

**National
Literacy
Trust**

**Young people's self-perceptions as
readers:**

**An investigation including family, peer
and school influences**

Christina Clark, Sarah Osborne and Rodie Akerman

**National Literacy Trust
January 2008**

Executive summary

Recent developments in literacy teaching and research have tended to focus on the technical aspects of reading. However, studies continue to highlight the importance of the affective aspects of reading, such as motivation and attitudes, and the reader self-concept.

This study of over 1,600 Key Stage 2 (KS2) and Key Stage 3 (KS3) pupils explored young people's perceptions of themselves as readers and aimed to challenge assumptions of what it means to be a reader. Some of the key questions explored in this survey included the extent to which young people see themselves as readers, what it means to them to be a reader, what characteristics they typically assign to readers, what materials a reader enjoys and the extent to which these perceptions are shaped by their family, friends and school.

General findings

Reading habits:

- The majority of young people (58%) enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot and rate themselves as proficient readers. Girls enjoyed reading more than boys. Most young people read on a weekly basis, either every day or once/twice a week.
- A great majority (71%) of young people also defined themselves as readers. More girls than boys saw themselves as readers.
- Magazines, websites and emails were read most frequently outside of school, while poetry manuals/instruction and factual books were read least often. More girls than boys read magazines, emails, blogs/networking websites and poetry, while more boys than girls read newspapers, comics/graphic novels and manuals/instructions.

Reader perceptions:

- Most pupils associated reading with positive feelings, such as feeling calm and happy. A third of pupils said that reading makes them feel bored, while only a small percentage saw reading as stressful or an activity that makes them nervous. More girls than boys said that reading makes them feel calm and happy.
- When asked to imagine someone who enjoys reading, most pupils viewed readers positively and as achievers. A third of pupils believed that readers are geeks/nerds, while a quarter perceived them to be boring. Girls perceived readers differently from boys, believing that readers are clever/intelligent and someone who will do well in life, while boys were more likely to view readers as geeky/nerds.
- Unlike their own reading preferences, the majority of young people believed that readers enjoy fiction books, followed by magazines, poetry and factual books.

Emails and blogs/networking websites, which were among the four most read materials outside of school, were considered materials enjoyed by a reader by only a minority of young people. There were no gender differences in their assessment of what types of material a reader enjoys.

- Most pupils believed that being a good reader means being able to read long books, to read frequently and to read different materials. Nearly half of them also believed that it means being able to read long words and to be good at reading aloud. Pupils had similar views of what it means to be a reader irrespective of gender.
- Most young people believed that reading is for everyone, with only a small percentage stating that reading is more of a girls' activity. There were no significant gender differences in the degree to which they saw reading as a gendered activity.
- While only a small percentage of young people saw reading as more important than TV, sport, computers/computer games, hanging out with friends and listening to music, these perceptions changed dramatically when they were asked to consider the impact of reading to help them do well in life. In this case, nearly half of them believed that reading is more important than TV and more important than computers/computer games. More boys than girls believed that reading is more important than TV and listening to music at the moment, while more girls than boys believed that it is more important than computers/computer games. These differences remained when asked to assess the importance of reading to do well in life. More girls than boys indicated that it is more important than sport, while more boys than girls believed that reading is more important than hanging out with friends and listening to music.

School influences:

- Nearly half of young people did not know whether adults in their school thought that they were good readers, while two-fifths thought they did. More boys than girls believed that adults in their school think that they read well, while a greater percentage of girls than boys did not know what adults in their school think about their reading.
- To gauge their perception of the types of materials promoted at school, pupils were asked which texts adults in their school encouraged them to read. Contrary to their own reading choices, but in line with their perception of the materials a reader enjoys, young people believed that adults in their school encourage them to read fiction books, factual books and poetry. There were no gender differences in the types of materials boys and girls feel are promoted by schools, with the exception that more girls than boys indicated that adults in their school encourage them to read fiction books and poetry.

Family influences:

- When asked whether anyone in their family thinks they are a good reader, most young people said that their mother believes that they are a good reader, followed by their father. However, nearly a sixth of pupils stated that no one in their family thinks so. There were no differences between male and female pupils in their perceptions of how good a reader their family thinks they are.
- Most pupils also indicated that their mother encourages them to read, while considerably fewer said that their father or sibling encourages them. Nearly a quarter of young people believed that no one in their family encourages them to read. There were no gender differences in the level of encouragement to read.

Peer influences:

- Young people were generally uncertain whether their friends are readers or not and whether their friends believe that they are good readers. Most also indicated that their friends do not encourage them to read. More girls than boys indicated that their friends are readers and that their friends believe that they read well and encourage them to read.
- The materials they believed their friends are reading largely mirrored their own reading choices, with magazines, websites and emails being the most frequently chosen texts. More girls than boys stated that their friends read a variety of reading materials.
- Their perceptions of how their friends view readers also closely resembled their own views of readers, with the majority of young people believing that their friends perceive readers to be clever/intelligent and someone who will do well in life. However, compared to their own assessment, a larger percentage believed that their friends see readers as geeky/nerds. More girls than boys stated that their friends view readers more positively.

The reader self-concept

Whether young people saw themselves as readers or not greatly impacted their reading habits, reader perceptions and their perceptions of family, friends and school influences. For example,

- Young people who defined themselves as readers rated themselves as more proficient and indicated reading more frequently outside of school. Nearly half of self-defined non-readers stated that they never read outside of school.
- Self-defined readers endorsed a greater variety of texts, with magazines, fiction books and websites being the most frequently read types of reading material. In contrast, self-defined non-readers indicated reading magazines, websites and blogs/networking websites most frequently outside of school.
- Self-defined readers associated reading with positive feelings, such as feeling calm, while non-readers associated reading with negative feelings, such as boredom and stress. Self-defined readers also view readers differently, seeing them as being clever/intelligent, while self-defined non-readers had a more

negative view of readers, believing them to be geeks/nerds, boring and someone who does not go out much.

- More self-defined readers than non-readers believed that being a good reader means reading long books and words, reading often, reading different materials and being good at reading aloud. Conversely, a greater percentage of non-readers said that it would annoy them if someone said that they were good readers.
- Reading played a greater role in the life of readers, with more self-defined readers than non-readers stating that at the moment, reading is more important than TV, sport, computer games, hanging out with friends and listening to music. These differences persisted when asked to evaluate the importance of reading to do well in life.
- More readers than non-readers also believed that adults in their school think they read well and promote texts, such as fiction books, factual books and poetry.
- A greater percentage of self-defined non-readers than readers believed that no one in their family thinks they are a good reader and that no one encourages them to read.
- More self-defined readers than non-readers believed that their friends are readers, that their friends think they are good readers and that their friends encourage them to read. Compared to non-readers, readers were also more likely to indicate that their friends read a greater variety of texts and that their friends have a positive view of reading.

Gender and the reader self-concept

A lot of attention has been focused on the male reluctant reader and we therefore also explored the connection between gender and seeing oneself as a reader. Of note is that there was generally more divergence in the responses between reading boys and girls than between their non-reading counterparts. These findings include:

- Both reading and non-reading girls indicated that they read more outside of school than their male counterparts. For example, more reading and non-reading girls than boys said that they read magazines, fiction books, emails and blogs/networking websites, while more reading and non-reading boys than girls stated that they read newspapers and comics/graphic novels.
- Compared to reading boys, more reading girls believed that readers are clever/intelligent, someone who will do well and is happy, while more reading boys than girls saw readers as geeky/nerds. With respect to non-reading young people, more non-reading girls than boys believed that readers are clever/intelligent and someone who does not go out much.
- More non-reading boys than girls believed that reading is more of a girls' thing. More boy than girl readers believed that reading is more important than watching TV and listening to music, while more girl than boy readers indicated that reading is more important than computer games. There were no such differences between non-reading boys and girls. Differences between reading boys and girls persisted when they were asked about the importance of reading

to do well in life. There was only one significant difference between non-reading boys and girls, with more non-reading boys than girls saying that reading is more important than hanging out with friends.

- There were few differences between the groups in terms of materials they believe adults in their school are encouraging them to read. Compared to their male counterparts, both reading and non-reading girls were more likely to indicate that adults encourage them to read fiction books and poetry.
- Non-reading boys were more likely to say that no one in their family thinks they are a good reader, while non-reading girls were more likely to indicate that they did not know what their family thinks about their reading.
- Unlike their non-reading peers, who did not differ significantly in the extent to which they said that their friends were reading, more reading girls than boys said that their friends read. More reading girls than boys and more non-reading girls than boys also indicated that their friends think that they are good readers. There were no differences amongst the groups in terms of peer encouragement to read.
- More reading boys than girls stated that their friends read magazines, websites, emails and fiction books, while more reading boys than girls said that their friends read comics/graphic novels, newspapers and manuals. Conversely, more non-reading boys than girls stated that their friends read magazines, emails and blogs/networking websites, while more non-reading girls than boys did not know what their friends were reading.
- Both reading and non-reading girls were more likely to believe that their friends view readers differently from their male counterparts.

The present research raises a number of implications in a climate that is literacy-focused. Firstly, those who make and implement policy should be cautious about encouraging children and young people to become 'readers' and to be known as and see themselves as such, when many do not see being a reader as something desirable. Our research has highlighted the importance of young people's perceptions of what it means to be a reader and how these perceptions appear to shape their reading habits.

The importance of changing these perceptions is particularly relevant because of the discrepancies between the materials that children and young people think a reader reads, or think that their school encourages them to read, and the reading matter they choose for themselves. It is striking that large numbers of even those who do not consider themselves readers *do* read; the important point is that they do not often read fiction. They are also less likely than the 'readers' to recognise that a reader may read a wide range of materials. As indicated above, those working to encourage reading in the home, as well as reading for pleasure, may find it helpful to bear in mind that the top reading materials outside school are not those the children believe their schools encourage, books and poetry, but rather magazines, websites and emails. Policymakers and practitioners may wish to consider whether non-book reading materials are

sufficiently valued as having a contribution to make to educational development and attainment.

Meanwhile, schools also need to consider the extent to which they encourage their pupils to read for enjoyment and, moreover, the range of reading materials that they promote. It is noteworthy that pupils in this study, who tended to perceive that their schools encourage them to read books and poetry, all attended schools that had signed up to our Reading Connects initiative (www.readingconnects.org.uk) and that were, in theory, promoting all forms of reading.

This research also highlights the existence of a group overlooked by current policy drives: namely, girls who do not see themselves as readers. 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. The implication, again, is that reading is something for other, 'clever' people. 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 that for boys, but rather in simply encouraging them to read what they enjoy, while promoting a wide range of materials to them: something that is also important for those girls (and indeed boys) who report that they do not read at all.

Of interest is the finding that when 35 professionals from research policy, practice and the media were interviewed by the NLT about a range of literacy issues for the coming year, most interviewees believed that reading for pleasure is not currently a "hot" topic but most certainly should be a focus of attention in 2008 (NLT, 2007). The National Year of Reading provides an ideal opportunity to promote the value of many different kinds of reading, not only for enjoyment but also as having a contribution to make to educational development and attainment.