

## The impact of age on pupils' reading

Since the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy in 1997 there have been concerns that rising standards in education were being undermined by a curriculum which focused on results and left little scope for attitudinal, or 'soft', outcomes. These criticisms became more prominent as rising schools standards reached a plateau and levelled out, with around 20 percent of pupils still not meeting government targets in reading. The reasons behind young people's motivations towards reading have subsequently become a key area for research and policy.

Research has looked at a range of factors that may affect an individual's enjoyment of reading, and there are increasing numbers of initiatives designed to reengage the reluctant reader. The influence of gender, family, and role models are perhaps the most discussed issues, and these areas have seen significant levels of research and policy activity. However, there are clearly other factors that play a role in determining children and young people's attitudes and motivations, such as age.

Recent US research by Scholastic showed that older children are reading less than their primary school counterparts.<sup>1</sup> The results showed that while 30 percent of children in the five to eight age bracket read every day, only 17 percent of 15 to 17-year-olds did the same. More strikingly only eight percent of children aged five to eight read less than once a week compared to 37 percent of 15 to 17-year-olds.

The study also looked at children aged nine to 11 and 12 to 14. Results for these two groups were fairly similar, 22 percent were daily readers and 23 percent read very rarely. On the surface this suggests a sharp drop in reading motivation between the ages of eight and nine, and, 14 and 15. However, it is unlikely that the percentage of children reading regularly decreases so rapidly between those ages. It is more likely that a gradual slide as children grow older was not picked up properly in the age groups used in the study.

To ascertain whether a similar set of results would exist in a UK context, the National Literacy Trust (NLT) looked back over the data gathered for the Young people's self perceptions as readers research and analysed whether there were significant differences related to age. The recent research paper *How does age relate to pupils' perceptions of themselves as readers?* summarised the results.<sup>2</sup>

The study was divided into primary and secondary school children. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the overall trend was the same as in the Scholastic study, with younger children reading books more regularly than their older counterparts. There are a multitude of possible reasons to explain why younger children read more, including more parental involvement in their education and fewer social freedoms, however, simply highlighting the number of hours spent reading books weekly ignores other, potentially more significant, findings.

As the title of the work suggests the focus is on readers self perceptions. In some instances this gives possible clues to why some pupils feel disengaged from reading. For instance, secondary pupils who described themselves as non-readers were significantly more negative than primary non-readers when asked if their family felt they were a good reader, or if people in their family encouraged them to read. Interestingly, more reading and non-reading primary pupils believed that their friends viewed readers

---

<sup>1</sup> 2008 Kids & Family Reading Report, Scholastic (2008)

<sup>2</sup> *How does age relate to pupils' perceptions of themselves as readers?*, Clark, 2008

National Literacy Trust is a registered charity, no. 1116260, and a company limited by guarantee, no. 5836486. Registered address: 68 South Lambeth Road, London SW8 1RL. Registered in England and Wales.

favourably than their secondary counterparts. More specifically, they believed that their friends saw readers as happy people with lots of friends, suggesting that negative stereotypes of readers are perhaps not embedded at primary age.

There is a further trend within the results which could have implications for future policy and practice. Despite secondary pupils having more negative attitudes towards readers, they are actually reading more non-traditional materials than primary pupils. This is particularly true of websites, emails, blogs and newspapers.<sup>3</sup> While the reasons behind this may be as simple as secondary pupils having greater access to technology, it is nonetheless significant. Secondary pupils who describe themselves as non-readers are reading, and reading regularly. However, they have embedded negativities towards reading, or at least the reading they believe is promoted in school. Indeed, in the Scholastic study children of all ages identified a lack of interesting materials as a reason for not reading more.<sup>4</sup>

It is worth re-iterating that both reading and non-reading primary school children have generally positive attitudes towards reading, and this is something that policy and practice needs to work to protect. Using the evidence that secondary school pupils are reading non-traditional materials as a starting point, there would appear to be two interlinked methods to ensuring positive attitudes are retained.

Firstly, a widened definition of reading and the promotion of all forms of reading to pupils, teachers and parents. Understanding that screen based reading is not a different skill set to traditional reading should help to dispel the myth amongst older pupils that reading is for 'geeks' and to be avoided. There is also the possibility of using older pupils to mentor younger pupils and to help them with new media. The understanding from both older and younger pupils that this is a valid form of reading would imbed reading as an everyday activity regardless of whether or not it is a school set text.

Both the Scholastic research and the NLT analysis of UK data demonstrate that there is a relationship between age and reading motivation. When non-traditional forms of reading are considered it is less clear is that older pupils are actually reading less. Therefore, practical interventions should consider working with the interests of children and young people to both safeguard the attitudes of younger readers and re-engage secondary age pupils.

George Dugdale, policy adviser  
National Literacy Trust, October 2008

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> 2008 Kids & Family Reading Report, Scholastic (2008)

National Literacy Trust is a registered charity, no. 1116260, and a company limited by guarantee, no. 5836486. Registered address: 68 South Lambeth Road, London SW8 1RL. Registered in England and Wales.

Tel: 020 7587 1842. Email: [contact@literacytrust.org.uk](mailto:contact@literacytrust.org.uk). Website: [www.literacytrust.org.uk](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk).