



Demystifying the reluctant reader

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

According to Henk and Melnick (1995: 472),

how an individual feels about him or herself as a reader could clearly influence whether reading would be sought or avoided, the amount of effort that would occur during reading, and how persistently comprehension would be pursued.

Yet, how children perceive themselves as readers and the relationship between these perceptions and their reading habits and achievements is still a relatively recent area of research (e.g. Chapman and Tunmer, 1995).

In our recent National Literacy Trust survey of 29 primary and secondary schools in England, some of the key questions revolved around the reader self-concept. What does it mean to be a reader? What are the characteristics typically assigned to readers and what materials does a reader enjoy? And how do readers and non-readers differ in their perception of these?

The following analyses are based on 1143 pupils who defined themselves as “Readers” and 471 pupils who defined themselves as “Non-readers”. However, as our findings show, a huge percentage of non-readers DO read, just not the kinds of materials that are traditionally associated with reading.

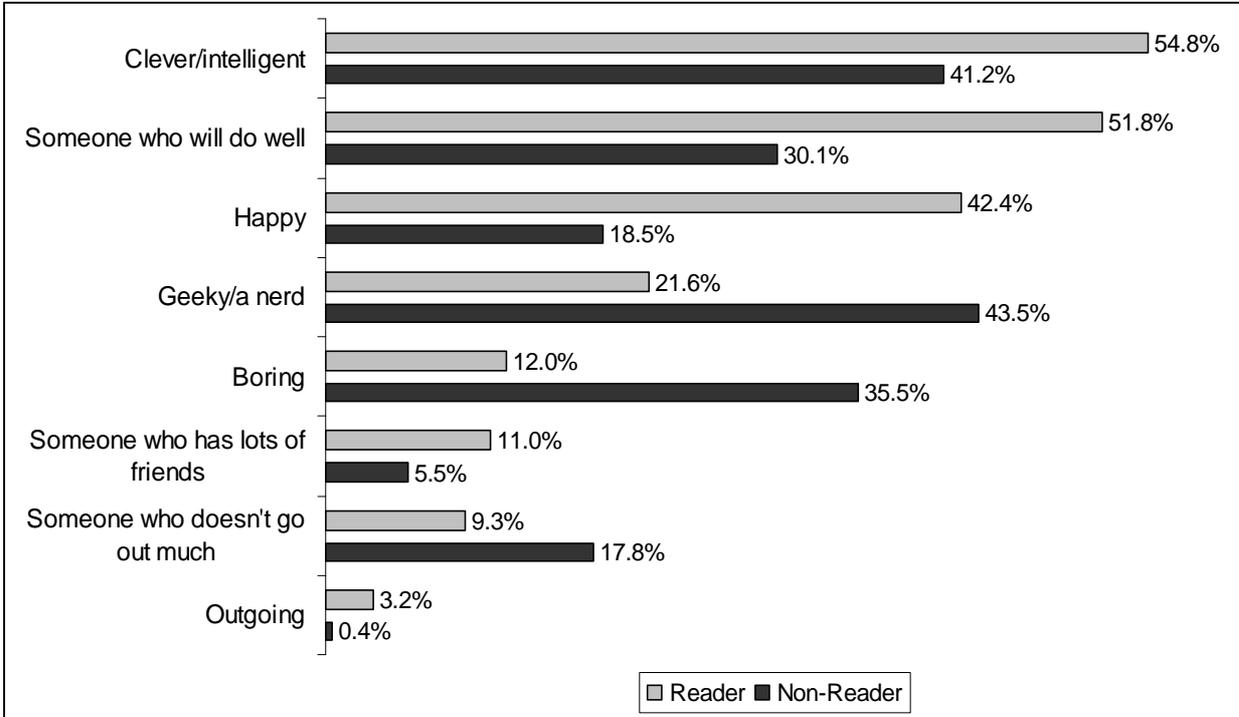
Previous research has shown that young people who enjoy reading do it more frequently and tend to become skilled at it. Results from our survey also show that there were significant differences between self-defined readers and non-readers in terms of their self-rated reading proficiency, with significantly more readers than non-readers rating themselves as good readers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, self-defined readers also reported reading more frequently outside of school compared to non-readers. For example, 48% of readers said they read outside of school every day or almost every day compared with only 2.9% of non-readers.

When asked what type of materials they read outside of school, self-defined readers endorsed a greater variety of texts than non-readers. The greatest difference between the two groups was found for fiction books, with 60% of readers and only 11% of non-readers saying that they read fiction outside of school. Although readers read more widely than non-readers, a great proportion of self-defined non-readers still read outside of school. For example, 66% of self-defined non-readers read magazines, 52% read websites, 49% read blogs/networking websites and 43% read emails.

If they still read outside of school, then why did non-readers label themselves as such? There may be a glimpse of an answer to this question. We also asked pupils to indicate the types of materials a reader might enjoy reading. With the exception of magazines, self-defined non-readers believed that readers enjoy materials that they themselves do not read, such as fiction books, factual books, poetry and newspapers. Only a small percentage of non-readers believed that readers enjoy websites, emails and blogs/networking sites. This perception of 'reader appropriate' materials is reflected in the types of texts they believe adults in their school are encouraging them to read. Alongside readers, self-defined non-readers believed that adults in their school encourage them to read fiction books, factual books, poetry, and newspapers – again, materials they themselves do not read outside of school. It is therefore likely that non-readers defined themselves as such partly because they do not read the types of materials they believe a reader reads.

However, there is also another dimension. When asked to imagine someone who reads and what kind of person they are (see **Figure 1**), self-defined non-readers perceived them in an unfavourable and undesirable light, such as being geeky and boring, while also seeing them as someone who is clever and who will do well.

Figure 1: If you imagine someone who reads, what kind of person are they?



This finding has some serious practical and policy implications. Those who make and implement policy should be cautious about encouraging children and young people to

become 'readers' and to be known as and see themselves as such, when many do not see being a reader as something entirely desirable. If 43.5% of those who do not consider themselves readers think that a reader is a geek, and 35.5% think a reader is boring, perhaps more needs to be done to try to change the perception of what a reader is.

In addition to questions about reading habits and perceptions about readers and reading, we also investigated the social influences on young people as readers, namely their perception of home, peer and school stimuli. Interactions with significant others greatly influence children's perceptions of themselves (Brookover and Gottlieb, 1964). Gambrell (1996) proposes that "social interactions with others about books and stories foster wide, frequent reading" (p. 22). She also maintains that "opportunities for sharing and talking with others about books is an important factor in developing engaged, motivated readers" and supports the contention that social interactions have a positive influence on reading achievement (p. 22). Daniels (2002) also supports the idea of literature discussions: "what real readers actually do is find someone to talk to, ASAP. We need to enthuse about the book, to grieve the lost characters, revisit the funniest lines, savor the beautiful language" (p. 90).

However, this study has shown that these strategies seem to work best for young people who are already engaged readers. Self-defined non-readers do not appear to have, or at the very least do not perceive themselves as having, the same opportunities for social interactions around reading as their reading peers. One of the consistent findings in the present study has been that non-readers are more likely to say that they do not know what their family thinks about their reading, that they do not feel that they get family encouragement to read, that they do not know whether their friends are reading or, indeed, what their friends are reading, and that they do not know what materials are being promoted by adults in their school. More specifically, when asked who in their family encourages them to read, 12.4% of readers and a concerning 56.3% of non-readers said no one does, compared with just 12.4% of readers.

The need for encouragement should therefore be clear. Whether or not young people's perceptions of family influences are the result of general negative attitudes towards reading, any measures that help parents to support their children's literacy skills are to be welcomed – including the National Year of Reading in 2008. Many initiatives encourage parents of very young children to recognise their important role in helping their children to learn. Perhaps more can be done to emphasise to parents of older children that involvement in their education, including encouragement to read materials that they enjoy, can have a significant impact, too.

Overall, our research has highlighted the importance of young people's perceptions of what it means to be a reader and how these perceptions appear to shape their reading habits. The importance of changing these perceptions is particularly relevant because of the discrepancies between the materials that children and young people think a reader reads, or think that their school encourages them to read, and the reading matter they choose for themselves. It is striking that large numbers of even those who do not consider themselves readers *do* read; the important point is that they do not often read fiction. They are also less likely than the 'readers' to recognise that a reader may read a wide range of materials.

As indicated above, those working to encourage closer links between home and school, as well as reading for pleasure, may find it helpful to bear in mind that the top reading

materials outside school are not, as the children believe their schools encourage, books and poetry, but rather magazines, websites and emails. Policymakers and practitioners may wish to consider whether non-book reading materials are sufficiently valued as having a contribution to make to educational development and attainment.

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

Recent research by the UKLA (2007) into the reading choices of primary teachers showed that the majority of teachers read popular fiction for pleasure, followed by autobiography/biography. The least frequently read categories included newspapers and magazines, practical/factual, poetry and plays. The study also highlighted a deficit in teachers' knowledge of picturebooks and poetry. This is a concern given our finding that a considerable percentage of primary and secondary pupils read comics/graphic novels outside of class and feel that texts such as these are not encouraged by schools.

The need to develop teachers' knowledge of alternative types of text may be addressed through professional development or even in initial teacher training. It is hoped not only that developing teachers' knowledge of such alternative texts will help foster children's reading for pleasure both in and out of school but also that an increase in teachers' awareness of such materials will help validate young people's reading choices.

This is particularly pertinent not only to our survey findings but also to research by Alvermann and colleagues (2007), who found that many struggling readers considered themselves as readers in out-of-school activities that were relevant to their everyday literacy activities and that offered choice. The National Year of Reading provides an ideal opportunity to promote the value of many different kinds of reading, not only for enjoyment but also as having a contribution to make to educational development and attainment.

For more information on the survey findings, and the National Year of Reading in 2008, visit www.literacytrust.org.uk

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