

Why are boys falling behind: the impact of boys attitudes towards literacy and their reading behaviours

Introduction

The gender gap in relation to reading attainment is a hotly debated topic. The ‘Boys Reading Commission’, published in 2012 by the National Literacy Trust (NLT), found that the gap extended beyond achievement to influence reading enjoyment, behaviour and choices.

This research digest sets out the findings from the three main areas of the Commission:

- the scale of the problem: the areas where boys are struggling and emerging trends in the UK;
- the impact of boys’ attitudes towards literacy and their reading behaviours; and
- some of the effective approaches in supporting boys’ literacy.

In doing so, it aims to identify and evaluate the beneficial strategies in motivating boys’ literacy.

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Background

In 2000, the Department for Education commissioned a four-year study into raising boys’ achievement. The commission worked with over 60 schools in England to investigate the strategies in motivating boys. In 2012, the NLT published a short report updating the findings with evidence from a survey of practitioners from 226 UK schools; a review of the academic and policy perspectives; and a survey of 21,000 8-16 year olds in 2011.

The scale of the problem with boys’ literacy in the UK

In 2012, the Commission reported that girls were outperforming boys on all National Curriculum reading tests, from early years through to GCSEs and A Levels. In 2011, 89% and 88% of girls achieved their expected level in reading at KS1 and KS2 respectively, compared to 82% and 80% of boys respectively. Between 1998 and 2011, the gap between boys and girls in reading attainment at KS1 and 2 remained constant at around an 8 or 9 percentage point difference. This increased slightly through KS3 to a gap of between 12 and 13 percentage points, and continued at GCSE level; in 2011, 72.5% of girls achieved A*-C in English, compared to 58.7% of boys, and the gap between the number of students achieving the

highest grades was at its widest since 1994, with 26.5% of girls achieving A*-A grades in English compared to 19.8% of boys.

Furthermore, the Commission found that the gender gap in literacy extended beyond being just about attainment. From the NLT survey (2011) of nearly 21,000 8-16 year olds, evidence emerged that:

- **Boys did not enjoy reading as much as girls.** The survey indicated that not only were boys more likely than girls to struggle with reading, but they were also more likely to say they only enjoyed reading a bit or not at all. This was supported by the findings from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009, which found that just over half of 15 year old boys claimed to read for enjoyment compared with nearly three quarters of girls.
- Perhaps as a result of this, the survey also found that **boys did not read as much as girls.** In 2011, 35% of girls reported reading outside school every day, compared with 26% of boys.
- **Boys enjoyed reading different materials.** Across the OECD countries which participated in PISA 2009, girls were twice as likely as boys to read fiction for enjoyment, whereas boys were more likely than girls to read newspapers and comic books. The results from the NLT survey supported these findings.
- **Girls had a more positive attitude towards reading than boys.** In the NLT survey, more boys than girls agreed with statements such as “I only read when I have to”, “I cannot find things to read that interest me” and “Reading is more for girls than boys”.
- **Girls were more likely to see themselves as readers.** Previous studies (Lynch, 2002) have demonstrated a strong relationship between young people’s perceptions of themselves as readers and their reading attainment. In the NLT survey, a quarter of boys responded that they did not view themselves as readers, compared to a sixth of girls; of these boys, only 3.3% said they enjoyed reading very much or quite a lot, and only 5.4% said they were reading every day.
- **Boys were less likely to use reading resources than girls,** such as public libraries. When asked why they did not use their local library, boys’ responses included that the library did not have interesting books or enough computers, they did not think of the library as a friendly space, and that their friends did not go. Boys were also less likely than girls to have visited a museum or bookshop or been given a book as a present.

Why are boys falling behind?

In 2011 the NLT conducted a survey of 226 practitioners, to ask them about their experience with boys’ literacy, and why they thought there was a gender gap in reading attainment. The findings can be grouped into three main categories.

Perceived cultural norms

“Reading isn’t cool”: One commonly cited reason given in the survey as to why boys were reading less and had lower attainment levels in reading was that boys did not regard reading as “cool”. As one survey respondent wrote: *“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.”*

The survey also highlighted differences in young people’s emotional responses and attitudes towards reading. Girls were more likely than boys to say that reading made them feel calm or happy, whilst boys were more likely to say that reading made them feel bored or stressed. In addition, when asked to describe a reader, girls were more likely to use terms like “happy”, “clever” or “someone who will do well in life” – whilst boys were more likely to describe readers as “boring”.

Boys' reading interests: Many practitioners surveyed felt that the reading interests of boys were not reflected in the school curriculum, and that this followed a more general trend in the publishing industry, with the majority of popular published material for young people being aimed at girls.

Boys' reading role models: Practitioners also felt that boys had a lack of male role models for reading compared with girls, especially in schools or departments with a predominantly female work force. One respondent commented: *"Girls are generally more comfortable with the reading culture; being seen with a book, being good at reading and enjoying reading. Unfortunately, reading may be perceived as a stereotypical pastime owing to the fact that many primary and English teachers are female."* However, the research evidence disagrees about the extent to which there is a link between a teacher's gender and the benefits or disadvantages for pupils of the same or different gender.

"Assessments favour girls": Another common argument in discussions of boys' underachievement in literacy is that the types of assessment most frequently used in English – extended written compositions or essays – favour girls over boys. However, elsewhere the research evidence has argued that this approach would be too simplistic, and the report concludes that arguments about assessment need to be put into a wider context.

Literacy in the home

Children learn from watching, and as a result, what parents are seen to do can have a significant impact on children's development. The importance of parents as reading role models is evidenced in the Kids and Family Reading Report (2006), which found that 53% of children whose parents were high frequency readers reported reading for fun every day, compared to only 15% of children whose parents read for fun 2-3 times a month or less.

Individual factors

Responses relating to individual factors varied in the survey, and included:

- boys' activity levels and their inability to sit still for long enough to enjoy reading; and
- the perception that girls mature more quickly and can therefore concentrate more and for longer periods, and demonstrate more perseverance.

What can be done to counter this?

When practitioners were asked what would make the biggest difference in raising boys' attainment in literacy, many of the solutions offered mirrored the perceived needs of boys, such as:

- engaging boys' interest through the use of texts or approaches which were likely to be of greater interest to them, such as linking it with technology;
- buying in more reading material for boys;
- running reading challenges or competitions to raise aspirations and lend activities around reading a more competitive element;
- increasing boys' access to male reading role models, such as bringing in visiting male authors;
- have silent reading time or environmental reading setting such as reading dens;
- validating and encouraging appreciation of different types of text, such as non-fiction books or comics; and
- engaging boys' in reading in contexts outside of school, such as library visits or involving parents.

Implications

For teachers

In compiling this digest, its author identified the following questions for teachers:

- The NLT surveys suggest that practitioners and young people did not feel that the reading materials they encountered at school were geared towards engaging boys' interests. What kinds of texts could you introduce into the classroom that would draw boys into reading? For example, do you encourage your pupils to engage with a good range of text types, including those might be more accessible to boys who struggle with reading, or struggle to relate fiction to their own lives – such as comic books or non-fiction texts?
- One suggestion made by the report was to introduce reading challenges or competitions to your class, to raise aspirations and bring in a more competitive element which might spark boys' interest. How might you do this in your class in ways which do not risk explicitly favouring girls or students who are already more confident readers (such as requiring students to read different types or genres of text)?

For school leaders

In compiling this digest, its author identified the following question for school leaders:

- The report suggests that one of the reasons boys might become disengaged with reading as an activity, or feel that it is “not for them”, is due to a lack of male reading role models, in school and at home. How can the school as a whole help boys notice more male reading role models e.g. by having male authors come to the school to deliver a session to pupils underachieving in literacy or asking other visitors to talk about the positive impacts of texts on them?

Find out more

Original report: Clarke, C., Burke, D. (2012). 'Boys' Reading Commission: A review of existing research to underpin the Commission'. London: National Literacy Trust. Available at:

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