

TEXT MESSAGING AND LITERACY – THE EVIDENCE

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The aim of the book was to collate the evidence on text messaging and literacy across samples of different ages and drawn from different populations. In reviewing the empirical work, this book addresses the many assumptions of parents and educators arising from the considerable negative media coverage on this topic. For example, that text messaging is responsible for declining levels of literacy in children and young people. It is refreshing to read a balanced review on this topic and to see that there is no empirical basis for the media claims and in contrast that text messaging may support children's literacy skills.

This book will be useful for psychology academics teaching language and communication within developmental, cognitive or social psychology units by introducing the impacts of modern technology and changing times to the traditional coverage. Also, the book will be a good source of material for those academics teaching cross-disciplinary units on Psychology or Computing degrees, such as CyberPsychology or Social Computing. Of interest to teachers and educational psychologists are a section covering the way that children with dyslexia and adolescents with Specific Language Impairment use text, and a section on using texting as an educational tool. The book will also be of use for academics and researchers wanting to investigate this topic; the authors summarise clearly issues needing research and useful materials are included which can be adapted such as questionnaires and coding guides.

The book is structured in a logical and easy to follow way, starting with an introduction to the rise of texting and media coverage and then evaluating existing research investigating the link between children's reading, spelling and texting. The review focuses on the traditional meaning of literacy (relating to written language skills) rather than other 'litteracies' that mobile phones can potentially impact upon (e.g. digital literacy). The coverage is balanced in highlighting the negative impacts (e.g. providing examples of poor grammar) and also positive impacts (e.g. providing evidence for the facilitation of literacy development). The authors relate these impacts to the wider context of understanding the mobile phone behaviour of children, adolescents and young adults. Based on the data available the authors list 19 findings summarising what is known regarding the impacts, for example: 'children who demonstrate the greatest knowledge of text abbreviations (textisms) also demonstrate better knowledge of conventional spellings' 'children who use the most textisms when asked to write a text message also have the best reading ability' 'it is better for children to text a smaller rather than a larger network of friends, if phone use is to impact on their phonological awareness' and 'there is little evidence that children are 'addicted' to mobile phones'.

I was impressed by the way the authors evaluated and discussed research methods throughout, but in particular they devote a chapter to methodological issues. This chapter reviews the strengths and weaknesses of the different techniques used to elicit, collect and interpret texts. The authors cover self report, observational and experimental methods and ways to analyse include counting, categorising and thematic analysis. The chapter will be of great use to researchers to interpret work already conducted and to help them plan future studies in a way that allows them to draw the most meaningful interpretations from their data.

The final chapter discusses lessons learned and suggestions for future research, e.g. including very young (i.e. pre-literate) children in studies. As with any discussions on the impacts of technology, the findings can be out of date as soon as they are published (e.g. the age that children are given access to ever more advanced phones is constantly changing). As such, there is a need for longitudinal work to identify changes to the existing impacts and identify new impacts. Indeed, some of the findings reviewed in the book come from research conducted by the authors in 2009 and this is recognised and they note that as the book was going to press they were completing a longitudinal study on texting and grammatical understanding in children and adults. I think the concluding sentence summarises where we are now at as a result of the work reviewed in this book:

“young people who text are not passive, mindless consumers of text trends with vulnerable minds, but the architects of a new creative form of communication which continues to evolve” (p101).

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