate information (OECD, 2021, p. 52). However, 'navigation that is too

quick or too slow does not help efficient and effective reading' (p. 63), for too short a time suggests brief skimming and low engagement. The report also mentions that 'quick scanning of a page to spot key information' (p. 65) is actively taught in Germany. A crucial finding was that while the most proficient readers make optimal use of digital technology for reading for information, these strong readers are also those who enjoy reading a book on paper.

3. Whereas the digital technology gap is now progressively closing globally as more and more students worldwide gain access to the internet, this is not the case for access to print books in the home: 'disadvantaged students from OECD countries are increasingly losing the cultural capital of having books in their home-learning environments' (OECD, 2021, p. 140).

4. Reading longer texts for school, and particularly fiction, is associated with better reading performance and a better ability to navigate and evaluate the information flood of the internet, more efficiently construct knowledge and validate viewpoints. Moreover, school has a vital role in enhancing enjoyment of reading, which is now on the decline in some countries. Enjoyment of reading among teachers as well as students is key, and according to OECD 2021 the most pronounced decline in reading enjoyment over the last decade is to be seen in Germany, Finland and Norway (p. 79).

5. More time spent on using digital devices for schoolwork resulted in weaker reading performance in thirty-six OECD countries. The relationship between time spent using digital devices for schoolwork and reading performance was positive in only five OECD countries: Australia, Denmark, Korea, New Zealand, and the United States (OECD, 2021, p. 14).

Covid-19 has taught us that technology can contribute to out-of-school social and emotional well-being. Quiñones and Adams argue (2021, p. 4), for example, 'that digital technology is a tool that contributes to and creates peer cultures and the development of friendships'.

However, social media without sufficient parental/caregiver or school guidance also poses real risks, an argument that Nicholas Carr has developed (2020). Carr makes the significant point: 'Because learning requires strong mental focus and exertion, students are especially susceptible to the brain-depleting effects of smartphones' (2020: 231). The OECD 21 report points to an urgent need for far better pedagogical understanding in the use of digital devices for schoolwork, and that print reading for pleasure must be reinvigorated, and extended to create egalitarian access to books, for the sake of language education, life-long learning, and also for the sake of a well-functioning democracy. Strong readers perform well whether reading in print or reading digitally. However, increasingly school students are not strong readers, and 'disinformation and fake news are jeopardising democracies that function poorly when citizens are not well informed or worse, misled. Disinformation is not unique to digital technologies but the Internet spreads and amplifies its impact' (OECD, 2021, p. 20).

The first article in this issue, Alfes, Guttke, Lipari and Wilden's '"Who controls the past controls the future" Benefits and Challenges of Teaching Young Adult Dystopian Fiction' conducts a discussion on dystopian fiction in ELT, on the basis of current theory and an interview study of English teachers engaged in secondary school teaching in Germany. According to OECD 2021, Germany is one of the countries where the interest in book reading is declining in a pronounced way. For this reason, it is to be hoped that policymakers take note of experienced teachers' perspectives, like those in this article, on the importance of keeping longer and attractive fictional texts in the curriculum.

The second article, Chaehyun Lee's 'Exploring Multicultural Picturebooks in a Heritage Language Classroom' is a qualitative study of the responses of young Korean American children to multicultural picturebooks, in the third grade of a heritage language class. The study found that multicultural literature supported the Korean American children in gaining self-esteem and confidence. The importance of self-efficacy in reading – students' self-perceived ability in reading for understanding – is also reported in OECD 2021: 'Students' general self-concept and reading self-efficacy are also likely to be enhanced through school-based social and emotional learning programmes' (p. 116). As I write this editorial exactly one year after the murder of George Floyd in police custody, I can't help wondering whether the

US mainstream school curriculum continues to be characterized by ethnocentrism and an absence of multicultural literature (and many other countries too, of course).

Next, Emilia Luukka has contributed 'Coursebook Authors on the Role of Literature in Developing Intercultural Competence', an article that highlights the voices of experienced secondary school teachers who are also coursebook authors in Finland. Here too the importance of enthusiasm for reading among teachers themselves is expanded upon, which is also a finding in OECD 2021 (p. 120): 'Together with teachers' enthusiasm, their stimulation of students' reading engagement is the teaching practice most strongly associated with students' enjoyment of reading'.

Another urgent focus in this issue of *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, is the Recommended Reads topic of environmental children's literature. Due to Covid-19, many of us have found peace, solace and a sense of awe through nature – which comes quite naturally to children, who are often still so wonderfully connected to their origins. The Recommended Reads, introduced by David Valente, are a valuable contribution to showing how children can strengthen and extend their connection to nature through environmental literature, which may even become a substantial catalyst for taking action.

Jessica Hanssen's book review of *Using Graphic Novels in the English Language Arts Classroom* by Boerman-Cornell and Kim, published 2020, reminds us of the importance of informed selection of appealing literary texts for the sake of reading enjoyment – and much else – in language education. The Recommended Resource contributed by Alison Hasegawa, Picturebooks in European Primary English Language Teaching (PEPELT) Mini e-Lessons, is also timely, as the foundational introduction to reading enjoyment and academic skills takes place in the primary school, a point that is made in OECD 2021 (p. 33). Secondary schools are not alone responsible for students' enjoying of reading, for primary schools, teacher education and policy makers are all vital actors in promoting book reading as groundwork for digital literacy, other 21st-century literacies, and informed democratic processes.

Many thanks to all who have contributed to this issue!

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