



Boys' Reading Commission

The report of the All-Party Parliamentary Literacy Group Commission. Report compiled by the National Literacy Trust.

National
Literacy
Trust

A photograph of a stack of open books in a library. The books are arranged in a stack, with the top book being the most prominent. The pages are white and the spines are dark. In the background, there are wooden bookshelves filled with many books, creating a sense of a large library. The lighting is warm and focused on the books in the foreground.

*Only 1 in 4 boys read
outside of class every day.*

National Literacy Trust research

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Executive summary | 4 |
| Foreword – Gavin Barwell MP | 5 |
| Introduction | 6 |
| Chapter 1. Mind the gap – understanding the challenge | 8 |
| 1.1 Girls have better reading test results than boys | |
| 1.2 Girls are enjoying reading more than boys | |
| 1.3 Girls are spending more time reading than boys | |
| 1.4 Reading affects writing | |
| 1.5 The educational gender gap is widest in literacy | |
| 1.6 The gender gap is an international issue | |
| 1.7 The gender gap is a long-term trend | |
| 1.8 Summary | |
| Chapter 2. Issues in the school system | 12 |
| 2.1 Boys' reading is a top concern for many schools | |
| 2.2 A feminised workforce | |
| 2.3 Gendered responses to the curriculum and assessment | |
| 2.4 The impact of curriculum texts on boys' reading | |
| 2.5 Teachers' knowledge of books and reading materials | |
| 2.6 Decoding and comprehension | |
| 2.7 Teaching the mechanics of reading vs. reading for enjoyment | |
| 2.8 Schools' current solutions | |
| 2.9 What really works in schools? | |
| Chapter 3. The home environment | 18 |
| 3.1 The vital role of families | |
| 3.2 Involving fathers as well as mothers | |
| 3.3 Male reading role models | |
| 3.4 How can policy support the home environment? | |
| Chapter 4. The impact of gender identity | 20 |
| 4.1 Biological factors | |
| 4.2 Does their gender identity discourage some boys from reading? | |
| 4.3 Reading loses out to other leisure activities | |
| 4.4 What texts will boys choose to read? | |
| 4.5 The role of libraries in creating a male reading culture | |
| Chapter 5. Conclusions and recommendations | 24 |
| 5.1 Why some boys underachieve in reading | |
| 5.2 What is the solution? | |
| 5.3 Recommendations to Government | |
| Appendix - Summary of evidence | 27 |

The Commission

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Executive summary

- Boys' underachievement in reading is a significant concern for schools across the country. In a National Literacy Trust survey, 76% of UK schools said boys in their school did not do as well in reading as girls. 82% of schools have developed their own strategies to tackle this.
- The issue is deep-seated. Test results consistently show this is a long-term and international trend. Boys' attitudes towards reading and writing, the amount of time they spend reading and their achievement in literacy are all poorer than those of girls.
- Boys' underachievement in literacy is not inevitable. It is not simply a result of biological differences; the majority of boys achieve in literacy and are fluent readers.
- The Boys' Reading Commission has found that boys' underachievement in reading is associated with the interplay of three factors:
 - The home and family environment, where girls are more likely to be bought books and taken to the library, and where mothers are more likely to support and role model reading;
 - The school environment, where teachers may have a limited knowledge of contemporary and attractive texts for boys and where boys may not be given the opportunity to develop their identity as a reader through experiencing reading for enjoyment;
 - Male gender identities which do not value learning and reading as a mark of success.
- There is no single solution to turning underachieving and unmotivated boys into readers; a sustained approach is required. It needs to encourage positive gender identities that value reading, develop a supportive social context for boys' reading and counteract the possible negative triggers that can turn boys off reading.
- A refreshed commitment in schools to promoting reading for enjoyment will strongly benefit boys, who want to read around their interests. To enable this to happen reading for pleasure needs to be an integral element in a school's teaching and learning strategy and teachers need to be supported in their knowledge of relevant quality texts that will engage all pupils. There is a specific danger that a predominantly female workforce will unconsciously privilege texts that are more attractive to girls.
- The issues undermining the achievement of some boys in reading are closely related to issues faced by other underachieving groups. It follows that strategies in schools, homes and the community which will benefit boys will also have considerable benefit for girls and impact on the attainment of groups frequently identified as underachieving. The Commission recommends that boys' reading is seen as a litmus test of a school's commitment to addressing underperformance in literacy of other groups.

The Commission's Recommendations

1. Schools should have access to an evidence framework to inform effective practice in supporting boys' reading.
2. Every child should be supported by their school in developing as a reader. Crucially, schools must promote reading for enjoyment and involve parents (overtly fathers) in their reading strategies.
3. Every teacher should have an up-to-date knowledge of reading materials that will appeal to disengaged boys.
4. Parents need access to information on how successful schools are in supporting boys' literacy.
5. Libraries should target children (particularly boys) who are least likely to be supported in their reading at home.
6. Social marketing and behavioural insight need to be deployed to encourage parents to support the literacy of their children – especially boys.
7. Every boy should have weekly support from a male reading role model.
8. Parenting initiatives must specifically support literacy and fathers.
9. A cross-Government approach to literacy needs to be developed and coordinated.



Foreword

By the time they reach school, many boys are already lagging behind in literacy: at age five, there is a gap of 11 percentage points between boys' and girls' achievement in reading. More and more boys struggle with reading and literacy as they progress through the school system and by age 16 girls are matching, or more often outperforming, boys in every GCSE subject except for construction. Boys are also less likely to enjoy reading and less likely to spend time reading outside of class.

The Boys' Reading Commission has found that while this literacy gender gap has been around for a very long time, the issue is becoming more pressing. The National Literacy Trust's survey of schools across the country carried out for the Commission this year found that three-quarters of schools are worried about boys' underachievement in reading, while the gap between how much boys and girls enjoy reading or choose to spend time reading is widening.

Literacy is a significant issue for all: a recent CBI study found that many employers are providing basic skills training for their school leaver recruits due to the demands of an increasingly complex workforce and the Government has rightly focused on ensuring all young children have the necessary decoding skills.

However, specific action is required to address the gender issue. Boys with poor literacy will struggle at school and throughout life. We need to act to ensure all our children fulfil their potential and contribute to making the UK economy globally competitive.

So what is making boys more likely to struggle with reading? The Commission has found it is not biological and therefore not inevitable. Not all boys struggle with reading and while the literacy gender gap is seen internationally, there are notable exceptions including Chile and the Netherlands. Something we are doing as a society is making boys more likely to fail at reading.

The Commission has found that the gender gap begins in the home, with parents supporting boys very differently from girls. In school, what is taught and how it is taught and assessed all impacts on boys' achievement, while boys' gender identities, influenced by society's expectations and reinforced by their peers, can negatively impact on their attitudes to reading, the amount of time they spend reading and ultimately their reading skills. Unfortunately it is those boys who are least likely to be socially mobile who are often most vulnerable to these triggers. For example, white working-class boys are one of the groups with lowest achievement in literacy.

The gender gap is certainly a complex issue – and one with no silver bullet or one-size-fits-all solution. The good news is that initiatives to address boys' reading will in most cases also support girls who are disengaged and struggling with their reading.

I hope this Commission's report will help to raise wider awareness of this issue and inspire parents across the country, as well as informing the teachers and librarians who are already working hard to meet this challenge.

Gavin Barwell

Gavin Barwell MP



Gavin Barwell MP
Chair of the All-Party
Parliamentary Literacy
Group and the Boys'
Reading Commission



Introduction

Research consistently shows a gender gap in children's reading. Boys' attitudes towards reading and writing, the amount of time they spend reading and their achievement in literacy are all poorer than those of girls. The test results speak for themselves: at age seven, there's a gender gap of 7 percentage points in the proportion of pupils reaching the expected level in reading, and at age 11, it's 8 percentage points; by age 13, the gap has increased to 12 percentage points, and by GCSE, for achievement at grades A* to C in English, the gap is 14 percentage points.

Boys' underachievement in reading is a significant concern for schools across the country. In a National Literacy Trust survey¹ of UK teachers, 76% said that boys in their school did not do as well in reading as girls. Reassuringly, despite the absence of a national framework or strategy to address boys' reading, 82% said that they currently have strategies in place to support boys' reading, and 49% said that they have developed different strategies for particular groups of boys – for example, avid readers and reluctant readers, less able readers and older children.

The Boys' Reading Commission is a joint venture set up by the All-Party Parliamentary Literacy Group and the National Literacy Trust to investigate the scale of the problem in the UK and try to establish why boys are falling behind. It looked at what approaches are successful and how boys are being effectively supported. This report presents key recommendations for how this challenge needs to be met through schools, libraries and local areas.

A wide range of evidence has been used, including:

- A review of relevant research²
- A review of policy
- A survey of UK schools and early years settings
- Interviews with schools that do not have a gender gap
- A focus group with boys aged seven to nine years
- An expert witness session at the House of Commons

The risks of focusing on boys' reading

There are obvious sensitivities when discussing boys' underachievement in reading. Boys are not a homogenous group; they are not all failing. In focusing on this issue there is a danger that we can overemphasise and make it a self-fulfilling prophecy; arguments that imply boys are not expected to be good or enthusiastic readers are simply reinforcing it as a social norm. However, the long-term impacts of low literacy have such a massive influence on future life chances that we feel it is our responsibility to address the issue and unpick the evidence.

We must also be careful not to disadvantage girls who struggle with reading. However, existing research³ and the findings of this Commission suggest that approaches that effectively support boys are equally girl-friendly. They are perhaps better thought of as quality teaching.

¹The survey was conducted online between mid-January and mid-February 2012. Findings are included in Clark, C. and Burke, D. (2012) A review of existing research conducted to underpin the Commission, National Literacy Trust, <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/boys>.

²Clark, C. and Burke, D. (2012) A review of existing research conducted to underpin the Commission, National Literacy Trust, <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/boys>.

³Younger and Warrington (2005) Raising Boys' Achievement, London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR636.pdf>.

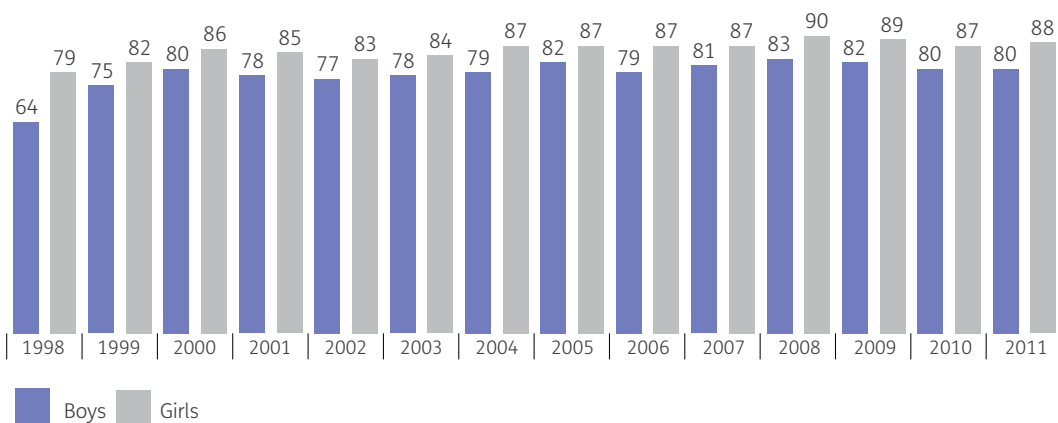


Understanding the challenge

1.1 Girls have better reading test results than boys

Attainment data for England consistently shows girls outperforming boys in reading, with the gap remaining relatively stable from the early years to GCSE level over the past decade. At the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy in 1998, only 64% of boys were reaching the level expected for their age at the end of primary school compared with 79% of girls, a gap of 15 percentage points. By 2000, the gap had been closed to 6 percentage points, but since then it has remained pretty static at this crucial stage of education, meaning 20% of boys (and 12% of girls) start secondary school unable to read at the expected level.

Figure 1: Proportion of pupils at Key Stage 2 (age 11) reading at the expected level between 1998 and 2011, by gender (%)



The evidence suggests that the gap is not simply a result of how schools teach children to read. The foundations are laid early: girls achieve higher levels than boys at the age of five in all areas of learning according to Early Years Foundation Stage profiling⁴. In 2011, there was a gap of 11 percentage points between boys' and girls' achievement in reading at age five (71% of boys working securely within level for age vs. 82% of girls).

Between ages five and seven the gap narrows significantly: at age seven (Key Stage 1) in 2011, 89% of girls achieved the expected level in reading, compared with 82% of boys⁵. However, from then on it increases again. At age 14, girls are outstripping boys in English by 12 percentage points. And at GCSE, again in 2011, 59% of boys achieved A* to C in English, compared with 73% of girls⁶. In fact, the gap between girls and boys receiving grades A* or A across all subjects is now at its widest since the top grade was introduced in 1994; in English, 21% of girls achieved A* or A, compared with 12% of boys.

1.2 Girls are enjoying reading more than boys

Girls not only outperform boys in reading tests, they are also more engaged with reading than boys at very many levels. A 2011 National Literacy Trust survey⁷ of nearly 21,000 eight to 16-year-olds showed that boys are not only more likely than girls to struggle with reading but they are also more likely to only enjoy reading a little or not at all (56% vs. 43%). This gap in reading enjoyment is corroborated by numerous other studies that all show that boys enjoy reading less than girls⁸. PISA (2009) also showed that across OECD countries, just over half of 15-year-old boys (52%) said they read for enjoyment⁹ compared with nearly three-quarters of girls (73%).

Comparisons with data from 2005 show there has been a widening of the gap in the proportion of boys and girls who enjoy reading very much or quite a lot. This is due to boys enjoying reading less now than they did in 2005. In 2005, there was a difference of 11 percentage points between boys and girls (57% of girls said they enjoyed reading vs. 46% of boys); this increased to 13 percentage points in 2011 (57% of girls vs. 44% of boys).

⁴ <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001033/sfr28-2011v2.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001022/sfr22-2011v2.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/aug/25/gcse-results-2011-exam-breakdown>

⁷ Clark, C. (2012 forthcoming) Young people's reading in 2011: Findings from the National Literacy Trust annual survey (to be published online in August 2012, http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research)

⁸ For example, Hodgson (2008) in *Practical Research for Education*, available at http://www.nfer.ac.uk/infer/PRE_PDF_Files/08_40_04.pdf; and OECD (2010) Programme for International Student Assessment, available at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/31/28/46660259.pdf>

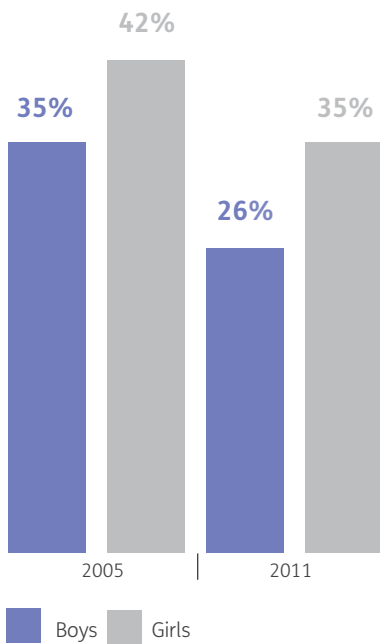
⁹ <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/34/50/48624701.pdf>. Please note that the PISA question is a combined reading enjoyment and reading frequency question, which might account for the smaller proportion of boys and girls who say that they enjoy reading compared with our survey.

1.3 Girls are spending more time reading than boys

Perhaps as a result of them not enjoying it as much, boys also do not read as frequently as girls. In 2011 National Literacy Trust research, 35% of girls said that they read outside of class every day compared with 26% of boys.

Comparisons with National Literacy Trust data from 2005 show that the gap in daily reading between boys and girls has widened slightly from a 7 percentage point difference in 2005 to a 9 percentage point difference in 2011 (see Figure 2). While levels of daily reading have dropped for both boys and girls, boys have seen a bigger decline.

Figure 2: Proportion of pupils reading outside of class every day in 2005 and 2011, by gender



This finding is consistent with other studies – for example, PISA 2009¹⁰ reported that the percentage of students who said they read for enjoyment daily at age 15 dropped in the majority of OECD countries between 2000 and 2009.

1.4 Reading affects writing

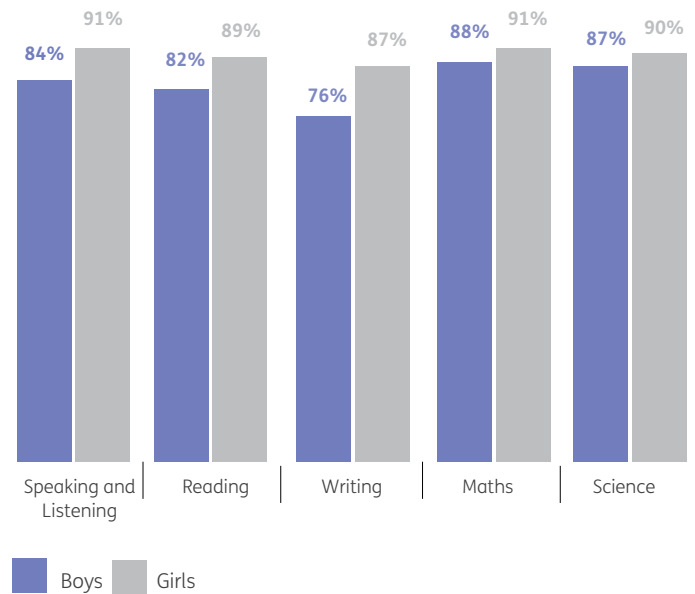
Reading and writing achievement are strongly linked. For example, National Literacy Trust data from 2011¹¹ shows that half (49%) of young people who read above the expected level for their age also write above the expected level (42% write at the expected level; 9% write below their expected level). Conversely, 59% of young people who read below the expected level also write below the expected level (35% write at the expected level; 6% write above their expected level).

National Literacy Trust data also shows strong links between reading and writing in terms of enjoyment, behaviour and attitudes. For example, 65% of children and young people who enjoy reading very much or quite a lot also enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot. Young people who read frequently are also more likely to write frequently, with nearly two-fifths of children and young people (38%) who read daily also writing daily. If we do not take action to support boys' achievement in and enjoyment of reading, it is likely that other literacy skills will be affected. Furthermore, having poor literacy will impact on achievement in all subjects and limit opportunities throughout life.

1.5 The educational gender gap is widest in literacy

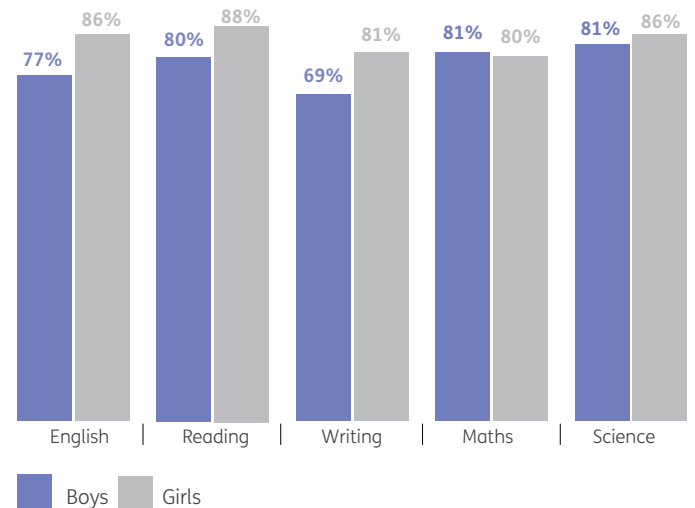
Girls outperform boys across a variety of subjects at every age. In 2011, at age seven (Key Stage 1), the gap between boys and girls was widest for writing and reading but girls also outperformed boys in maths and science¹².

Figure 3: Proportion of pupils achieving the expected level at Key Stage 1 (age seven) in five subjects, by gender



At age 11 (Key Stage 2), with the exception of maths, the picture repeats itself, with girls outperforming boys in four out of five subjects. Again, the gap between boys and girls is the widest in terms of writing and reading as well as English (not assessed at Key Stage 1)¹³.

Figure 4: Proportion of pupils achieving the expected level at Key Stage 2 (age 11) in five subjects, by gender



Girls continue to outperform boys at age 14 (Key Stage 3) and the gender gap continues to be widest for English¹⁴.

¹⁰ <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/34/50/48624701.pdf>

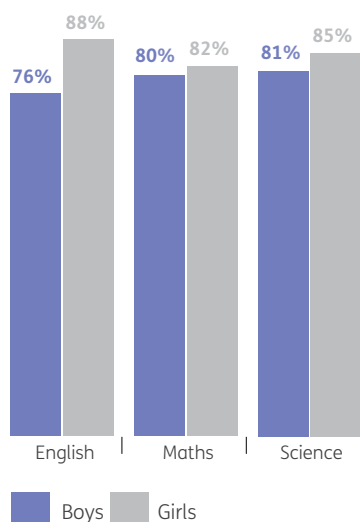
¹¹ Clark, C. (2012 forthcoming) Young people's reading in 2011: Findings from the National Literacy Trust annual survey (to be published online in August 2012, http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research)

¹² <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001022/sfr22-2011v2.pdf>

¹³ <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001047/sfr31-2011.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001018/sfr18-2011v2.pdf>

Figure 5: Proportion of pupils achieving the expected level at Key Stage 3 (age 14) in three subjects, by gender



The pattern continues at GCSE level. With the exception of the subject of Construction, where boys outperform girls by 5 percentage points, girls are performing just as well as boys, or are even outperforming them.¹⁵

Figure 6: Proportion of pupils receiving A* to C grades across GCSE subjects, by gender

| Subject | Boys | Girls |
|----------------|-------|-------|
| English | 58.7% | 72.5% |
| History | 66.7% | 74.0% |
| ICT | 73.5% | 81.7% |
| Maths | 58.9% | 58.6% |
| Physics | 93.8% | 93.4% |
| Science | 60.9% | 64.9% |
| Economics | 80.4% | 79.9% |
| Construction | 75.1% | 70.6% |
| Social science | 53.8% | 64.8% |
| Media studies | 55.2% | 73.9% |
| French | 66.4% | 76.5% |

1.6 The gender gap is an international issue

Girls outperforming boys is not just an issue for the UK; far from it. International comparisons of 10-year-olds (PIRLS¹⁶) and 15-year-olds (PISA¹⁷) show that girls do better in reading than boys across all of the OECD countries. Encouragingly, the latest PISA results from 2009 showed that the gender gap is relatively small in the UK compared with other countries (only Chile and the Netherlands had smaller differences in assessments between boys and girls) and that the gap has narrowed slightly since the 2006 PISA survey.

The gender gap in reading enjoyment is also an international issue. PISA (2009¹⁸) found that girls not only greatly outnumber boys in terms of enjoying reading but also that the gap between boys and girls at age 15 has widened between 2000 and 2009, roughly by three percentage points across the OECD area. This is largely due to a greater decline of levels of enjoyment in boys than in girls, which was repeated in the National Literacy Trust 2011 survey on reading enjoyment in the UK.

However, these international comparisons do not include most African and many Asian countries. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics reports that, globally, 92% of males aged 15 to 24 are able to read, compared with 87% of females; 61% of young people across the world who cannot read are women¹⁹. In its 2011 census, the Indian Government reported that 71% of men could read, compared with 57% of women. Nonetheless, since the 1991 census, the proportion of women who can read has been growing at a higher rate than the proportion of men²⁰.

1.7 The gender gap is a long-term trend

During the 1970s and 1980s, the consistent underperformance of girls in maths and science was a major concern. While these issues seem to have been successfully addressed, concerns have shifted to the underperformance of boys in reading and English.

However, there is evidence that the literacy gender gap has been around for some time, with girls outperforming boys for perhaps as long as 60 years²¹, and the gap unchanged since the early 1970s²².

With the wealth of attainment data now available, the differences in literacy achievement between the genders is being highlighted more frequently than ever, but it does not appear to be a recent phenomenon.

1.8 Summary

Boys' underachievement in literacy is complex. Some commentators have suggested that the main factor is class, not gender. However, Connolly²³ has demonstrated that within like-for-like social class groupings, a gender gap of 10 percentage points is sustained.

The available research evidence does not explain why the issue affects some boys and not others. Clearly not all boys are unenthusiastic about reading; neither do all boys experience difficulties with their literacy, so we need to avoid concepts that suggest boys are "victims of the system". However, as research consistently shows that more boys than girls underachieve in literacy, we need to understand why this occurs. Of course, literacy is not an isolated experience; by its very nature it is a socio-cultural activity. Therefore, solutions to literacy issues need to work alongside other types of intervention. The Commission has found that it is the interplay of the school system, the home environment and gender identity that can have a negative impact on boys' reading. These areas are discussed in the following chapters.

¹⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/aug/25/gcse-results-2011-exam-breakdown-data-embedded>

¹⁶ <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/PRN01/PRN01.pdf> p. 23

¹⁷ <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/NPDZ01/NPDZ01.pdf> p. 22

¹⁸ <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/34/50/48624701.pdf> p. 1

¹⁹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2011) Factsheet on Adult and Youth Literacy, p. 1 <http://www.uis.unesco.org/FactSheets/Documents/FS16-2011-Literacy-EN.pdf>

²⁰ Government of India (2011) Provisional Population Totals – India, http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/india/Final_PPT_2011_chapter6.pdf p. 103

²¹ Twist, L. and Sainsbury, M. (2009) Girl friendly? Investigating the gender gap in national reading tests at age 11, *Educational Research*, 51:2, p. 284

²² Smith, E. (2003) Failing boys and moral panics: Perspectives on the underachievement debate. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 51: 3, pp. 282-295. ²³ Connolly, P. (2004) *Boys and schooling in the early years*, London: RoutledgeFalmer.

²³ Connolly, P. (2004) *Boys and schooling in the early years*, London: RoutledgeFalmer.



Issues in the school system

2.1 Boys' reading is a top concern for many schools

Boys' underachievement in reading is among the top concerns of many schools. In preparation for the Commission's work, the National Literacy Trust undertook a survey of 226 schools in the UK, in which 76% of respondents said boys in their school did not do as well in reading as girls.

In evidence to the Commission, Emily Tudor, Deputy Headteacher at St Paul's Academy in Greenwich, described the challenge her school had faced:

“10 years ago in a school made up predominantly of boys, the Year 11 lower ability English exam took place in a separate room to the higher ability. It was a painful scene. There were the empty seats of the boys who did not bother to turn up, and then there was that moment when they would start to put their pens down 25 minutes into a two hour exam.”

Many respondents to the survey told similar stories. In response to these challenges 82% said they had strategies in place to support boys' reading.

As has been discussed, boys do not represent a single homogenous underperforming group with a single and distinct identity. Schools are frequently identifying other factors (particularly ethnicity and social class) which influence boys' attitudes and achievement in literacy.

2.2 A feminised workforce

It is a frequent assumption that predominantly female staff at school benefits girls. While some studies²⁴ have found a small benefit for boys of male teachers for maths, and for girls of female teachers for English, others have failed to find such a link²⁵. It appears that the research evidence does not back up this assumption about the impact of a feminised school workforce on pupil attainment.

However, there is some evidence²⁶ that teachers award higher marks to pupils from their own gender. With women making up 85-90% of teachers in primary schools, this could be significant for boys' achievement.

In the National Literacy Trust's survey, some practitioners felt quite strongly that the issue is not about female teachers per se, but the lack of male staff in primary schools to model positive reading behaviour and attitudes. This can mean reading is perceived as a female pastime, and therefore girls are more comfortable with being good at reading and enjoying reading. We will return to the issue of gender identity and how it impacts on attitudes to reading in chapter 4.

2.3 Gendered responses to the curriculum and assessment

Many teachers mentioned boys' responses to curriculum topics as a factor in their underachievement. When asked what would make the most difference in raising boys' reading levels, one said, “Freedom in the curriculum for children to pursue more child-led interests which



would necessitate independent reading and encourage them to read more and more widely.”

Giving evidence to the Commission, writer and former Children's Laureate Michael Rosen argued that the current curriculum encourages closed questioning about texts, which displays a lack of interest in what the child really thinks about a piece of writing. This, he felt, is particularly off-putting for boys who, according to stereotype, are less keen than girls to please the teacher by answering correctly, and so switch off from the process. He suggested boys may be encouraged by more open-ended questioning in relation to texts, or resisting asking questions altogether in favour of open-ended talk, as this is shown to have an effect on willingness to read.

Phil Jarrett, National Adviser for English at Ofsted, argued that boys need to feel that the English curriculum matters, and “that English as a subject is active, practical and productive. Therefore, work in English needs to engage with the world outside school, involving real audiences and real contexts for reading.” Making imaginative use of technology could also help boys to connect with the curriculum and motivate them to read for enjoyment.

Girls are often said to do better in education because the current modes of assessment, and particularly essay-based assessment in English, favour girls; research has shown their preferred style of written response is “extended, reflective composition”, while boys more often prefer episodic or factual texts and focusing on commentative detail²⁷. According to an Ofsted research review, “Boys do better on multiple choice papers, whatever the subject.”²⁸

However, others argue that such a focus is too simplistic. The Ofsted review cautioned that girls may do better in coursework as a result of syllabus choice, or teachers' tendency to mark boys and girls differently due to gender-stereotypic perceptions.

²⁴ For example, Ammermüller, A and Dolton, P. (2006) Pupil-Teacher Gender Interaction Effects on Scholastic Outcomes in England and the USA, ZEW Discussion Paper No. 06-600.

²⁵ For example, Driessen, G. (2007) “The feminization of primary education: Effects of teachers' sex on pupil achievement, attitudes and behaviour”, *International Review of Education* 53, 183-203.

²⁶ Quazad, A. and Page, L. (2011) INSEAD Working Paper No. 2011/88/EPS,

http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1782675##

²⁷ Cited in Gallagher, A.M. (1997) A review of research evidence on the apparent underachievement of boys, Statistics and Research xBranch, Department of Education Northern Ireland, p. 2

²⁸ Cited in Madeleine Arnot and Alison Phipps (2004) Gender and Education in the UK, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, England, UK.

2.4 The impact of curriculum texts on boys' reading

In 2009, the Department for Children, Schools and Families published *Gender and Education – Mythbusters*. It asserts that:

“There is no evidence to suggest that the content of the secondary curriculum reflects particularly gendered interests, or that such interests equate with attainment.”²⁹

However, in his evidence to the Commission, Phil Jarrett nuanced this statement:

“Schools need to value and teach a wider range of texts than currently. We know that boys tend to read different kinds of texts from girls – non-fiction, autobiographies, newspapers and so on – yet the English curriculum largely values certain kinds of narrative fiction texts, I think. I think for boys it often seems that what they read outside school does not matter; it does not count in relation to the classroom. We need to bring those resources much more into the classroom.”

This view also came through from schools that took part in the survey:

“I think [the gender gap] is due to boys turning off from reading at secondary school and curriculum texts not lending themselves to boys' interests. I also feel that libraries are often too heavily stocked with fiction books.”

If children's gender influences what they enjoy reading, the curriculum needs to consciously include those types of text. As teachers are given more freedom to decide the content of the curriculum, their knowledge of appropriate and engaging reading materials will become more vital.

2.5 Teachers' knowledge of books and reading materials

Professor Teresa Cremin, Professor of English (Literacy) at The Open University, alerted the Commission to concerns about the teaching profession's knowledge of books and reading materials for boys. She referenced a survey of 1,200 primary school teachers by the United Kingdom Literacy Association³⁰, which asked them to name six writers of fiction for children; only one teacher named a significant writer for boys (Philip Reeve). Professor Cremin explained this as part of a much bigger issue – the weak knowledge of books and reading materials for children among many teachers. In the same survey, only 18% of teachers could name a poet and only 24% a picture book creator.

Phil Jarrett from Ofsted supported this analysis:



“I think there is an issue of subject knowledge, particularly in primary schools. Understandably, because they are not specialists, too few teachers in primary schools have a detailed knowledge of literature, either classic or contemporary children's literature. I think this makes it more difficult for them to choose the right kinds of text to share with children, and also how to recommend books individually to boys that they might read outside of school.”

Professor Cremin also suggested that the predominantly female make-up of the school and children's workforce could mean that their knowledge of texts and reading materials could lead them to have a bias towards materials which suited girls' interests. So even though there is no evidence that the gender of the teacher impacts on the relative attainment of boys and girls in a class, it could well be that the teacher's gender could influence the extent to which they effectively promote books and reading materials that are attractive to boys and girls. Interestingly, one survey respondent who understood the need to promote reading materials that reflect the interests of boys at the same time made clear her discomfort with these interests:

“We try to work from their interests no matter how banal, disgusting or undesirable...”

Teachers need knowledge of a range of texts to suit and engage the diverse profiles of children and young people they teach. They need to be comfortable and confident in using them within lessons and as material for pupils' personal reading outside of the classroom.

Libraries have a vital role to play in addressing this knowledge gap around books and reading materials. This function has traditionally been fulfilled by schools library services but evidence heard by the Commission highlighted how many of these have closed in the last 10 to 15 years. In May 2011, the *TES* published analysis³¹ that showed “just 85 councils out of more than 150 with responsibility for schools run their own dedicated service”. Since then, others have been put under review or cut back. In 1997/8, 83% of UK pupils were served by a school library service; by 2002/3 this was 72%³². This trend can be linked to the introduction of the fair funding scheme in 2001, which requires local authorities to devolve all funding to schools. Unfortunately, as pressure on school budgets has increased, many headteachers have chosen not to prioritise school library support, and local services have been forced to close.

Where schools library services no longer exist, public libraries and school libraries need to be supported in taking on this role. As Professor Cremin explained:

“If she [a teacher] does not have a librarian to support her, what does she do? Go to Waterstones? Turn to a publisher perhaps. We are dealing with a problem there.”

The evaluation of the Boys into Books project, which supported over 330,000 children through 13,000 schools in 2008/9, provided evidence that partnerships between schools and public libraries can go a long way in helping improve teachers' knowledge of reading materials for boys and, as a result, boys' enthusiasm for reading. In particular, there was evidence that teachers had been supported in moving children from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” by “instilling a sense of enjoyment from reading”.³³ Case studies showed how specialist reader development librarians in public libraries were able to support the professional development of teachers and ensure that “reading activities [in school] are more closely linked to the needs of identified boys”.

²⁹ Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) *Gender and Education – Mythbusters*, <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/00599-2009BKT-EN.pdf>

³⁰ Cremin, T., Mottram, M. and Goodwin, P. (2008) *Teachers as Readers: Phase 1*, http://www.ukla.org/research/research_projects_in_progress/ukla_research_on_teachers_as_readers/

³¹ <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6082614>

³² <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/dils/lisu/list04/school04.html>

³³ ERS (2009) *Boys into Books Programme Evaluation*, Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, p. 7



2.6 Decoding and comprehension

Most primary schools are now using a programme of systematic synthetic phonics to ensure every child gets a good basic grounding in literacy. However, surprisingly, there is little empirical data comparing the relative effectiveness of phonics teaching for girls and boys. A systematic review of the research evidence³⁴ found a lack of clarity on whether systematic phonics teaching was equally beneficial to boys and girls.

A seven-year study in Clackmannanshire³⁵ (Johnston and Watson, 2005) found that, after receiving an early grounding in synthetic phonics, boys pulled significantly ahead of girls in word reading, and stayed ahead right through to the end of primary school; the same was true for the children's progress in spelling. However, for reading comprehension, the boys and girls did not differ significantly. So while synthetic phonics may appear to close the gender gap when decoding skills are measured, it does not offer any advantage for boys for reading comprehension – and, therefore, engagement with and understanding of text.

Expert witnesses raised concerns about teaching which placed an exclusive emphasis on decoding and didn't allow for the development of comprehension skills. There was a concern that this did not allow children to develop their own identity as readers. As Michael Rosen told the Commission:

“Reading is, broadly speaking, reading for meaning. We have to decode; we also have to say we need to put as much money and effort into reading for meaning.”

Decoding is an essential first step, but it does not necessarily increase comprehension skills, engage pupils or show them the purpose of reading. This seems to impact particularly on boys. The phonics screening test for Year 1 pupils introduced this year, needs to be supplemented by efforts to develop children's identity as readers, with a specific focus on boys. As Professor Cremin explained, this would help create:

“Individuals who develop that lifelong capacity, desire and motivation to read and to find out more through their reading and to take pleasure in their reading.”

2.7 Teaching the mechanics of reading vs. reading for enjoyment

The Commission heard evidence from those concerned about the lack of focus on enjoyment of reading in Government policy since the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy in 1998. The focus has generally been on teaching the mechanics of reading, and giving personalised support to any struggling pupils to ensure they can access the rest of the curriculum. Michael Rosen highlighted the significance of Ofsted's *Moving English Forward* report³⁶, which, he said, was the first time a governmental body had ever recommended that schools develop a policy on reading for enjoyment. The Commission welcomes this recommendation and sees it as an important strategy in boosting some boys' reading.

This recommendation is backed up by the revised Ofsted framework for inspection, which came into effect from January 2012. Inspectors are now, for the first time, looking for evidence of support for children's enjoyment of reading, not just effective teaching of phonic skills.

It is also significant that, under the new Ofsted framework, inspectors will

be considering “how well gaps are narrowing between the performance of different groups of pupils in the school and compared to all pupils nationally”³⁷. The challenge is for schools to connect these two issues, and develop an approach that helps disengaged and underachieving boys to both enjoy reading and improve their literacy skills.

In his evidence to the Commission, Ofsted's Phil Jarrett quoted the Bullock Report of 1975³⁸:

“‘When pupils admitted to an adult literacy scheme were asked why they failed to read at school, the common factor that emerged was that they did not learn from the process of learning to read, that it was something that other people did for pleasure.’ I think we have to prioritise far more reading for pleasure in schools. I think at the moment there is an emphasis on what we could broadly call the skills of reading and preparing pupils for tests and examinations.”

The perception that some boys were not developing their skills, identities and behaviours as readers because they had not had the opportunity to experience it as an enjoyable pastime came through in much of the evidence from teachers. When asked what would make the most difference in raising boys' reading achievement, one said:

“[We should be] Finding out their interests and encouraging reading using these interests. Promoting reading for pleasure throughout school as well – in every lesson.”

In some cases, a focus on enjoyment is presented as a reaction to earlier official guidance which had reduced the profile of reading for enjoyment within schools. Some interpretations of the National Curriculum requirements and early work on the National Literacy Strategy have been widely criticised for negatively impacting on children's reading for enjoyment. Indeed, research has suggested that the early years of the Strategy, when literacy standards were significantly increasing, were marked by a rapid decrease in the number of children who read for enjoyment³⁹. Steps were subsequently taken to increase the profile of reading for enjoyment in the National Strategies. However, there is still a sense that studying short extracts of text fails to engage young readers and also fails to develop the reading stamina which is necessary to develop enjoyment of reading. There may be ways in which schools use reading and writing which almost act as aversion therapy. Michael Rosen's evidence drew attention to the dangers of using reading and writing as a punishment:

“Stereotypically, boys tend to be punished more than girls, and curiously, certain kinds of reading and writing are sometimes used as punishment! I think this is counter-productive. We have to connect reading with pleasure, not with duty and unpleasantness. If we make it part of a punishment, this too presents an obstacle.”

2.8 Schools' current solutions

When asked what would make the most difference in raising boys' achievement, most schools offered solutions that responded to boys' perceived needs. The majority said we should be engaging their interests – for example, by making reading purposeful, combining it with more appropriate texts and linking it with technology. They also felt that a more supportive home environment, and in particular more fathers reading, would have an impact. (The next chapter provides a detailed examination of family influences.) Some felt that the foundations need to be laid early, with reading aloud and strong role models at home, in educational settings and in wider culture.

Naturally, these themes recurred when we asked practitioners about the types of strategies that they currently have in place. Examples included:

- Buying library stock to appeal to boys, and creating displays of non-fiction
- Validating different types of text – for example, comics
- Using role models, including male authors and older children
- Running reading challenges/competitions/raising aspirations. Often linked to play – for example, following instructions on treasure hunt

³⁴ Torgerson et al (2006) A Systematic Review of the Research Literature on the Use of Phonics in the Teaching of Reading and Spelling, Department for Education and Skills, Research Report RR711.

³⁵ Johnston and Watson (2005) A Seven Year Study of the Effects of Synthetic Phonics Teaching on Reading and Spelling Attainment, <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/02/20682/52383>

³⁶ Ofsted (2012) *Moving English Forward*, <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/moving-english-forward>.

³⁷ <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/framework-for-school-inspection-january-2012>

³⁸ Bullock, A. (1975) *A Language for Life*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

³⁹ Twist, L. and Sainsbury, M. (2009) *Girl friendly? Investigating the gender gap in national reading tests at age 11*, *Educational Research*, 51:2, p. 284

- Reading aloud and acting out a wide range of books and plays
- Having silent reading time or special settings, like dens or reading circles
- Class visits to library
- Involving parents
- Staff training
- Additional lessons/support and specific intervention schemes – for example, the Better Reading Project, Read Write Inc, Every Child A Reader and Renaissance reading scheme
- Gender segregation

The commitment and creative practice is encouraging, given the lack of any national guidance or policy framework. However, it means teachers are often working in isolation to develop strategies, without guidance on what is proven to be effective practice.

The concept of male reading role models (men and boys who are keen readers) was mentioned by many schools as a way to help boys understand the purpose and benefits of reading, and how it is enjoyed by other males. However, there is much disagreement about whether the greatest influence is to be had from family, friends, or celebrity role models. The Commission heard evidence that suggested children are influenced more strongly by seeing their peers, friends and parents reading, rather than celebrity role models. Andrea Quincey, from Oxford University Press, cited as an example a project called Transformers, run by Gary Wilson, which uses “peer leaders” – boys who have influence rather than those with the strongest skills. By engaging those boys, it is possible to transform them from leaders who distract others from learning and promote the view that reading is not cool, and turn them into advocates for learning within the school.

A similar peer approach was described by Eve Bearne, in her evidence about Keith Topping’s work in Newham. Boys who were not committed or successful readers were trained to work with younger pupils with similar skills and attitudes. The training shows them how to teach reading and how to talk about reading. The result was 10-year-old boys who could teach reading strategies as adequately as some teachers, and improved reading standards among both the younger and older boys.

2.9 What really works in schools?

Younger and Warrington’s four-year research programme⁴⁰, looking at the effectiveness of strategies in schools for raising boys’ achievement, provides a strong evidence base for understanding effective practice. The research suggests four different categories of school-based approaches:

- Pedagogic: classroom-based approaches centred on teaching and learning
- Individual: essentially a focus on target-setting and mentoring
- Organisational: ways of organising learning at the whole school level
- Socio-cultural: approaches which attempt to create an environment for learning where key boys and girls feel able to work with, rather than against, the aims and aspirations of the school

Their analysis showed that pedagogic strategies to improve reading were most successful when combined with a holistic approach, which focused not on teaching reading but on helping boys become “successful and satisfied readers”. When this happened, and pupils were given space to talk and reflect on reading, share ideas and discuss why it was enjoyable, standards of reading improved massively – “sometimes by twice that expected within national test parameters”.

Furthermore, Warrington and Younger found that each of these types of approach was most effective when it was not self-contained, but integrated with other types of approach: “There must be an integration of different approaches if their impact is to be maximised.” They also

highlighted the centrality of socio-cultural approaches in beginning to address constructs of masculinity (and “ladettish femininity”) that may affect children’s attitudes to learning. Interestingly, practitioners responding to the survey cited a huge range of practical approaches already in place – with many mentions of “boy friendly” book stock and curriculum topics. However, while there was some awareness of the need for an integrated whole school approach, there were few mentions of such an approach underpinning existing strategies.

Warrington and Younger’s research is backed up by OECD data⁴¹, which has shown very clearly the link between motivation to read and reading skills. It seems that for some boys, the desire and motivation to read needs to be explicitly fostered.

The Commission heard evidence from Professor Teresa Cremin on the Teachers as Readers research project, which used a range of approaches to develop “reading teachers”. Activities in the programme include reading aloud; having a reading environment; significant amounts of talk about texts; high levels of peer-to-peer book recommendations as well as teacher-to-peer and child-to-teacher; and quality reading time, where there is time both to read and then to talk about what was read. It found that: “As teachers became more confident, autonomous and flexible in using their enriched subject knowledge, they began to articulate an informed and strategic rationale for selecting and using texts to support children’s reading for pleasure.”⁴² New shared understandings about what constitutes reading generated new kinds of talk about reading, both with and amongst children.

Warrington and Younger stress the importance of talk in supporting boys’ literacy, a theme more recently echoed by the Department for Education expert panel reviewing the content of the National Curriculum⁴³. In her evidence to the Commission, Deputy Head Emily Tudor commented:

“The key to boys’ literacy is talk. We must have high expectations of boys when it comes to discussing emotional responses to text. Speaking must be planned for in the majority of lessons. With a greater impetus on talk, it becomes the norm and peer pressure amongst boys becomes less of an issue. In my school, boys’ achievement in English is high because they are involved in so much drama, dialogue and speaking on film.”

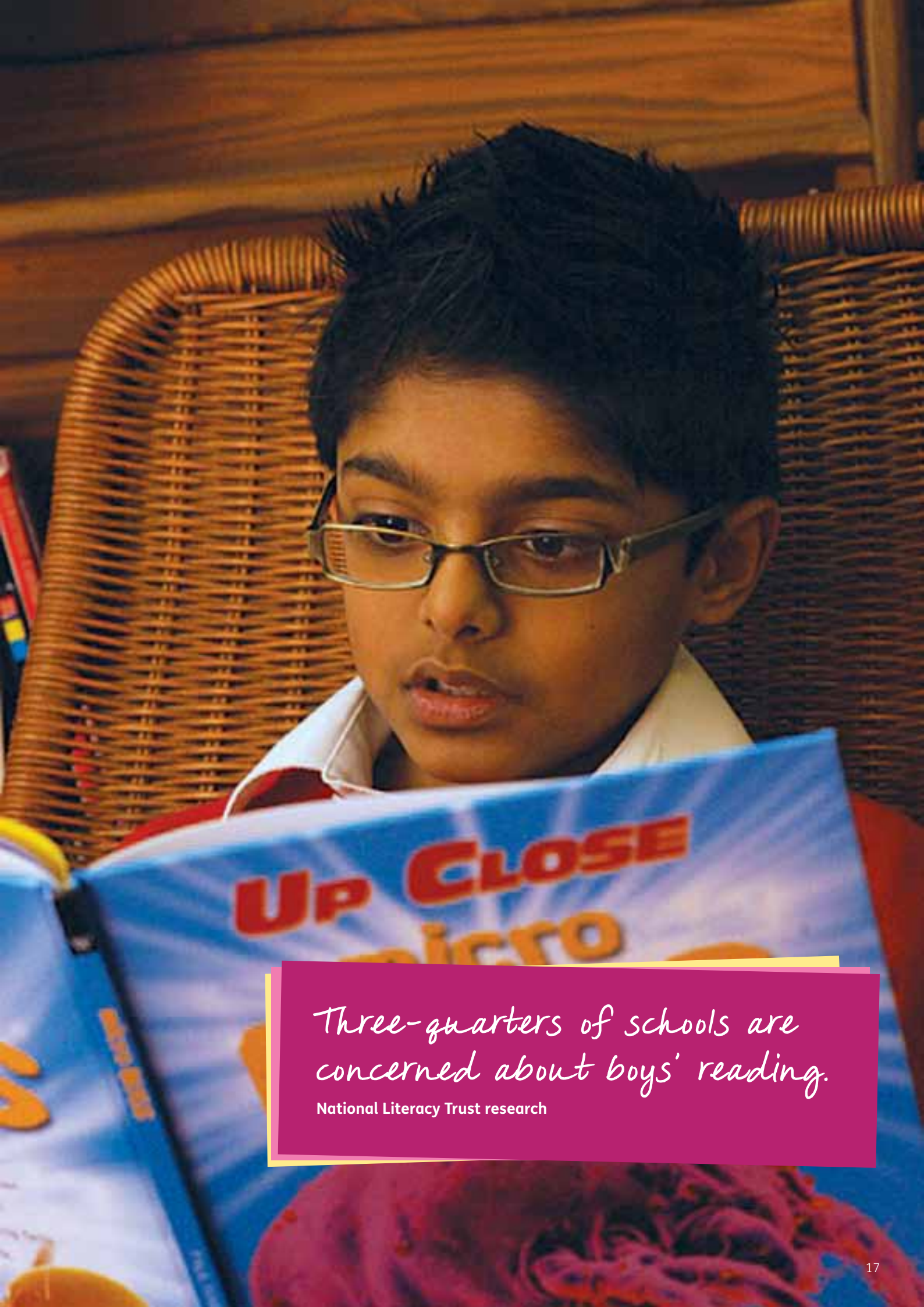
It is crucial that national policy supports schools to identify gender issues in reading and to put into place evidence-based approaches to address them. This should mirror the way in which the Education Endowment Fund is informing schools’ use of the pupil premium to reduce the gap in achievement between pupils on free school meals and those who are not.

⁴⁰ <http://www-rba.educ.com.ac.uk/Executive%20Summary.pdf> p.4

⁴¹ <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/NPDZ01/NPDZ01.pdf> p. 64

⁴² United Kingdom Literacy Association (2008) Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers, http://www.ukla.org/downloads/teachers_as_readers.pdf

⁴³ Department for Education (2011) The Framework for the National Curriculum: A report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review, <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/NCR-Expert%20Panel%20Report.pdf>, p. 52.



Three-quarters of schools are concerned about boys' reading.

National Literacy Trust research

The home environment

3.1 The vital role of families

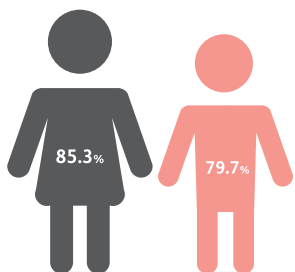
Research into the impact of parental involvement in education, and children's literacy activities in particular, is conclusive and consistent. It shows that parental involvement in children's learning positively supports success in primary and secondary school. The impact is the same regardless of ethnic background, family income, maternal level of education or child's gender. The earlier parents become involved in their children's literacy practices, the more profound the results and long-lasting the effects⁴⁴. While the impact on children's educational and literacy outcomes continues into the teenage and even adult years, early parental involvement has the greatest effect⁴⁵.

Importantly, research has shown that children's reading is more sensitive to parental influences than any other school subject. Simple activities in the home, and exposure to a wide range of reading materials, have been shown to make a significant difference to children's skills, as well as their enjoyment of and attitudes towards reading⁴⁶.

Evidence of this link was also presented to the Committee. Michael Rosen cited research by the University of Nevada⁴⁷, which showed that children growing up in homes with many books get three years' more schooling than children from bookless homes, independent of their parents' education, occupation and class. He argued that "there seems to be some power about books hanging around children and children hanging around books, which enables them to access this stuff that we call schooling and the curriculum".

Interestingly, while few would deny that families can have a huge impact on both children's skills and attitudes to reading, most of the evidence heard by the Commission related primarily to what happens in schools, not families. However, many teachers responding to the survey had very strong feelings about how home factors can impact on reading, and most were clear that parental support for reading and parents that show themselves to be readers, are vital for both girls and boys.

However, there were also a notable few who believe that parents encourage girls to read more. One said: "We find that boys are more difficult to motivate and that messages from parents at home do not support boys in continuing to read at home once they have learnt the basic skills of decoding words." This is backed up by National Literacy Trust research which has found that boys are less likely to be given books as presents than girls (79.7% vs. 85.3%)⁴⁸.



Girls are more likely to be given books as presents than boys.

3.2 Involving fathers as well as mothers

Many studies about parental involvement rely on evidence from mothers, perhaps because they are still seen to be the main caregiver and educator. However, there is some evidence⁴⁹ that children whose father spends time with them, reading or going on outings, have higher IQs and are more socially mobile than those who receive little attention. In other research⁵⁰, father and mother involvement at age seven independently predicted educational attainment when the child was 20. More importantly, the researchers found that early father involvement with a child was associated with continued involvement throughout childhood and adolescence, which led them to conclude that "engaging fathers in their children's lives from an early age should guarantee that they remain involved throughout their children's childhood"⁵¹. Interestingly, this research also found that father involvement was not more important for later educational attainment when mother involvement was low rather than high. This suggests that strong fatherly support should occur alongside, and not instead of, support from a mother.

Our review of the evidence suggests there is a lack of research to measure the impact of fathers' involvement against that of mothers to see what the differential effects are. Nonetheless, there was a strong feeling among teachers that a greater involvement in reading among the fathers of underachieving boys would be advantageous.

3.3 Male reading role models

Research shows that it is important for parents to not only show support for their child's literacy, but also to model positive reading behaviour themselves. Children of high-frequency readers are far more likely to read for fun every day than children whose parents are not high-frequency readers. The *Kids and Family Reading Report (2006)*⁵² found that 53% of children whose parents are high-frequency readers are reading books for fun every day; however, among children whose parents are low-frequency readers (reading two to three times a month or less), only 15% read for fun daily. These findings have been echoed in surveys of children and young people by the National Literacy Trust – for example, in 2009, both boys and girls rated their immediate family as very important role models in inspiring them to read⁵³. There is some evidence that gender is a factor in this relationship. Mullan (2010) found that mothers' reading is more strongly associated with girls' reading, while fathers' reading is more strongly associated with boys' reading. Boys who see their father read for 30 minutes a day read more than boys who never see their father read⁵⁴.

Schools responding to the survey described their experience of this. One teacher said: "Children are very influenced by what they see their parents doing and there is a tendency to identify with the same gender. So if male role models are usually out working and when they are present are indulging in something other than reading, this may have an effect on boys' motivations to read."

⁴⁴ Mullis, R.L., Mullis, A.K., Cornille, T.A., Ritchson, A.D. and Sullender, M.S. (2004) Early literacy outcomes and parent involvement. Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University.

⁴⁵ Desforges, C. and Abouchar, A. (2003) The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: A literature review. London: Department for Education and Skills.

⁴⁶ For example, OECD (2012) Let's Read Them a Story! The Parent Factor in Education, PISA, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264176232-en>.

⁴⁸ Evans, M.D.R., Kelley, J., Sikora, J. and Treiman, D.J. (2010) Family scholarly culture and educational success: Books and schooling in 27 nations. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 28, pp. 171-197.

⁴⁹ Nettle, D. (2008) Why do some dads get more involved than others? Evidence from a large British cohort. *Evolution and Human Behaviour*, 29, pp. 416-423

⁵⁰ Flouri, E. and Buchanan, A. (2004) Early father's and mother's involvement and child's later educational outcomes. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 74, pp. 141-153

⁵¹ Flouri, E. and Buchanan, A. (2003) What predicts fathers' involvement with their children? A prospective study of intact families. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 21, pp. 81-97

⁵² http://www.scholastic.com/aboutscholastic/news/reading_survey_press_call_2.pdf also see http://anatomiteca.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/2010_KFRFR.pdf

⁵³ Clark, C., Osborne, S. and Dugdale, G. (2009) Reaching Out with Role Models: Role models and young people's reading, National Literacy Trust, http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research/263_reaching_out_with_role_models

⁵⁴ Mullan, K. (2010). Families that read: A time diary analysis of young people's and parents' reading. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 33: 4, pp. 414-430

Yet many young boys do not have male reading role models at home. The National Literacy Trust's last annual literacy survey of nearly 21,000 young people showed that both boys and girls are more likely to report encouragement to read from their mother than their father. We need to identify and overcome barriers that prevent some fathers from taking a full role in supporting their children's literacy. For example, Lynch (2002) found that mothers had stronger beliefs than fathers in their ability to help improve boys' reading achievement⁵⁵.

We also need to think about how we can best support children who do not have a father figure in the home. The Committee heard evidence from Owen Thomas, Service Manager for Working With Men, who said: "In our experience, modelling behaviour is key, whether within the home, within an educational setting, within the wider community and society, or through the media; in that order, we have found. With all of them, if you are lacking in one then the other areas become more important."

3.4 How can policy support the home environment?

There is a growing awareness that government policy needs to support the family and inform parenting, including support for literacy and reading. It was established in the first round of Sure Start in 1999, when literacy was seen as part of the variety of support offered from the start. The current government is increasingly confident in terms of this agenda. For example, a two-year trial⁵⁶ starting in three local authority areas this spring will see a number of family organisations funded to deliver parenting classes.

However, we need to ensure that the literacy support that is provided addresses the needs of boys as well as girls. Furthermore, it is essential that parenting strategies support fathers, and target them directly, since families are often still seen as a predominantly female issue.



⁵⁵ Lynch, J. (2002) Parents' self-efficacy beliefs, parents' gender, children's reader self-perceptions, reading achievement and gender, *Journal of Research in Reading*, 25: 1, pp. 54–67, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9817.00158/abstract>

⁵⁶ <http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a00205898/parentingc>

The impact of gender identity

4.1 Biological factors

It is a common belief that boys' underachievement in literacy is due to biology; that they just aren't suited to sedentary, language-based learning because of their levels of maturity and physicality. This was a recurring theme among schools surveyed, many of whom talked about boys' inability to sit still. Some connected this to the age at which boys are expected to start learning reading and writing skills in the UK:

“Boys... still want to engage with more physical activities.”

“In the early years girls seem to sit and play at the table more readily than boys, who seem more active generally and less inclined to sit for long periods.”

Levels of testosterone are often thought to be a factor in this behaviour. However, a review of research evidence by Lloyd (2011) found the evidence does not prove a causal relationship between testosterone and male behaviour⁵⁷.

Boys who took part in our focus group also talked about their need to run around and play, and said this was a reason why boys generally don't spend as much time reading as girls. One said: “The only thing I see boys doing is playing outside. Whenever I walk down the street I look in houses and I just see girls reading.” However, it is possible this attitude is influenced by the boys' existing perception of reading as something that is for girls, and the wide range of other activities competing for their time, which they also talked about. Their need to run around and be active certainly didn't seem to dampen their enthusiasm for spending lengthy periods playing computer games, which they considered more interactive than reading.

Teachers and librarians also feel that girls have a developmental advantage, being perceived to mature more quickly than boys, to be able to concentrate more and for longer periods, and to persevere more.

There are significant dangers in attributing the gender gap to biological differences alone, as Lloyd points out, as it may leave practitioners “with a view that nothing can really be done about boys' general slow development except wait for them to catch up”⁵⁸.

Discussions about biological factors are often combined with talk about the different learning styles that are perceived to exist as a result. The idea that people have preferred learning styles developed in the 1970s, and some researchers try to generalise that boys and girls have distinct preferences. However, there is little agreement among academics about what learning styles are, and whether or not they are useful to assist pedagogy.

There are various common stereotypes about boys' and girls' preferred learning styles, just as there are about the way they play and interact more generally. For instance: “Classroom evaluation studies reveal that boys prefer active learning and are bored more easily than girls, having lower levels of concentration and weaker organisational skills.”⁵⁹

Research suggests it is not that simple. Warrington and Younger concluded that boys are not necessarily biologically predisposed to learn in certain ways. Likewise, Gary Wilson⁶⁰ has argued: “It is not just about simply

stereotypically labelling all boys as kinaesthetic learners and attempting to teach them all that way.” Rather, it is vital we engage boys in dialogue about how they learn, and provide a balance of approaches in the classroom.

However, it is clear from research, and to most people observing children, that there are cognitive differences between girls and boys. In evidence to the Commission, Paul Keenleyside of the Dyslexia Association cited research on dyslexia by Maggie Snowling which supports the view that there is a spatial advantage for boys and a verbal advantage for girls. He argued that: “This means that boys may not be ready for formal literacy learning at the same time that girls are.” However, he emphasised: “Learning about the pleasure of reading and books is something completely different.”

4.2 Does their gender identity discourage some boys from reading?

The evidence offered by teachers to the Commission described the challenge of getting boys to read and identified that the act of reading itself was viewed by some boys as being counter to their identity as a boy:

“Reading is associated with being a nerd and is very feminised - potential barrier.”

“It is more ‘cool’ for girls to read.”

This was echoed by the boys in our focus group. One said: “Girls really like reading; boys play video games.”

While gender identities are complex and sometimes contradictory, it is clear that gender does constrain choices and define behaviour. The evidence heard by the Commission suggests that for some boys the construction of their gender identity underpins negative attitudes to reading and literacy. Owen Thomas from Working with Men told the Commission:

“...in society our roles as men - the vast majority of men, apart from the elite - were defined by physicality as opposed to intellectual pursuits... There is change in societal norms and the role of gender in society. Certain groups of men are left behind. When this happens, as mothers become the bread-winners in the family homes, men and boys try to express their masculinity through uber-displays of machismo.”⁶¹



⁵⁷ Lloyd, Trefor (2011) Boys' Underachievement in Schools Literature Review, Centre for Young Men's Studies, Ulster University, Belfast, p. 38

⁵⁸ As above, p. 37

⁵⁹ Salisbury, J., Rees, G. and Gorard, S. (1999) Accounting for the Differential Attainment of Boys and Girls at School in School Leadership & Management, 19:4, pp. 403-426, p. 408.

⁶⁰ Wilson, Gary (2005) Quoted in Shelton, Fiona, Too Cool for School? Why are our boys not achieving? http://www.grimus.or.at/helden/outcome/United%20Kingdom_english_final_version1.pdf, part 6.

⁶¹ Owen Thomas, Service Development Manager, Working With Men in evidence to the Commission

The role of parents in establishing gender identities that impact on literacy is significant and possibly unconscious. As has been noted in chapter 3, boys are less likely to be encouraged in their reading by their parents and to have reading modelled to them in the home as a male behaviour.

Gender identities that cast reading as an unattractive activity mean that boys have markedly different attitudes to reading to girls. More girls than boys say that a reader is happy (46% vs. 40%), clever (70% vs. 61%) and someone who will do well in life (66% vs. 54%). Boys, on the other hand, are more likely than girls to believe that a reader is boring (18% vs. 13%) and a geek (22% vs. 19%).⁶²

These attitudes also affect the extent to which girls and boys identify themselves as readers: girls are more likely than boys to view themselves as readers, with 69% of girls saying that they are a reader compared with 60% of boys. A quarter of boys (25%) said that they are not a reader (15% were not sure) compared with a sixth of girls (16%; 15% were not sure). Some boys find being a reader less attractive and less aspirational. It doesn't sit well with their gender identities.

Interestingly, even boys who regard themselves as readers differ from girls who see themselves as readers: 66% of boys who see themselves as readers enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot compared with 76% of girls who see themselves as readers.

The strongest indicator that male gender identities can be hostile to reading is the fact that a significant minority of children and young people think that reading is more for girls than boys – 18% of boys and 12% of girls.

Evidence from teachers to the Commission stressed the role of peer pressure and the media in constructing gender identities and attitudes which undervalue reading:

“Peer pressure continues to influence the way boys define their identity – geeky/ nerdy/ boffin are all terms that are used to ridicule boys that read or are known to read. Films, TV and advertising have been somewhat responsible for peddling this attitude.”

“Peer pressure from boys means they do not want to be seen as good or interested readers.”

Peer pressure does seem to be a significant factor in establishing negative attitudes to reading, with 19% of boys saying they would be embarrassed if their friends saw them reading.

As discussed, using peer leaders to support, rather than damage, the place of reading in boys' gender identities can help. However, teachers also felt that boys' reading could be influenced by more high-profile, male celebrity role models, to overcome gaps in support at home or from peers. One teacher remarked:

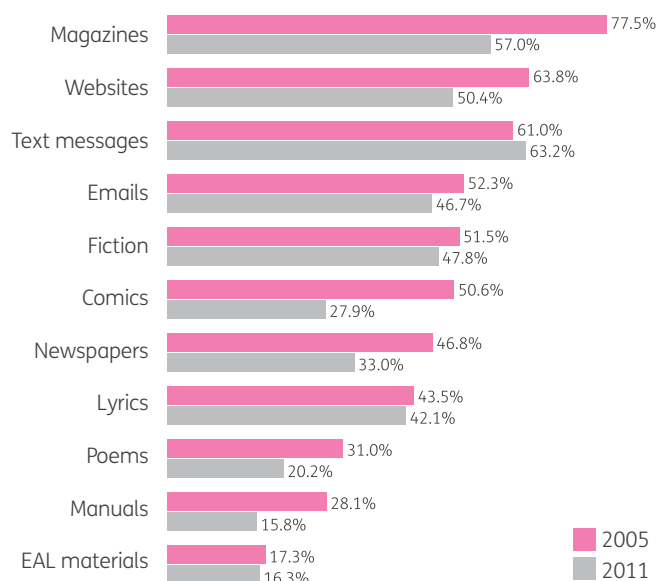
“Getting more ‘free’ willing male personalities and quality male authors to come to schools and preach the importance of reading; most ‘celebrities’ are very hard to source/ expensive, and basically not willing to put their heads above the parapet. In this day and age, secondary school male students need all the persuasion they can be given. More male celebs would be a very excellent and enthusiastic way forward.”

4.3 Reading loses out to other leisure activities

Many commentators have drawn attention to the fact that, in a digital age when image and video is overtaking text as the means of transmitting information, reading is losing out to other pastimes.

Year-on-year data suggest that this is true. Between 2005 and 2011⁶³ the number of children who reported reading every day dropped from 38.1% to 30.8%. And reading in all formats fell – with the exception of text messages. This is not simply about children shifting their reading patterns from paper to digital.

Figure 7: Proportion of children reading different reading materials outside of class at least once a month, in 2005 and 2011



For boys this pattern is compounded by the increased likelihood of them holding negative perceptions of the value and identity of reading. In addition, boys are more likely to report less satisfying experiences of reading – for instance, they say that reading makes them feel bored (34% vs. 25%).

So it doesn't come as much of a surprise to discover that boys are more likely to choose other leisure activities, with 62% of boys saying they prefer to watch TV to reading (as opposed to 46% of girls) and 31% of boys saying they only read when they have to (as opposed to 21% of girls).

4.4 What texts will boys choose to read?

The choice to read is a vital decision. It is a key element of the ongoing motivation⁶⁴ to read which will support lifelong learning and, ultimately, social mobility. Parents, teachers and librarians share the challenge of instilling this desire in children.

The evidence received by the Commission suggests that the fundamental barrier to some boys achieving this is their gender identity. However, there was also significant evidence to suggest that many boys do not choose to read simply because they cannot find reading materials that interest them. In a National Literacy Trust survey⁶⁵ 30% of boys (and 23% of girls) said they couldn't find things to read that interest them.

There is a strong gender difference in the materials that children and young people enjoy reading (see figure 8). This is not simply a UK phenomenon but across OECD countries (e.g. PISA 2009), girls are twice as likely to read fiction for enjoyment, and are more likely than boys to read magazines; boys more commonly read newspapers and comic books⁶⁶.

⁶² Clark, C. (2012 forthcoming) Young people's self-perception as readers revisited in 2011: Findings from the National Literacy Trust annual survey (to be published online at http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research)

⁶³ Clark, C. (2012 forthcoming) Young people's reading in 2011: Findings from the National Literacy Trust annual survey (to be published online in August 2012, http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research)

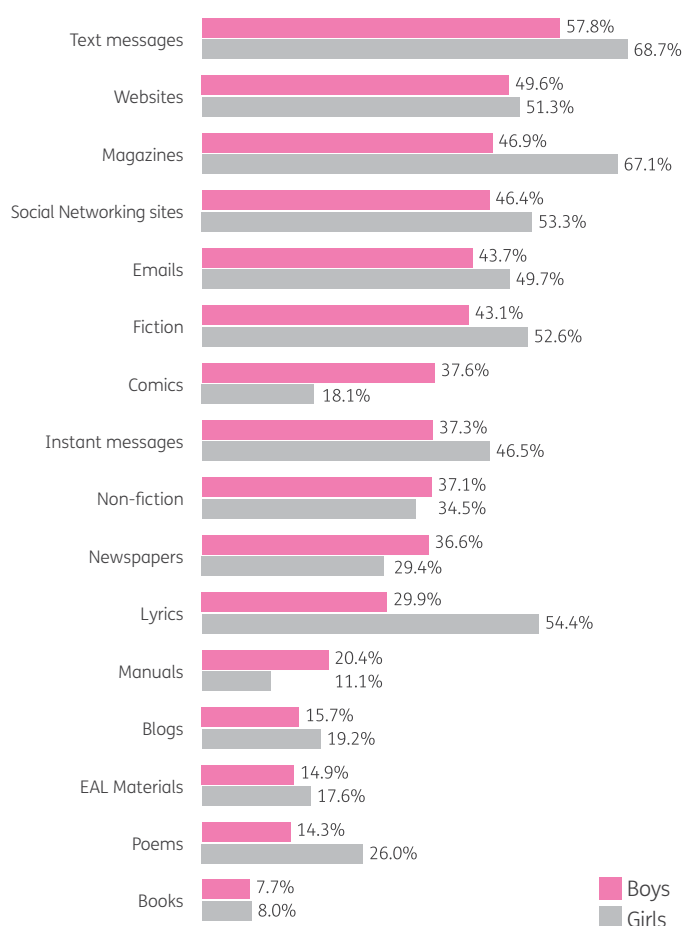
⁶⁴ Clark, C. and Rumbold, K. (2006) Reading for Pleasure: A research overview, National Literacy

Trust, http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research/271_reading_for_pleasure_a_research_overview

⁶⁵ Clark, C. (2012 forthcoming) Young people's reading in 2011: Findings from the National Literacy Trust annual survey (to be published online in August 2012, http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research)

⁶⁶ <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/31/28/46660259.pdf>

Figure 8: Proportion of children reading different reading materials outside of class at least once a month, by gender



Within the genre of fiction, differences also exist. Research conducted on behalf of WHSmith⁶⁷ showed that girls were significantly more likely than boys to read adventure, horror/ghost, romance/relationship and animal-related books, while boys were significantly more likely than girls to read science-fiction/fantasy, sports-related and war/spy books. This finding is corroborated by a National Literacy Trust survey from 2005⁶⁸.

Evidence offered to the Commission from school teachers and librarians emphasised the importance of promoting reading materials to boys which correspond to their interests:

“I find that boys, if given the incentive to read books that interest them, are just as enthusiastic as girls.”

“... I find that boys are just as easily stimulated into reading if they are led to it in an interesting, structured manner, with books that are relevant and exciting to them.”

The author Anthony Horowitz described his experience of boys’ reading:

“My experience of boys and books is that if you give them the right incentive they will immerse themselves in books.”

The Commission received evidence on two explanations for why some boys are not getting access to materials which interest them. Firstly, many witnesses and much of the evidence noted that boys’ access to reading materials is mediated by teachers and parents, many of whom do not have a wide knowledge of appropriate texts. However, some teachers and librarians asserted that it is a supply issue and linked it to the female bias of the publishing industry:

“For the past few years the mass of popular published material has been aimed at girls, e.g. dark romances. The boys’ books have been add-ons to long-running series, often started years ago, e.g. Cherub, Darren Shan, etc. before this present generation were choosing reads. A few years ago when these series were new boys were some of my best readers.”

This is clearly an issue for a range of stakeholders, including those who create materials for boys and those who mediate and promote them. As we have already noted, the knowledge and passion of teachers for children’s reading materials seems to be an immediate priority.

4.5 The role of libraries in creating a male reading culture

Public libraries are vital community literacy resources. Their contact with children and young people is one of their greatest achievements. According to DCMS figures⁶⁹, in 2010/11 76% of children had visited a library in the last 12 months. However, active library engagement, beyond visiting, is lower. PISA (2009⁷⁰) reported that 51% of 15-year-olds in England said that they never visit a library to borrow books for schoolwork and 58% never visit a library to borrow books to read for pleasure (both of these were higher than the OECD average of 34% and 48% respectively).

Girls are more likely to actively use the public library compared with boys (39% vs. 49% respectively). This gender gap in library use extends into adulthood, with women being significantly more likely than men to use the library (45% vs. 34% respectively).⁷¹

When children who did not use their local library were asked why not, boys generally thought about public libraries more negatively than girls. Boys were also more led by the behaviour of their friends, with more boys than girls saying that they do not use a public library because their friends do not go.⁷² It appears that the uneasy relationship between male gender identities and literacy is influencing male attitudes and use of libraries.

School libraries have a hugely important role to play as power houses of reading within the school community. Anthony Horowitz commented:

“I can tell you if a school has a good library five minutes after entering it... It is in the eyes of the kids.”

This observation is backed up by international evidence that connects the quality of school library provision to the achievement of pupils⁷³.

Evidence was received of how school and public libraries are directly engaging boys in reading through initiatives such as The Reading Agency’s Summer Reading Challenge, and through “Dads and Lads” initiatives which specifically encourage fathers to support their sons’ reading. Compelling evidence of the role of school libraries in engaging boys in reading was received. Many school librarians talked about how they made use of Accelerated Reader, which quizzes children on books they have read. The competitive nature of the activity was seen as very attractive to boys. Ofsted’s *School Libraries: Making a Difference to Learning*⁷⁴ contains excellent examples of best practice.

⁶⁷ Hall, C. and Coles, M. (1999) Children’s reading choices. London: Routledge.

⁶⁸ Clark, C. and Foster, A. (2005) Children’s and Young People’s Reading Habits and Preferences: The who, what, why, where and when, http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research/273

⁶⁹ <http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/research/taking-part-Y6-child-adult-report.pdf>

⁷⁰ <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/NPDZ01/NPDZ01.pdf>

⁷¹ <http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/research/taking-part-Y6-child-adult-report.pdf>

⁷² Clark, C. (2010) Linking School Libraries and Literacy, http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research/2477

⁷³ <http://www.lrs.org/impact.php>

⁷⁴ Ofsted (2006) School Libraries: Making a difference to learning, <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/good-school-libraries-making-difference-learning>



"I can tell you if a school has a good library five minutes after entering it... It is in the eyes of the kids."

Anthony Horowitz, author

Conclusions and recommendations

Boys' level of achievement and engagement in reading has long-term implications, and is linked to achievement in other areas of education. While it is an international problem, we do not believe that it is simply biological or inevitable; girls are not more likely to be "wired" as readers.

If we are to address this issue, we believe that it needs to be fully understood by parents, teachers and professionals working with boys and young men. We believe that professionals need to be equipped with resources and strategies to engage and encourage boys in reading, and that they need to have a strong knowledge of children's literature and, particularly, materials that appeal to unmotivated boys. We believe that parents should be supported in building a home reading culture that includes boys, and fathers should understand the importance of their involvement, both in providing support and in acting as a role model.

As we have discussed, underachievement in literacy and reading does not affect all boys; and does not affect boys alone. However, examining the issues around boys' reading is like applying a litmus test to determine how we can best support the literacy skills of all pupils.

5.1 Why some boys underachieve in reading

The evidence we received suggests that boys' underachievement in reading is a complex issue. To help our understanding, we have adopted a three-stage model:

1. **Gender identities** significantly impact on boys' attitudes to reading. Their literacy behaviours and ultimately their skills are frequently affected by attitudes which see success as being linked to non-academic activities. One boy in five sees reading as being more for girls. These identities increase the likelihood of boys having a low interest in reading as an enjoyable activity and may undermine their literacy attainment.
2. Negative attitudes to reading related to gender identities are exacerbated by **external social and educational contexts** such as increasing peer pressures and the transition to secondary school. These potentially strengthen the negative impact of gender identity on literacy attainment.
3. In addition, there are often specific **triggers which turn boys off reading** (the most frequently quoted are preference for other forms of leisure activity and not finding reading materials which interest them). These provide children with the specific reason they say they don't want to read.

Of course, many of these issues may also apply to girls. And there are female gender identities which also negatively impact on attitudes to learning and reading. However, the impact is frequently more significant for boys. This may be because of more positive female role modelling of reading, beginning with the stronger role which many mothers take in supporting early literacy development; or because female gender identities are sometimes less hostile to reading and education; or because girls find it easier to access texts which interest them.

5.2 What is the solution?

The evidence that we have heard suggests to us that no single approach will turn into readers those boys who currently don't think it's for them. There is no silver bullet.

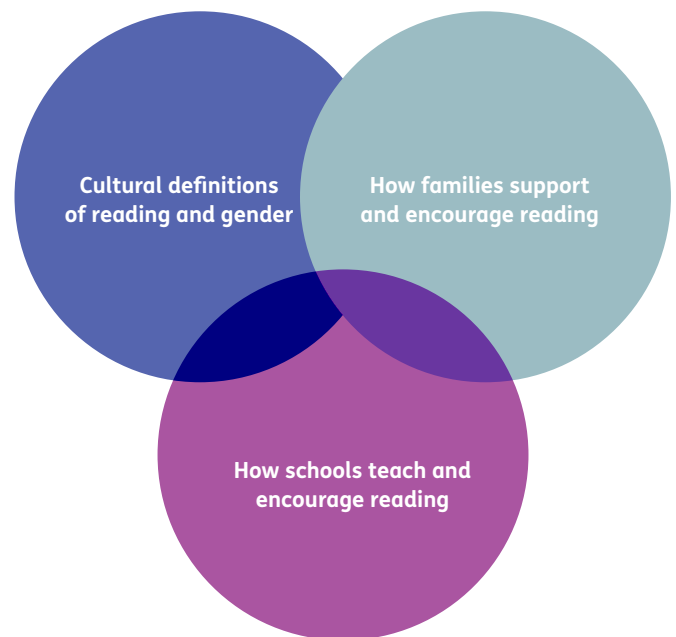
We believe that in order to motivate and engage more boys in reading, a sustained approach is required.

As Michael Morpurgo commented:

“The problem is cultural and deep-seated, therefore unlikely to be resolved quickly. The effort to turn things round has to be multi-faceted and has to be sustained over decades.”

This approach needs to support the development of gender identities in young people which value education; to develop a supportive and positive social context for boys' reading; and to counteract the possible negative triggers of literacy disengagement. It also needs to engage boys in schools, supporting how they learn to read and developing their identities as readers. It needs to ensure that the home learning environment supports boys' literacy. It needs to engage fathers and male role models in boys' reading.

Our recommendations for this approach focus on the development and alignment of three areas (adapted from the Teachers as Readers research by the United Kingdom Literacy Association⁷⁵):



It is a complex challenge and extends into areas beyond the remit of public policy. However, literacy is a statutory objective and we are dealing with a failure of this objective. Therefore, it is appropriate for public services to make a strong commitment and work in partnership with community and voluntary sector agencies, businesses and families themselves to remedy the inequalities faced by many boys as a result of their low levels of literacy.

Many of our recommendations are not gender specific – they relate as much to the literacy and reading of girls as they do of boys. However, we believe that they will impact significantly on the attitudes to reading and ultimately the literacy levels of the boys who do not see themselves as readers and have no appetite for literacy.

⁷⁵ United Kingdom Literacy Association (2008) Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers, http://www.ukla.org/downloads/teachers_as_readers.pdf

5.3 Recommendations to Government

1. Schools should have access to an evidence framework to inform effective practice in supporting boys' reading.

Schools need support in their identification of effective practice in supporting boys' reading. The Department for Education should create an online evidence framework to allow teachers to access appropriate interventions and resources. It may be appropriate for the Education Endowment Fund to undertake this. Currently, over 80% of schools are adopting approaches to supporting boys' reading and literacy, frequently with little reference to evidence of effectiveness or research.

2. Every child should be supported by their school in developing as a reader. Crucially, schools must promote reading for enjoyment and involve parents (overtly fathers) in their reading strategies.

Schools need to provide children with opportunities to read around their own interests, and enjoy reading. Boys are less likely than girls to be provided with opportunities to do this in the home. The Department for Education should use all resources at its disposal (research, strategic guidance, third sector grants) to ensure that this happens. The Department for Education should endorse Ofsted's recommendation that every school should have a reading strategy. It should also ask Ofsted to report on whether schools have reading strategies, and whether there is a focus on the needs of groups of pupils who are more likely to fall behind – including boys, as well as the effectiveness of the school library in supporting these strategies.

3. Every teacher should have an up-to-date knowledge of reading materials that will appeal to disengaged boys.

The Department for Education needs to work to ensure that all teachers have access to up-to-date information about reading materials which will engage and excite children, particularly boys. All schools should have a library at their heart. The school librarian has an important role to play in enthusing teachers with a knowledge of reading materials. However, primary school libraries are infrequently staffed and school library services are closing. Even in secondary schools a minority of school libraries have a qualified librarian.

The Department for Education and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport need to ensure that a universal advisory service is available to support teachers in their knowledge of children's books. In the first instance schools need to be encouraged to invest in their library provision. The aim is to create a national network of school librarians, schools library services and public librarians coordinated through the proposed Cultural Learning Hubs. This advisory network should also be able to draw on up-to-date research on the reading interests and preferences of boys.

4. Parents need to be able to access information on how successful schools are in supporting boys' literacy.

The data sets published by the Department for Education should contain the relative performance in literacy of boys and girls.

5. Libraries should target children (particularly boys) who are least likely to be supported in their reading at home.

This needs to be addressed through partnerships. Libraries need to work in partnership with children's centres to target younger families who most need support. This builds on the important contribution libraries made to literacy in earlier forms of Sure Start. Libraries must also work with schools to ensure that children who are least likely to be taken to the library by their parents, or face problems with their reading, can take part in important initiatives such as the Summer Reading Challenge. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education should use every resource at their disposal to encourage this to happen.

6. Social marketing and behavioural insight need to be deployed to encourage parents to support the literacy of their children – especially boys.

The Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team should examine how positive parenting around literacy can be promoted through media, messaging and the use of cultural influences. Gender issues need to be considered as a key factor.

7. Every boy should have weekly support from a male reading role model.

One boy in five thinks reading is more for girls than boys. This reflects the fact that mothers are more likely to support their children's reading than fathers, that mothers are more likely to read in front of their children and that the teacher who teaches a child to read is more likely to be a woman. Many boys will be supported in their reading by males within the home, but for those who aren't, the recruitment of male reading volunteers is a vital strategy. The Government should use volunteering initiatives such as the National Citizen Service and the newly announced Decade of Social Action to engage young men in the support of boys' reading.

8. Parenting initiatives must specifically support literacy and fathers.

The Department for Education and the Department of Health need to embed literacy, speech and language in all parenting and family initiatives. Parenting classes (including the results of the CANparent pilot), antenatal and postnatal support need to give explicit guidance to parents in supporting the early literacy of their children. At this stage, it needs to be explained that boys and girls need the same exposure to language and literacy. The Department for Education and the Department of Health need to ensure that fathers and male carers are included in all parenting and family initiatives and supported in their understanding of how children learn to read, write and communicate. Generic parenting and family initiatives will always speak more directly to mothers than to fathers, unless the male role in parenting is made explicit.

9. A cross-Government approach to literacy needs to be developed and coordinated.

The cost of poor literacy is borne by all areas of government from criminal justice to health. All departments should therefore be seen as stakeholders in addressing low literacy. The Department for Education needs to develop a partnership approach to literacy across government departments and with the community and voluntary sector. Agencies involved need to include those who have an interest in working with groups who face literacy issues. This should include organisations committed to the development of positive gender identities and supporting fathers.



"The effort to turn things round has to be multi-faceted and has to be sustained over decades."

Michael Morpurgo, author

Summary of evidence

A research review has been published separately. It is available, along with transcripts of evidence sessions, at www.literacytrust.org.uk/boys

Researchers:

Jonathan Douglas
Dr Christina Clark
Sam Brookes
David Burke
Fiona Lewis
Jane Woodley

We are grateful to everyone who provided evidence for the Commission:

- 226 schools and other settings were surveyed
- An open call for evidence received 18 submissions.
- A focus group was held with six boys aged seven to nine at Dersingham Primary School, Newham
- An expert witness session took place at the House of Commons. Evidence was heard from:

Dyslexia Action, Paul Keenleyside
Every Child a Chance Trust, Di Hatchett
Anthony Horowitz, author
Michael Morpurgo, author
National Foundation for Educational Research, Liz Twist
Ofsted, Philip Jarrett
Oxford University Press, Andrea Quincey
Michael Rosen, author
St Paul's Academy, Deputy Headteacher, Emily Tudor
St Paul's Academy, Headteacher, Patrick Winston
The Open University (and Board member of Booktrust), Professor Teresa Cremin
The Reading Agency, Sue Jones
United Kingdom Literacy Association, Dr Eve Bearne
Working with Men, Owen Thomas
Working with Men, Sally Mehta

Survey results were anonymous but the following schools and settings gave their names:

Acre Rigg Junior School
Adams Grammar School
Alma Park Primary
Alperton Community School
Ashlyns School
Bangor Grammar School
Barnfield West Academy
Beckstone Primary School
Birdwell Primary School
Brayton High School
BSix Sixth Form College
Buttershaw Business and Enterprise College
Carmel College, A Catholic Academy
Carr Hill Primary and Nursery School
Castleford Academy
Catton Grove Primary
Christ The King RC Primary School.
Corpus Christi High School
Croydon Literacy Centre
Dezives School
Eccleston CE Primary School
Edgar Stammers Primary School
Esher High School
Exmouth Community College
Gearies Junior School
Grange Academy
Grange School
Guilsborough School
Hady Primary School
Hammersmith Academy
Harrow High School
Home School
King Edward VI School
Kirkby C of E Primary School
Knutton St Mary's Primary School
Landau Forte Academy QEMS
Langley Hall Primary Academy
Langley Secondary School
Leeds City College
Lincoln Christ's Hospital School
Little Buddies Pre-school
Little Oaks Nursery
Long Cross Primary School
Manchester Academy
Marine Park Primary School
Marlborough Infants School
Montessori Education for Autism
Mountain Ash Comprehensive School
Newman Catholic College
Normanhurst School
Northwood Prep School
Parkside Junior School Ashbourne
Pent Valley Technology College
Pudsey Primrose Hill Primary School
Rainhill High School
Ripley St Thomas CE Academy
Risedale Community College

Saltley School
Shebbear College
Shevington High School
Sidegate Primary School
Sir William Stanier Community School
St Catherine's School
St George's C of E Primary School
St Joseph the Worker RC Primary School
St Mary's Catholic School
St Mary's High School
St Michael's CE High School
St Peters C of E Church School
St. Peter's C of E Primary School
Sugar Hill Primary School
Sutton Local Authority
The Blessed Sacrament School
The Emmbrook School
The Martin High School
The Perse School
The Warriner School
Tupton Hall School
Walton Oak School
Wardiur Catholic Primary School
Westerton Primary School
Wootton Upper School



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