Do German-Speaking Children
Have a Chance to Overcome Reading and Spelling Difficulties? A Longitudinal Survey from the Second Until the Eighth Grade

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In a longitudinal study the development of reading and spelling abilities of 458 Viennese school children from the second until the eighth grade was analysed. Although the students' level of performance displayed a great consistency with poor readers and spellers retaining their weaknesses, groups of students whose performance either improved or deteriorated with time were also identified. Not only cognitive prerequisites, but also the classroom behavior of the students and social factors proved to be significant for the long-term prognosis.

Introduction

The question of the long-term prognosis for children who show reading difficulties in the first years of elementary school has received little attention so far in the German-speaking countries. This lack of attention could lead to the conclusion that a large part of these children is later able to read fairly well, and shows only a problem concerning reading speed and spelling, a view held by Schenk-Danzinger (1968) regarding dyslexic children. Indeed, early studies from the English-speaking countries gave reason for optimism regarding the further development of dyslexic children. These studies, however, were carried out on relatively small samples partly of above — average intelligent children from socially well — situated families. Later studies, using more representative selections of children and more objective determinations of reading skills, demonstrate a less favorable prognosis (Schonhaut & Satz, 1984; Watson, Watson, & Fredd, 1982). The well-known English Isle of Wight study concluded that the backwardness
of children with reading difficulties, which amounted to two and a half years at the age of 9-10, doubled until the age of 14-15 to five years, and that only a small percentage of these poor readers achieve average reading skills as adolescents (Rutter, Tizard, Yule, Graham, & Whitmore, 1976). A similarly high continuity of reading difficulties was also determined in a longitudinal study by Satz, Taylor, Friel, and Fletcher (1978) in which the development of reading abilities was measured over a few years from the beginning of school.

For several reasons, it is questionable as to what extent findings from Anglo-American research can be applied to the learning of the German written language. On the one hand, the school systems differ significantly: unlike American and British pupils, children in German-speaking countries, for example, do not start school before the age of 6. On the other hand, the grapheme-phoneme correspondence of the German language shows a greater regularity than that of the English language. Due to this reason, greater importance is attached to an early systematic introduction of the grapheme-phoneme correspondence in the initial reading instruction of German-speaking schools. It would thus not be surprising, if the differences between the children in their reading skills — at least their basic decoding skills — prove to be relatively small and the reading difficulties less stable than in the Anglo-American region.

Independent of the issue of how stable the reading difficulties of German-speaking children are, the reasons for the continuing reading difficulties are of concern. This question can be answered — among other things — by comparing pupils who later make up for initial reading difficulties with those who do not.

Earlier studies, also almost exclusively from the Anglo-American region, pointed out that, aside from pupils with persistent reading difficulties, there are other pupils whose reading skills fall behind in the upper grades, or pupils who overcome initial difficulties later. In the longitudinal study of Satz, Taylor, Friel, and Fletcher (1978), many children were found who showed no reading difficulties in the lower grades of elementary school but who fell behind in the development of their reading skills and had to be described as weak in terms of their reading skills at the age of 11-12. Other longitudinal studies, however, report that — over a longer period of time — pupils who overcome their difficulties and become average readers can be identified (Forrell & Hood, 1985; Cox, 1987).

Only a few studies so far have pursued the question in which domains the children who overcome their difficulties differ from those who do not. According to Forrell and Hood (1985), the extent of the backwardness in performance is important for the prognosis. Pupils with little reading difficulties seem to have a chance to overcome their difficulties, whereas children with greater handicap do not. If extreme groups like children, whose reading difficulties have improved and children with continuous reading difficulties are compared, it can be seen that the children's learning motivation, their school behaviour as well as the social situation in the classroom influence the long-term prognosis (Cox, 1987).

No empirical results were reported in any study with respect to the question of why students, showing no initial difficulties in learning to read deteriorate in the upper grades. Satz et al. (1978) assumed that the reason for the increased reading difficulties in the upper classes was the decreased emphasis on the fostering of reading. They did not, however, examine the way in which the students with declining reading performance differed from the other students.

The present study deals with the question of how reading and spelling skills develop in German-speaking schools. Reading and spelling skills are first analyzed at the beginning of elementary school and then followed up until the eighth grade. The question concerning the long-term stability of the reading and spelling difficulties is of great practical importance, since it determines the degree to which special remedial measures are offered to the students with poor reading and writing skills. From the statements of Schenk-Danzinger (1968), it was deduced that remedial services could be limited to the second and third grades.

In the first part of this paper, the development of the reading and spelling performance from the second until the eighth grade was examined. To allow conclusions on the stability of inter-individual differences and in particular on the persistence of reading difficulties, the development of reading performance in children whose performances differ greatly at the