



Being a Reader The relationship with gender

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April 2008**

Anyone who is aware of the media coverage may be forgiven for believing that British boys have reading difficulties, leave school with few or no qualifications and fail to fulfil their potential. Although the headlines exaggerate the problem, there is consistent evidence that boys' achievement lags behind that of girls – a trend that is international¹. In England the discrepancy is particularly evident in English, where statistics show that boys' performance is lower than girls' in all literacy related tasks and tests, and a significant percentage of boys is not attracted to reading. In 2005, Government figures indicated that 76% of 11-year-old boys reached the expected level 4 in English, compared with 85% of 11-year-old girls.

Various policy drives and projects have sought both to improve boys' levels of attainment and to encourage them to develop a love of reading. In May 2007, the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned the School Library Association to create a list of 170 book titles to encourage boys aged 11 to 14 to read for pleasure. The initiative, called Boys into Books, included a one-off offer of funding from the DfES for all state secondary schools in England with boys on roll to choose 20 free books from the list for their school library. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) funds the National Literacy Trust (NLT)'s Reading Champions initiative, which uses the motivational power of male reading role models to inspire other boys and men to read more. The DCSF also provides for initiatives such as Bookstart in England, which gives free books to all babies to help them discover the fun of reading.

Meanwhile, the academic performance of boys in schools, particularly in the area of literacy, remains a topic of growing concern to researchers and educators. There are a plethora of explanations in the literature for the apparent underachievement of boys, including discussions of biological and cognitive differences, differential parental treatment, changing masculinities, the assessment system, the school curriculum and styles of teaching and learning. One factor that influences an individual's literacy practices is the extent to which they see themselves as readers, or the reader self-concept. According to Henk and Melnick (1995: 472): "How an individual feels about him or herself as a reader could clearly influence whether reading would be sought or avoided, the amount of effort that would occur during reading, and how persistently

¹ Eg The 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) found an average 17-point difference in performance between boys and girls, rising to 19 points in England (Twist et al., 2007).

comprehension would be pursued.” Studies have typically found that boys have more negative attitudes to reading and possess more negative reading self-concepts than girls (Clark and Foster, 2005; McKenna et al., 1995).

A lot is made of the reluctant or disengaged male reader and it was therefore of interest to us to explore the connection between gender and seeing oneself as a reader. Are there significant differences between reluctant boy and reluctant girl readers? And if so, what are these differences and what could be done to address them? The present study therefore investigated the views of 516 boys and 626 girls who defined themselves as readers, and 270 boys and 201 girls who did not define themselves as readers. This report forms a companion piece to the full report of the study, *Young people’s self-perceptions as readers: An investigation including family, peer and school influences* (Clark, Osborne and Akerman, 2008).

Methodology

Reading Connects is an initiative delivered by the NLT on behalf of the DCSF. It supports schools in building whole-school reading communities. Schools that had signed up to Reading Connects by April were contacted by email to invite them to participate in this survey. Of the 46 schools that initially expressed an interest, 29 schools – over 1600 pupils - took part in the online questionnaire. In addition to being emailed the link to the online questionnaire, teachers were also sent guidance on how to administer the questionnaire. The analyses in this report are predominantly based on basic descriptive statistics (such as frequency distributions) and two-way cross-tabulations. The data in this study were analysed using SPSS 13.0. Any result for which statistical significance is reported was significant at the conventional probability level of 0.05. This means that the result would be likely to occur by chance only a few times in every 100 cases. In line with Hall and Cole (1999), however, some judgement is needed about the educational significance of these findings.

Findings

Self-perception as readers and enjoyment of reading

In line with existing literature, a significantly greater number of girls than boys in the study saw themselves as readers (54.8% and 45.2%, respectively) and indicated that they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot. As in a previous NLT survey (Clark and Foster, 2005), boys and girls rated themselves as equally proficient readers. While boys and girls who called themselves readers were significantly more likely to rate themselves as proficient readers than boys and girls who did not, there were no significant gender differences within the 'reader' group or within the 'non-reader' group in pupils' perceptions of their reading abilities.

When asked how often they read outside of school, a greater percentage of girls than boys, in both the reading and non-reading groups, stated that they do so every day or almost every day, while a greater proportion of boys than girls stated that they never or

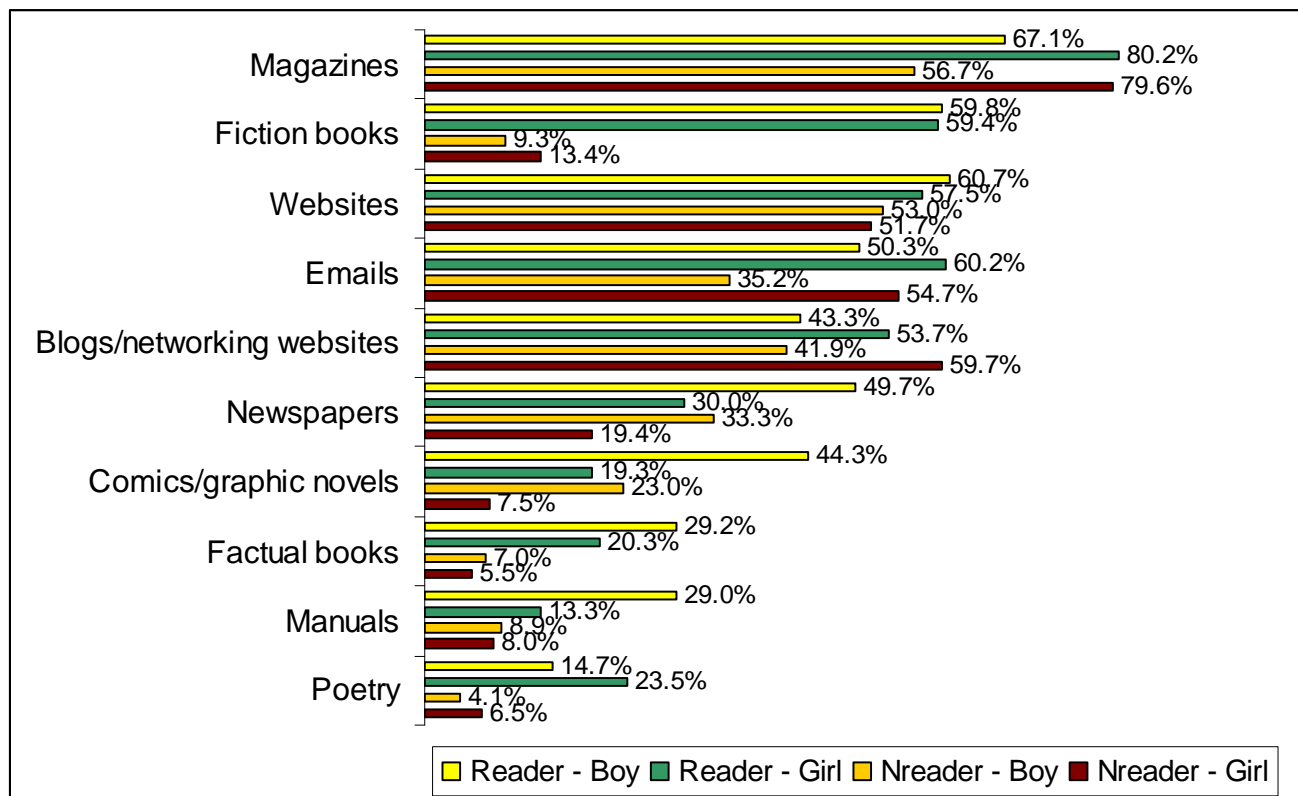
almost never read outside of school. Again, there were no significant gender differences within the 'reading' and 'non-reading' groups.

Types of reading material

Gender affected the types of material being read outside of school, again in line with previous research. A significantly greater percentage of reading and non-reading girls than the equivalent boys said that they read magazines, fiction books, email and blogs/networking websites (*Figure 1*). Conversely, a significantly greater percentage of reading and non-reading boys than their female counterparts reported reading newspapers and comics/graphic novels. A significantly greater percentage of reading boys than girls also indicated that they read factual books and manuals. Notably, magazines were the most popular reading material for all groups, with around 80% of girls and over half of boys stating that they read them outside school, regardless of whether they described themselves as readers. Emails and websites of various kinds were also popular, with blogs/networking sites most popular among *non-reading* girls; indeed, they were as popular with this group as fiction books were among both boys and girls who saw themselves as readers.

These results are striking, because they show that young people who do not describe themselves as readers are still reading a variety of materials, even in the case of many of the boys; the big difference is simply that those who do not call themselves readers do not read fiction books. Indeed, further analysis shows that only 3% of pupils reported that they did no reading outside of school at all.

Figure 1: Which of the following do you read outside of school more than once a month?



How reading makes you feel

When asked how reading makes them feel, a significantly greater percentage of girls than boys indicated that reading makes them feel calm and happy. Conversely, significantly more boys than girls (7.2% and 4.3%, respectively) chose the 'none of these' option. While readers in general associated more positive feelings with reading, and non-readers reported more negative feelings, there were no significant differences between boys and girls within the reading group or within the non-reading group.

How a 'reader' is perceived

Gender had an impact on what pupils perceived readers to be like with a significantly greater percentage of girls than boys perceiving readers to be clever/intelligent and someone who will do well in life. By contrast, a significantly greater percentage of boys than girls believed a reader to be geeky/a nerd.

When the results were broken down there were significant differences between the groups. Among the readers, a significantly greater percentage of girls than boys perceived readers to be clever/intelligent, someone who will do well in life and someone who is happy. Conversely, a significantly greater percentage of boys than girls saw readers as geeky/nerds. Among the non-reading group, a significantly greater proportion of girls than boys believed that readers are clever/intelligent, but also thought that a reader is someone who does not go out much.

Overall, there was only one significant gender difference in perceptions of what materials a reader enjoys, with a significantly greater percentage of girls than boys believing that a reader enjoys poetry. When these results were broken down, a significantly greater proportion of boy than girl readers believed that a reader enjoys newspapers, comics/graphic novels and manuals. By contrast, a significantly greater proportion of girl than boy readers thought that a reader enjoys poetry. A significantly greater proportion of non-reader girls than boys believed that a reader reads poetry and factual books.

When asked whether reading is more of a girls' thing, more of a boys' thing or for everyone, more boys than girls indicated that it is more for girls (14.3% and 11.0%, respectively), while a greater number of girls than boys said that reading is for everyone (87.4% vs. 81.8%). It appears that this disparity results from the perceptions of the group of non-readers, where a significantly greater percentage of non-reading boys (24.1%) than girls (13.0%) believed that reading is more of a girls' thing. Conversely, non-reading girls were more likely than boys to see that reading is for everyone (82.0% vs. 71.4%). There were no significant differences between boys' and girls' perceptions on this point within the group of readers.

How important is reading?

Interestingly, a significantly greater percentage of boys than girls indicated that, for them, reading is more important than TV and listening to music. Conversely, a significantly greater proportion of girls than boys stated that reading is more important for them than computers or computer games. There were no significant gender differences in terms of the importance of sport and hanging out with friends for the

pupils. When these results were broken down, the differences indicated above appear to result from the group of readers. None of the differences between boy and girl non-readers was statistically significant.

Gender continued to exert an influence when pupils were asked to assess the importance of reading compared with other activities in order to do well in life. A significantly greater percentage of girls than boys stated that reading is more important than sport to do well in life, while a significantly greater proportion of boys indicated that reading is more important than hanging out with friends and listening to music.

When the results were broken down, a significantly greater proportion of reading girls than boys stated that reading is more important than sport to do well in life; while a significantly greater proportion of reading boys believed that reading is more important than hanging out with friends and listening to music. Among the non-readers, a significantly greater proportion of non-reading boys than girls also said that reading is more important than hanging out with friends to do well in life.

Family

Although girls were more likely than boys to state that their mum (or step-mum/carer), dad (or step-dad/carer) and brother/sister think that they are a good reader, these differences were not statistically significant. Similarly, although girls were more likely than boys to indicate that their mum (or step-mum/carer) encourages them to read, this difference was not significant.

When the differences between readers and non-readers were considered, a significantly greater percentage of boy than girl non-readers said that nobody in their family thinks that they are a good reader, while a significantly greater percentage of girl than boy non-readers indicated that they did not know whether anyone in their family thinks so. #

Friends

Girls generally believed that their friends had a more positive picture of what readers are like than boys. More specifically, a significantly greater percentage of girls than boys thought that their friends view readers as clever/intelligent, someone who wants to do well in life and as happy. The assertion that their friends viewed readers as clever/intelligent and someone who will do well in life held for both reading and non-reading girls. Conversely, a significantly greater percentage of boys than girls – even the boys who saw themselves as readers – believed that their friends see readers as geeky/nerds, although non-reading girls also held this belief. A significantly greater percentage of non-reading boys than girls thought that their friends see readers as boring.

Discussion

This survey backs up the existing evidence that girls are more likely to describe themselves as readers and are more likely to read outside school than boys. This was true even for the girls who do not call themselves readers. The finding underlines the

need to continue to target boys specifically to help them find things they enjoy reading, and to work to make reading something that can be seen as fun, since it has to compete with many other activities that may currently be seen as more enjoyable.

The findings about which materials young people read should provide encouragement for those working to engage children in reading. They show that almost all young people are already reading some kinds of texts outside of school, giving scope to build on their interests. Teachers wishing to promote reading to pupils who do not perceive themselves as readers may wish to bear in mind that newspapers and comics/graphic novels seem to appeal particularly to boys, and magazines, blogs/networking websites and emails particularly to girls.

While much research, policy and practice has focused on the male reluctant reader in the past few years, the self-defined non-reading girl has frequently been overlooked. This survey's findings about how readers are perceived are significant, because while they provide perhaps little that is surprising regarding the views of boys who do not see themselves as readers, they also give a picture of the 'non-reading' girls. These girls are likely to say that reading makes them feel bored, and that a reader is someone who is clever and will do well, but is also boring and doesn't go out much. It is also noteworthy that on the question of how important reading is, in almost all the categories, it was the non-reading girls who were least likely to agree that reading is more important than other activities either now or for the future, although the gender difference was not usually significant. The implication, though, is that to these girls reading is something for other, 'clever' people – perhaps people whom non-reading girls would never aspire to imitate.

Knowing that almost all self-defined non-reading girls do still read, the answer may not be in attempting to persuade these girls that they are readers after all, or in launching a 'Girls into Books'-type initiative to mirror the existing one for boys, but rather in simply encouraging them to read what they enjoy, while promoting a wide range of materials to them. Schools need to consider working to change the stereotypes of the girls in a similar way that they do with the boys to avoid the self-defined female non-readers feeling neglected. This could involve drawing on key components similar to those that seem to motivate the boys, such as rewards and competition, but also using the strong penchant of girls towards social and verbal interaction to create a buzz around reading.

There may also be some scope for promoting reading role models for girls, in the same way that male role models have proved successful in encouraging boys to read. Indeed, this survey provides evidence that such role models should continue to be promoted to boys too, since even many reading boys hold the view that a reader is a geek, and there is still a proportion of boys who think that reading is more of a girls' activity. To have a chance of changing young people's perceptions of readers, it is important to find role models whom boys and girls genuinely want to imitate. There is some evidence from practice that deliberately targeting those boys within a school who have influence over their peers – whether positive or negative – and encouraging them to be positive role models, can have a positive effect². The disparity between readers and non-readers in their perceptions of the importance of reading could be addressed by work to help young people formulate their aspirations and the steps needed to achieve them,

² See www.basic-skills.co.uk/sharingpractice/detail.php?SharingPracticeID=1574481296 for an example. Retrieved 23.11.2007.

including developing their reading skills. Where it is possible to involve parents in this process, this is likely to have a positive effect.

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