Reading Habits in School

Do students read full bodies of text?

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Abstract

This paper is about reading habits among students in the Swedish Nine-Year Compulsory School. Results from a study with focus on coherent reading of various sorts of classroom texts (textbooks, newspapers, texts downloaded from the Internet, etc) are presented. By “coherent” is meant full bodies of text. All schools in a one of Sweden’s largest municipalities participated in a survey. 1526 students in grades five and eight answered a questionnaire. In the questionnaire, queries concerning the reading of fiction where kept separate from other types of reading material.

The results of this study indicate that students receive little training in the reading of coherent texts in school. The main result shows that more that 20% of the students in grade 5 and about 30% in grade eight fail to read a single coherent page of non fiction text as part of their schoolwork during a normal school day and that more than 50% of the students read less than two pages such text a day. Only a few students are reading a large amount of coherent text. The results are discussed in the light of the good but declining reading results among Swedish students in international comparison.
Introduction and theoretical perspectives

Traditionally most texts at school have been non-fiction but investigations about reading habits in a school context have focused on fiction to a large extent. There are a number of studies of reading habits which concentrate on students’ reading of fiction in school and at home, while studies scrutinising the same students’ reading of other types of texts are far fewer. There is a need to widen that focus and therefore this paper has its main focus on non-fiction.

The present paper presents results from a study which aims to investigate the degree to which Swedish students actually read coherent texts. The term “coherent” is interpreted as meaning full bodies of text rather than text fragments taken from different parts of the text. Against the background of my results and the results of national and international studies in the field, I will discuss possible connections between students’ declining reading skills, reading habits in relation to classroom texts, and the teaching strategies employed.

In this study I have primarily been interested in the degree to which students read non-fiction literature and if they read them in a way which also facilitates a deeper comprehension of the context and possible message conveyed by the text. In order to acquire an understanding of this, I have asked how many pages of coherent text are read by students during class in an average school day. This will include all kinds of text including textbooks, newspapers, texts downloaded from the Internet, etc. My fundamental assumptions proceed from the fact that normally, longer, coherent texts are required in order for something to be explained and presented with any depth and nuance. For students to achieve comprehension and themselves assume a critical attitude, encounter with content of another sort other than which is offered by assorted fragments from various parts of a text.

This study has its starting point in an investigation of the previous inquiry and theory within the area of reading research. Earlier research focused on the cognitive perspectives associated with the way people learn to read. Such perspectives focused on the mechanisms behind the human processes of thought. More recent approaches focus on the socio-cultural perspectives where the context in which the learning takes place is emphasised, and how factors, such as the socio-economic background, culture and classroom environment, can influence learning.1

In my study I combine those perspectives.

The skill to read is today considered to be a complex skill where the learner as an active participant has been the focus and provides the foundation for the concept of reading competence. Research has shown that such competence can look different depending on the kind of text read.2 In this context it is common to consider three different kinds of texts: fiction, non-fiction (factual) and information text.

Reading competence is seen as an active and ongoing process connected to the purposes of the reading. From this perspective reading skill and reading competence is an ever evolving skill, constantly changing in relation to how it is used and for what purposes. The develop-

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ment can be both positive and negative. One aspect of this way to look at reading competence as something dynamic is to question the relationship between acquiring and developing this competence. It is also of interest to investigate how often such competences are used. An assumption in connection to these questions is that students using their competence to a larger extent are also those who have the greatest chances to become and stay good readers. There are previous research findings to support this notion.

Thus conquering and retaining certain reading skills demands constant application. Furthermore, there is increasing rhetorical agreement about the importance of teaching strategies which embrace holism and context. Has this also generated teaching strategies whose results can be detected in students’ text reading? The purpose of the study presented here was to learn more about how students read texts during lessons with the focus on how much of coherent text reading they deal with. This can be important for the kind of learning students will be able to achieve. The amount of text students read is also important for their ability to learn and to maintain reading skills. Knowing more about how much coherent texts students read can also put focus on the kind of teaching that is practiced and if that teaching is adapted to the learning aims of school.

**The Swedish school system and reading competency**

The study was carried out in Sweden among students in the nine-year compulsory school. Most children start regular school the year they turn seven but parents can chose to let their child start a year earlier. Every child has a right to go to school attending 9 grades and is guaranteed teaching for a minimum of 6,665 hours during those years. The compulsory school attendance extends until the student turns 16 but almost all children continue to the gymnasium, the Swedish upper secondary school. The Swedish Education Act states that all children and youths shall have a right to education. To guarantee education to all regardless of social or economic factors, the public education is free from preschool throughout university.

Sweden with a population of 9.1 million has 290 municipalities, the smallest with a population of about 2,500 inhabitants and the biggest with a population of almost 800,000. The municipalities are obligated to develop their own school plans on how their schools implement the curriculum, national objectives and framework established by Government and Parliament. The principal of each nine-year compulsory school has the responsibility to develop their own local school “work plan” and an individual plan for each child how to reach the educational objectives. The public school system is evaluated and followed up by The National Agency for Education which also reports to the Government and Parliament.

On average, Swedish students display a high degree of reading competency, and can be found near the top of international comparisons. In 1991 and 2001, Sweden participated in the extensive The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) study "Progress in International Reading Literacy" (PIRLS) together with thirty-two and thirty-five other countries, respectively. The results indicated that during this time period

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6 IEA is composed of more than fifty countries worldwide and has existed since 1967.

7 Skolverket (National Agency for Education), Barns läskompetens, 30.
between these two studies the results for Sweden had declined in both comprehension and reading speed. Interestingly, these changes in reading results differ somewhat depending on the kind of text employed. Swedish students displayed poorer comprehension when reading fictional texts, but an unchanged or somewhat improved comprehension of informational literature compared to a decade previously. The largest decline concerned the comprehension of non-fiction literature.

Nationally, studies and reports also indicated that the reading literacy of Swedish students had declined since the beginning of the 1990s. Furthermore, Swedish studies indicate that teaching methods had changed during the same period. The new ways of working in school, characterised by independent, self directed study whereby students have wider opportunities to choose what and how they read as opposed to more teacher-directed lessons is based on a rhetoric in which the students are depicted as “knowledge seekers” and “knowledge producers”. Another aspect that makes students reading habits especially interesting is the fact that students in Sweden today are more directed to consider the content of different subjects on their own and are therefore also more dependent on texts for their learning than they were back in the early 1990s. The most common teaching resource seems to be different kinds of texts.

Against this background and general agreements that teaching not be fragmentary and atomised which seems to reign today, it is interesting to investigate just how students read texts in their classrooms. One of the interesting questions is whether they read in a manner which provides access to context and facilitates comprehension and which in turn can make it possible for the student to use the knowledge in a personal and/or social perspective in accordance with the current understanding of literacy.

**Research design**

The main aim of the study presented here was to investigate reading habits among students in the nine-year compulsory school in Sweden. To be able to provide a more reliable result and to give indications on common reading habits for a broad group of students, the investigation was carried out among a large group of students in one of Sweden’s largest municipalities. The chief education officer gave permission to make the investigation among all students in grade 5 and 8. In the chosen municipality there are schools in both highly populated centres and in rural areas and with different socioeconomic settings. Schools in the municipality have a diversified structure and organisation of classes with many multi-graded classes which is common in Sweden. About a fifth of the classes in 5th grade are multi-graded. In the 8th grade this is more uncommon but exists in about 1-2 percent of all Swedish classes.

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8 Mullis et al., *Trends in Children’s Reading Literacy Achievement*, 4-23.
9 Skolverket (National Agency for Education), *Barns läskompetens i Sverige*, 10.
10 Mullis et al., *Trends in Children’s Reading Literacy Achievement*, 16-17.
11 Gustafsson & Rosén, *Förändringar i läskompetens*, 17-35.
13 This municipality belongs to the category “Large cities” (27 municipalities) The definition is: Municipalities with 50,000-200,000 inhabitants and more than 70 per cent of urban area.
The study is based on a survey where students were asked to answer a simple anonymous questionnaire about the number of pages of coherent text they had read (textbooks, newspapers, texts downloaded from the Internet, etc.) during lessons at the end of a normal school day. There were also some background questions, subjects studied and how many teachers the students were taught by and a question about the amount of fiction they had read during lesson the day of the investigation. In the questionnaire, queries concerning the reading of fiction were kept separate from other types of reading material.

All students attending school the day of the investigation in grade 5 and grade 8 at the participatory municipality were invited to take part in the project. The students did not give information about their names and the data cannot be traced to any single student. Ethical considerations were made and the conclusion was reached that there was no potential for distress from this study.

The questionnaires were distributed by the classroom teacher at the end of an ordinary school day. Answering the questionnaire took about 10-15 minutes which included the information and the instructions from the teacher about the survey. The teachers informed the students about the purpose of the study and their participation was voluntary. It was also explained to students what was meant by coherent text in the context of the study. It was explained as text bonded together where the content links together. Furthermore, the students were told that texts on pages sprinkled with pictures where text and pictures form a unit was also to be considered as coherent text and that a page with denominate numbers (written numbers) was not to be considered as coherent text. Fiction was explained as narrative texts, or made up stories.

The data have been statistically analyzed with help of the data analysis tool Excel Pivot Tables. Pivot Tables allows for the creation of multidimensional data views. The primary analysis concerned the number and percentage of pages of coherent text read by students during lessons on a normal school day. The analyses also looked for differences and similarities in reading habits during lessons in different subjects and between boys and girls, but this is not reported in this paper.

**Reading habits during lesson related to non-fiction**

The results are based on answers from a total of 1526 students in the chosen municipality, 828 in grade 8 and 698 in grade 5. The drop off was less than 2 percent of the participating students and are therefore considered not to have had any mayor influence on the main results. There were 92 classes involved in the study within 40 schools in the municipality. The students in grade 8 were in 43 classes and the students in grade 5 were in 49 classes, many of them multi-graded.

In the fifth grade more than 20% of the students did not report reading any coherent non-fictional texts during lessons in a normal school day. If the students that read 1 to 2 pages are added to that figure it indicates that more than half of the students read a maximum of two pages coherent text a day. Less than 15% of the students in grade 5 declare that they read

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15 In an earlier pre-study to this investigation this was not considered and many students therefore added such pages in their estimation.

16 Five schools with only grade 9 and 35 with only grade 5 and nine of the schools with classes in both 5th and 9th grade.
more than 5 pages of coherent non-fictional text and very few of them got to read more than 10 pages of such text during the day’s lessons.

In grade 8 more than 30% of the students did not report reading coherent non-fiction text during their lessons on an ordinary school day. About 60% read 2 or fewer whole pages non-fictional texts and about 20% read more than 5 pages such text where about half of them read more than 10 pages.
Presenting the results in cohorts gives an even clearer picture of these reading habits with a majority of the students normally reading just a few pages coherent non-fiction text or none during their lessons. However, there are some students who read in-between 10 and 19 pages of such texts. To read more than 20 pages text is still unusual but a couple of students in the study reported reading more pages than any student in grade 5.

The percentage of students in grade 5 that read 0, 1-2, 3-4, 5-9, 10-19 or more than 20 pages coherent non-fiction text during lessons an ordinary school day.

The percentage of students in grade 8 that read 0, 1-2, 3-4, 5-9, 10-19 or more than 20 pages coherent non-fiction text during lessons an ordinary school day.
Looking at the diagram for the grade 5 and grade 8 at the same time it is also obvious that the reading habits seem to change from the lower grade to the upper grade. Besides the fact that the group of students that has not read any coherent non-fictional texts during lesson time on a normal school day it also indicates that there has become a polarization between the increasing number of students that do not read at all or just a few pages of coherent text and the increased number of students that actually read many pages. The group of students in the middle which represents those who read more than two pages but less than 10 has decreased between grade 5 and grade 8.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The results show that a large number of students never read any coherent non-fiction texts during lesson time in a normal school day and that about 50% of the 5th and 8th graders never read more than two pages of coherent non-fiction text. These findings are similar to an earlier pre-study made in 2005 among a total of 462 students.¹⁷

The findings will be discussed here on two levels, one highlighting the significance of such reading patterns on a more general basis and on the other looking at possible connections between these findings and the changes in the Swedish school context that was mentioned in the beginning of this paper, namely the lower results in national and international literacy testing compared to earlier results and changes in Swedish classrooms during the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century.

It is no easy task to explain the declining reading literacy of Swedish students. There are likely a number of interacting factors involved in causing this decline. An analysis of the results from the PIRLS studies of 1991 and 2001 shows that a maximum of 20% of the decline can be explained by a change in the composition of age groups. There were more young students among the study population in 2001, as a result of the right of students to start school at the age of six.¹⁸ In Sweden, it is still more common to start school at the age of seven. Since only a small portion of the declining results can be explained by this, and since it has been proven that an increased percentage of students born to immigrant families have no affect whatsoever on the lower results, then the bulk of this deterioration must be explained some other way.¹⁹ In discussing the causes of the declining reading skills of Swedish students, another explanation could be changed reading and computer habits.

Gustafsson and Rosén draw attention to a distinct reduction in library book borrowing by students and the availability of newspapers and books in their homes.²⁰ Similarly, leisure time reading of this form of media by students has decreased. On the other hand, computer use has increased among Swedish children and teenagers, though not for the purpose of reading longer texts. The conclusion which might be drawn from this is that students receive less reading training outside of school compared to ten years earlier, which would result in poorer reading ability. What speaks against this explanation is that less reading seems to be an international phenomenon, but that only Sweden and the United States display deteriorating reading competency in a study of international trends and tendencies, where nine countries which

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¹⁸ Gustafsson & Rosén, 53.
¹⁹ Ibid., 97.
²⁰ Ibid., 98.
participated in the IEA’s 1991 Reading Literacy Study were more closely examined in a replicated study conducted in 2001.\textsuperscript{21}

By dividing reading skills into the ability to assimilate fiction, non-fiction/factual and information texts, it might be possible to discover more precise explanations. In an analysis of changes in reading competence between 1991 and 2001, the overall conclusion reached by Gustafsson and Rosén is that leisure time reading appears to have the greatest significance for the students’ ability to assimilate fiction, while school activity seems to be more significant for the development of the students’ reading ability vis-à-vis non-fiction.\textsuperscript{22} Knowing this it is of special interest to know what is happening at school in the area of non-fiction.

The poorer results of Swedish students in relation to the reading of fiction is plausible to connect with the decline in their reading of fiction outside of school, and even a decline in reading newspapers and comic books. The library book borrowing of Swedish students has furthermore decreased to a much larger degree than in many other countries. The increased and regular use of computers by Swedish children and teens may also reduce the amount of time left for reading books. With a generally downward trend in reading, the training received by the students is reduced, and reading speed and comprehension is influenced negatively, which in turn may affect their desire to read at all. Computer use should, however, explain the generally unchanged results in information reading, which even displays improvements in performance concerning the interpretation of information presented in graphic form. Changes at the beginning of the 21st century when compared to a decade earlier can be understood as an outcome of students regularly coming into contact with information texts via their computers.

The deteriorating non-fiction results of Swedish students seem to be the most difficult aspect to explain and it is also where the decline is at its highest. Gustafsson and Rosén hypothesise that reduction in resources per student in the Swedish school system, partly in the form of teacher qualifications, partly the increasing number of students per class, has influenced the students’ reading competency negatively. They do not say how this would specifically affect the reading of non-fiction text aside from pointing out the particular significance school has for the development of that kind of reading ability.

The results from my investigations of students’ reading of non-fictional texts during lessons indicate that most students receive little or none training in reading coherent non-fiction within the framework of a normal school day. From this I hypothesise a connection between how students read classroom texts in schools today and a decline in reading competency in the area of non-fiction. But against this it can be claimed that the study does not say anything about how it was previously. We know that there has been a change in the way children work at school during the same period of time as this decline in reading competences has occurred. It has become more common for students to work on their own not listening to the teacher or other students’ narratives and presentations. The hypothesis I came up with integrates Gustafsson and Rosén’s theories concerning the significance of resource reductions. During the 1990s, the number of students increased by 3.5 students per class, an increase which displays a strong connection with deteriorating student achievement.\textsuperscript{23} Reduced resource frameworks can have contributed to a change in the shape of teaching strategies employed in classrooms and student work patterns. The concrete changes which can be noted include less use of special teaching aids and workbooks and more independent study, where students are encouraged to seek knowledge on their own.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{21} Mullis et al., Trends in Children’s Reading Literacy Achievement, 16-17.
\textsuperscript{22} Gustafsson & Rosén, 100.
\textsuperscript{23} Skolverket (National Agency for Education). Barns läskompetens, 24.
\textsuperscript{24} Gustafsson & Rosén, 7.
There has also been a broad shift into multi-graded classes based on pedagogical ideas and for economical reasons. In the early 1990s there were about 15% multi-graded classes in grade 3 and about 14% in grade 5. These figures were almost 40% for grade 3 and about 20% for grade 5 around the millennium shift. In grade 8 multi-grouping has not become very common with only a small increase during the same period from 1% to 1.6%. In those classrooms it is very common with students working on their own because the teachers cannot teach all students at the same time and because it has been seen to be beneficial to encourage students to self pace their own learning or work at their own speed. I think that these changes in the classroom work allows for students to choose what to read and how to work with their texts to a larger extent than was before.

A reduced frequency of factual book reading in schools has also been observed. With the classroom texts currently available and the type of reading employed within the framework of the students’ schoolwork today, comprehensive text reading of non-fiction is negligible. Little or only fragmentary reading of factual texts reduces the training the students receive, with poorer reading literacy as the result. One may also assume that the reading patterns I have demonstrated do not encourage the holistic development of knowledge in a variety of subjects either, despite that being the expressed ambition of education.

With decreased reading speed and poorer comprehension, the downward spiral is a fact. Increased aversion to reading reduces the desire to read and with reduced reading, reading competency worsens. The amount of text is significant in order for the students to receive sufficient training, but there are numerous supporting factors significant to the positive development of reading skills. In a recent study of the support provided by the school system for the development of literacy in secondary school and elementary school’s grades four to nine, Liberg and Eklund emphasise the importance of having students introduced to texts through teaching. They insist that this can happen if teaching methods which include metacognitive reading strategies are used and by offering the student the opportunity to discuss his or her own thoughts and ideas about the contents of the text in question. But such strategies seem to be more difficult to use in a time when work on one’s own with text and figures, without any discussion about the subject knowledge content have become a common way of doing schoolwork.

Nils-Erik Nilsson show in a study that students have difficulties in finding literature that suits the understanding they already have. They either chose too advanced or too trivial texts. This in turn often creates problems in gaining consistency and coherency from the reading sources they have at disposal. He also draws the conclusion that many students tend to understand the task to make knowledge on their own as an assignment to find facts. When the students understand their tasks this way it will lead them into a reading that is more a way of just locating some facts, to reproduce, rather than reading the whole text for the purpose of understanding and being able to hold critical viewpoints or to be able to contribute to new ways of understanding.

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26 Gustafsson & Rosén, 66.
28 Vinterek, Monika. (Individualization in an Educational Context.)
The Swedish National Agency of Education presume that when the teachers try to encourage student responsibility and students’ rights they create a teaching and learning context that leaves the students very much on their own to meet with the subject content knowledge. However, this means that Swedish students are often left by themselves to make understanding and meaning out of texts rather than engaging in discussion and guided inquiry. If the students working on their own also skip reading whole bodies of text, which is shown in the present reported study, we might assume it will affect their ability to reach deeper comprehension. The results in the study reported are based on student self disclosure of reading and on their estimation of how many whole pages of coherent text they have read during class. Thus results only relate to what the students said was happening, not necessarily on the actual number of pages read. As such it provides an overview but despite this fact the findings presented in this paper indicate that most students’ reading habits in the Swedish nine-year comprehensive school do not provide optimal reading practice or optimal access to context and does not seem to facilitate comprehension. The study also indicate that there is a need to take note of what guides the choice and extent of students’ reading and the manner in which they approach non-fiction. In regard to the changing in class grouping and the way teachers try to deal with the demands to individualize their teaching, I postulate that student reading patterns have changed during the same period as the decline in reading skills.

I claim that there may be a connection between changes occurring in schools such as fewer teachers, more multi-graded classrooms and a change in students reading habits, resulting in many students not reading or reading very little coherent text during lessons, and the decline in reading competence that has been shown in national and international investigations. I discussed that the reading habits might have changed because student nowadays work more on their own. In doing so they have more choice in relation to what they read and how to make knowledge from their teaching resources. This in combination with students not understanding that their learning tasks are more than simply finding factual information does not encourage them read whole bodies of text. Consequently, the students get less practice in reading which in turn can have a negative affect on their reading ability in general but also specifically on non-fictional text since they mainly practice this kind of reading at school.

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30Skolverket (National Agency for Education). Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003, 120.
Reference


