

SUMMARY

Reading is one of the most important skills in our information society. It is also a well-studied topic in educational research. However, most previous studies have either focused on the cognitive domain of reading (e.g., reading comprehension), or the motivational domain (e.g., reading enjoyment). The research described in this thesis studies both domains as they are inextricably connected. That is, children who enjoy reading are expected to read more during leisure time, and therefore their reading skills will improve. This will in turn contribute to their reading enjoyment. The main aim of this thesis was to examine the possible determinants of individual differences in children's reading enjoyment and comprehension. A multidimensional point of view was adopted. First, individual differences in child variables were considered (Chapters 2, 5, and 7), Second, the contribution of the home literacy environment to children's reading enjoyment and comprehension was examined (Chapter 3, 4, and 5). Finally, the school context was studied (Chapter 2 and 6).

Chapter 1 provides an outline of the theoretical background on reading enjoyment and reading comprehension that is relevant for this thesis. In addition, an overview of the chapters is presented.

Chapter 2 describes the relation between fifth- and sixth-graders' reading motivation and teacher perceptions of their reading comprehension skills. A sample of 160 children self-reported on three dimensions of reading motivation, i.e., reading self-concept, reading task value, and reading attitude. Results showed that these three aspects of reading motivation were all interrelated. Girls scored higher than boys on reading task value and reading attitude, and teachers perceived girls as slightly better readers than boys. Importantly, gender differences were found as well in the relation between teacher-perceived reading comprehension skills and children's reading motivation. In the case of boys, teacher perceptions did not predict reading motivation. For girls, on the other hand, teacher-perceived reading comprehension predicted their reading self-concept and reading task value. These findings suggest that especially girls in the upper grades of primary school are susceptible for teacher perceptions of their reading skills. Therefore, teachers should be aware not to display negative perceptions towards poor readers, as these children might develop a negative reading motivation in response.

Chapter 3 presents the first of three studies that focus on aspects of children's home literacy environment. In the study that is described in Chapter 3, a sample of 452 parents reported on the home literacy activities (e.g., talking about the book the child is reading) that they engaged in with their child in the upper grades of primary school (Grade 3-6). In addition, parents' own reading interest (i.e., their reading enjoyment and habits) was assessed, as were parents' perceptions of their child's reading interest. The results showed that parents indeed still engage in home literacy activities with their older child. However, the frequency of engaging in these activities declines between Grades 3 and 6. Furthermore, when both parents and child were interested in reading home literacy activities took place most frequently. Interestingly, parents who were not interested in reading, but who observed that their child showed reading interest still engaged in as many home literacy activities as parents who were interested readers themselves. In other words, they seemed to let their child's reading interest prevail over their own. This suggests that even parents who are not very interested in reading themselves are aware of the benefits of reading for their children and they seem to want to encourage them to read by engaging in home literacy activities. Finally, a subsample of 89 third and fourth graders was selected, whose parents had participated in the survey study. The children self-reported their reading interest in a personal interview and these self-reports were related to the frequency of home literacy activities reported by their parents. Children whose parents had reported to frequently engage in home literacy activities showed more reading interest. These results suggest that engaging in home literacy activities might positively affect the reading interest of children in the upper grades of primary school.

Chapter 4 focuses on mothers' beliefs about reading as a means to develop the social and moral competences needed for active citizenship. In addition, the educational expectations for their children and the home literacy environment were studied. The home literacy environment was operationalized as the amount of (children's) books available at home, combined with parents' print exposure. A total of 389 mothers of children from Grade 3-6 participated in this study. Mothers with positive beliefs about reading for active citizenship were more likely to expect that their 7-to-13-year-old would graduate from university. In addition, they offered a higher quality home literacy environment. Moreover, mothers' beliefs about reading for active citizenship were found to partially mediate the relation between their educational expectations and the quality of the home

literacy environment. Informing parents about the benefits of reading as a means for developing active citizenship might therefore positively affect the quality of their home literacy environment.

Chapter 5 investigates the relation between third- and fourth-graders' home literacy environment and their reading comprehension. In this relation, the role of two higher-order skills, i.e., mentalizing and expressive verbal ability, and children's print exposure was examined. The study on 117 children showed that a richer home literacy environment (again operationalized as a composite score of the amount of (children's) books at home and parents' print exposure) was related to a higher reading comprehension score. Besides this direct relation, an indirect path was found via children's mentalizing ability, i.e., the ability to infer other people's mental state (including story characters'). This was not the case for the other higher-order skill, i.e., expressive verbal ability. The results indicate that individual differences in primary school children's reading comprehension can partially be accounted for by their mentalizing ability. Mentalizing skills might help children to form or enrich the mental model that they create while reading a story, and this will help them understand the story better. The home literacy environment can positively affect the development of children's mentalizing ability. Another indirect relation between home literacy environment and reading comprehension ran via children's print exposure. In other words, children from a rich literacy environment were familiar with more books that are appropriate for their age-group than children from lower-quality literacy environments. This in turn predicted their reading comprehension.

Chapter 6 reports on a study among 152 first-year students at a university of applied sciences for primary school teachers. The study focused on first-year pre-service teachers' own reading enjoyment and reading habits in relation to the quality of their teaching. Pre-service teachers who reported to be enthusiastic readers possessed more books, and recognized more authors of both adult and children's literature. In addition, enthusiastic readers had on average more knowledge about classroom practices that effectively promote literacy than their non-enthusiastic peers. Finally, pre-service teachers' expectations of their own reading behavior as a teacher were compared before and after their first semester at university. A difference was found between the two reader types. The enthusiastic readers showed a greater increase in their awareness of the

importance of reading a lot as a teacher than the non-enthusiastic readers. This study implies that teacher education programs should aim to enhance pre-service teachers' reading enjoyment, in addition to teaching them literacy teaching practices. This might positively affect the quality of their literacy teaching.

Chapter 7 presents a quasi-experimental study on the role of children's mental imagery skills when reading a narrative that includes pictures. Fifth-graders' comprehension of an experimental book version in which words were partly replaced by pictures was compared to the performance of children in two control groups. The 150 children all read one of three story versions: (1) an *experimental picture version*, in which the story was partly told by words, and partly by pictures that replaced some textual information; (2) a *pictures-and-text version*, which included the same pictures as in the experimental version, plus the complete text of the story; and (3) a *text-only version*, which consisted of the complete text of the story and no pictures. The results showed that children with lower imagery skills had problems understanding the experimental narrative version. They may not have been able to create a coherent mental model, based on information from both pictures and words. The ability to integrate these two sources of information seems to appeal for mental imagery skills. The results imply that teaching children effective visual literacy and mental imagery strategies might help them to understand stories better.

Chapter 8 presents the main findings and conclusions of the thesis in the light of the aims described in Chapter 1. Furthermore, the implications for schools, teacher education, and parents are discussed. Finally, an example of an intervention for primary schools is presented, which was developed in line with the findings in this thesis. The thesis shows the value of taking multiple perspectives, i.e., child-, school-, and home-factors, into account, when examining the reading enjoyment and comprehension of children in the upper grades of primary school. The findings shed more light on how to support children to develop good reading comprehension skills, and, more importantly, a life-long love for reading.