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Are Reading Rates Declining Among U.S. Schoolchildren?

ABSTRACT: Spichtig, Hiebert, Vorstius, Pascoe, Pearson, and Radach (2016) claim that reading rates have declined in the past 50 years in the United States, making today's schoolchildren "less efficient than their 1960 counterparts" in reading (p. 252). I argue that their data, along with other studies on reading rates, show no such decline.

KEYWORDS: *reading rates, reading speed, test score decline*

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Introduction

Reports of declining test scores among American schoolchildren appear frequently in the popular press (e.g., WFSA, 2018). Yet a considerable amount of evidence suggests that many of these stories of falling test scores are false (e.g., Bracey, 2000; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). There is ample evidence that we are not, in fact, experiencing a "literacy crisis" in the United States (Krashen, Lee, & Lao, 2018; McQuillan, 1998) in spite of an increasing diverse student population (Tse, 2001).

In some cases, claims of decline are based on data that have other, equally plausible interpretations. An example of this is the supposed decline in reading rates reported by Spichtig, Hiebert, Vorstius, Pascoe, Pearson, and Radach (2016). Spichtig and colleagues suggest that reading rates have declined in the past 50 years in the United States, making today's schoolchildren "less efficient than their 1960 counterparts" in reading (p. 252). This decline is thought to be part of a larger pattern, in which the "academic achievement of U.S. students in lagging behind in relation to other nations" (p. 254). Their conclusion is based on a comparison between data they collected in 2011 and data drawn from a 1960 survey of reading rates (Taylor, Frackenpohl, Morris, and White, 1960, reported in Taylor, 1965).

In this brief comment, I argue that (a) there are too many unknown variables that may have influenced the results of the 1960 survey to draw any firm conclusions from it, and (b) other data suggest that reading rates may have actually increased or stayed the same over the past two generations.

Three Reading Rate Studies

There have been three large studies done on reading rates among U.S. schoolchildren over the past 50 years, with data collected in 1960 (Taylor, et al., 1960), 1971 (Gallo, 1972), and 2011 (Spichtig et al., 2016). Results from the three studies are summarized in Table 1. Each study used different sampling criteria, and not all studies tested at every grade level.

Table 1: Reading Rates in Words Per Minute for U.S. Students in 1960, 1971, and 2011

Grade	1960	1971	2011
2	115		116.1
4	158	117	147.8
6	185		164.2
8	204	173	169.9
10	224		186.6
12	250	194	187.5

Taylor et al. (1960). Taylor and colleagues collected data from a large sample (N = 12,143) of students, grades one through college, testing approximately 1,000 students at each level. The Tyler sample, while large, was not collected with an eye towards being representative of all U.S. schoolchildren. The children were selected to represent the "average socio-economic level for the area" of the participating school districts, with no

more than 10% of the sample coming from private or parochial schools (1960, cited in Spichtig et al., 2016). The researchers measured reading rate, comprehension, and eye movements while reading. In deter-mining reading rates, Taylor et al. controlled for comprehension by only using data from students who obtained an adequate score (70% or higher) on a passage comprehension test.

Their data showed that students progressed in reading speed in increments of roughly 20 words per minute as they moved from grade to grade. Grade 1 reading speed was 80 wpm, while 12th grade readers read at 250 wpm (Taylor, 1965, Table 2, p. 193).

Gallo (1972). A second study was conducted by Gallo as part of the first administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 1971. As is typical for NAEP exams, a nationally representative sample was used for the testing. Unlike Taylor et al., however, Gallo did not control for reading com-prehension ability, and only grades 4, 8, and 12 were tested. Student reading rates ranged from 117 wpm at grade four to 194 wpm in grade 12.

Spichtig et al. (2016). The most recent study on reading rate was a partial replication of Taylor et al. (1960) by Spichtig et al. (2016) conducted in 2011. Like Taylor, Spichtig and colleagues measured reading rate, comprehension, and eye movements for a large sample (N = 2,203) of students, but limited their study to grades 2, 4, 5, 8, 10, and 12. The researchers attempted to stratify their sample to reflect the current demographics of U.S. schools, but it was not a random sample. Their data indicated that reading rates rise from grades 2 to 6, plateau until grade 8, then rise again through grades 10 and 12.

Choosing a Comparison Group: 1960 or 1971?

As seen in Table 1, if you compare Spichtig et al.'s 2011 results with those from Taylor's 1960 sample, reading rates do appear to have declined at all grade levels tested except grade 2. The two studies used nearly identical methodologies, and both controlled for reading comprehension ability. But the differences in sampling make any conclusion of "decline" very tenuous: Taylor's selection criteria sought, at best, to be provide a representative sample at the district level, while Spichtig et al. attempted to create a sample that was representative (in demographic variables) at a national level.

This means that Taylor's subjects may have come from higher socioeconomic status (SES) groups than later samples. Participants in Taylor's study thus may have had more access to books, and are more likely to have been good readers (Krashen, 2004). Students living in poverty typically have fewer reading resources or models, live in neighborhoods with poorly stocked public libraries (Newman & Celano, 2001), and are enrolled in schools with inadequate classroom and school libraries (McQuillan, 1998).

While Spichtig and colleagues note the weaknesses of the 1960 data, and recognize that better controls for demographic variables are needed, they defend their use of Taylor's sample as a comparison group. They note that while no demographic data are available for Taylor, the 19 states from which Taylor drew his sample "provided a fairly representative sample of the U.S. population at that time" according 1960 U.S. Census data (p. 242). For this to be true, however, we'd need to know that (a) the samples within a given state were representative of the demographics of the entire state, and (b) the distribution of the sample across states was proportional to the demographic features found in the entire set of states. It seems unlikely that either condition was met, given the description of how schools were targeted by Taylor and his colleagues.1

If we instead use Gallo's (1972) data as a basis for comparison, there is little evidence of a decline in average reading rates. If anything, there may have been an improvement in rates among younger readers. The average grade 4 reading rate rose from 117 in 1971 to 147.8 in 2016. Estimates for grades 8 and 12 are somewhat higher in the 1971 data than the 2016 estimates, but the differences were very small (grade 8: 173 in 1971, 169.9 in 2016; grade 12: 194 in 1971, 187.5 in 2016). Remember that of the three

studies, only Gallo's sample was a random, stratified sample representing the entire U.S. student population.

Carver (1989) pointed out that the 1971 NAEP results reported in Gallo likely overestimated student reading rates, since no control was made for passage comprehension. About a third of the fourth graders, for example, read at rates below 100 wpm, and about a third of those students scored less than 70% correct on the comprehension measure. Com-prehension-adjusted estimates would have been lower than the estimates reported, making the difference in rates between the 1971 and 2011 samples even larger in favor of the 2011 students.

Conclusion

Using a different sample as the basis of comparison, we find an equally plausible but opposite interpretation of the data on how reading rates have changed over the past 40 to 50 years than that provided by Spichtig et al (2016). Using results from the 1971 NAEP exam, we find that reading rates may have increased among younger readers, and stayed the same among older readers.

This interpretation is also consistent with the trends in NAEP reading achievement scores. NAEP reading scores were significantly higher in 2012 than they were in 1971 in grades 4 and 8, and the same as a generation ago in grade 12 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Increases overall in U.S. reading achievement are likely to have a positive impact on reading rates as well. Given the greater diversity of the U.S. student population in 2011 versus 1971, especially at the high school level, rising and/or stable achievement is an impressive achievement by U.S. schools.

Note

1. Spichtig et al. (2016) also claim that we can have some confidence in their findings because there was "good agreement" between Taylor's results and those obtained by Gallo's (1972) representative sample (p. 255). But an inspection of the data shows otherwise: rates at grade 2 differ by 41 wpm or 25%, at grade 8 by 31 wpm or 15%, and at grade 12 by 56 wpm or 22%.

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