

HOW JANET AND JOHN FEEL ABOUT READING: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN NEW ZEALAND PRIMARY STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TO READING

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***ABSTRACT** The differing achievement levels of boys and girls in New Zealand schools is a cause for concern. This is especially true in the areas of literacy, where the greatest differences in the achievement of boys and girls are occurring. The attitudes and motivations of students in a learning area have a strong impact on their academic achievement. This article examines the differences between the responses to a survey on attitudes towards reading carried out as part of the National Education Monitoring Project. Although some important differences emerged, overall the enthusiasm for, and enjoyment of, reading by both boys and girls is encouraging.*

INTRODUCTION

The difference in the academic achievement levels of boys and girls is one that has received great attention in recent times, with the underachievement of boys being called the "major issue of the 1990s" (Rutledge, 2000). The phenomenon is relatively recent, replacing previous concern in the achievement levels of girls: "The traditional educational disadvantage shown by females has largely disappeared and has been replaced by an emerging male disadvantage" (Fergusson & Horwood, 1997). The Education Review Office reports that "girls currently outperform boys at school against all measures of achievement" warning that "this pattern of [boys'] underachievement is likely to have serious consequences, both for boys themselves and for society at large" (Education Review Office, 1999).

One of the major areas of concern is the difference in achievement in the areas of literacy. The National Education Monitoring Project publishes a series of reports giving an overview of what New Zealand primary school students know and can do. Twelve reports, reporting on 15 learning areas, are prepared over a four-year cycle. Five areas of literacy are assessed; reading, writing, listening, viewing and speaking. In these five areas, not only have girls demonstrated higher achievement, but the largest gaps in the performance between boys and girls have occurred.

Many factors influence student achievement in a learning area. A positive attitude is very important: "students' attitudes, interests and liking for a subject have a strong bearing on progress and learning outcomes" (Crooks & Flockton, 1999). Research shows that students learn best when they enjoy what they are doing and when they see a value and a purpose for what they are learning (Doran, Lawrenz & Hegelson, 1994). Other factors also influence students' achievement, such as the experiences and opportunities they have in and out of school, the expectations and support of significant people in their lives and the extent to which they experience feelings of personal success and capability. This article

examines some of the differences in responses by boys and girls in a survey on attitudes to reading and reading habits conducted with students as part of New Zealand's National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP).

The survey was carried out with a national sample of students from 260 schools and completed by 478 students at Year 4 (257 boys and 221 girls) and 477 students at Year 8 (254 boys and 223 girls). The students answered the questionnaire in an interview setting, answering the questions on their own, but with the teacher available to assist with reading questions and/or recording responses where required.

Students were asked three types of questions: Likert-type scale questions; choosing responses from a list of options; and open questions. Fifteen of the Likert-type scales gave four choices as four faces, for the purpose of analysis these faces have been assigned the following numeric values:

$$\text{😊} = 4; \quad \text{😐} = 3; \quad \text{😞} = 2; \quad \text{😡} = 1.$$

A further Likert-type scale question involved the use of verbal indicators: heaps, quite a lot, sometimes, never. These were again assigned a numeric value on a descending scale of 4 to 1. Differences in responses between boys and girls were checked for statistical significance using t-tests. The critical level for statistical significance was set at $p = .01$ so that differences of this magnitude between the two groups would not be expected by chance in more than 1% of cases.

Twenty-four questions were asked in the survey and student responses to these questions are presented in three sections: reading at school, reading when not at school, and perceptions of ability in reading.

READING AT SCHOOL

Students were asked to select their three favourite school subjects from a list of 12 subjects. Reading was chosen as one of the three favourite subjects by 29% of the Year 4 students, ranking fifth in student choices at this level. Art was the favourite subject of Year 4 students (70% listed it as one of their three favourite subjects); physical education came second (42%), and mathematics third (37%). Reading dropped to seventh place in student choices of favourite subjects at the Year 8 level, identified by 19% as one of their three favourite subjects. First choice at this level was physical education (55%), art was second (44%); and mathematics third (40%). Girls were more likely than boys to choose reading as one of their favourite subjects: at Year 4 it was chosen by 31% of the girls and 19% of the boys, and at Year 8 by 24% of the girls and 12% of the boys.

A separate question asked students to rate how much they liked reading at school. Students were very positive about this: 90% of Year 4 students and 86% of Year 8 students gave a positive rating on the four-point scale. They were also asked to rate how they felt about a number of aspects of a classroom reading programme: reading to a group, reading to the teacher, reading to the class, the stories/books used in their classroom programme and when their teacher reads a story out loud. Year 4 students consistently used higher ratings than Year 8 students on the scale used. This reflects a trend that has been observed in the NEMP surveys, younger students are generally more positive than older students in the survey questions. Other researchers have also noted a general decline in students' enjoyment of school as students get older (Schibeci, 1984; Simpson,

Koballa, Oliver & Crawley, 1994). The mean ratings for responses to these questions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Enjoyment of Reading at School

	Year 4		Year 8	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
How much do you like reading at school?	3.45	3.32	3.06*	3.26*
How do you feel about reading in a group in the classroom?	3.16	3.18	2.79	2.90
How do you feel when asked to read out loud to the teacher?	2.80*	3.06*	2.44*	2.67*
How do you feel when asked to read out loud to the class?	2.36*	2.67*	2.01*	2.26*
How do you feel about the stories/books you read as part of your reading programme?	3.22	3.37	2.90	2.99
How do you feel when your teacher reads a story out loud?	3.67	3.71	3.38	3.31

* These differences are statistically significant ($p = .01$)

Year 4 boys liked reading at school more than Year 4 girls, but this had changed by Year 8. At Year 8, girls were more positive than boys about liking reading and, at this level, the differences in responses at this level were statistically significant. Girls gave a higher mean rating for enjoyment of reading at school than boys.

There were also differences in responses to students' feelings about reading aloud to the teacher and to the class. Reading to the class was regarded unfavourably by students, and more so by boys. Older students were more negative about reading to the class than younger students. Students preferred to read to the teacher. At Year 4, two-thirds of the boys (64%) gave a positive rating to this question compared to three-quarters of the girls (76%). Student ratings for this dropped for Year 8 students: 49% of the boys and 61% of the girls giving a positive rating.

Having the teacher read a story was very highly rated, especially by Year 4 students but retaining popularity at Year 8. Girls were more positive about this at Year 4, but at Year 8 boys expressed greater enjoyment. The stories and books read as part of school reading programmes were also enjoyed, although more so by girls than boys.

A further question with a Likert-type rating scale was asked to determine how often students read to others at school. Students at both age levels thought they were reading a good deal to others at school: the mean for Year 4 students

being 2.69 for both boys and girls. Year 8 students rated this even higher, the mean for boys being 2.93 and for girls being 2.94. These differences were not statistically significant.

Students were also presented with a list of eight reading activities and asked which they liked doing most at school, with a further option of recording something else they liked doing at school (other). They were invited to tick up to three activities. The percentage of students who ticked each option is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Reading Activities Enjoyed at School

Reading Activity	Year 4		Year 8	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Silent reading	65%	60%	79%	78%
Listening to teacher reading	61%	61%	59%	55%
Reading with buddy/partner	49%	46%	28%	32%
Written work	32%	42%	34%	38%
Reading with the teacher	27%	36%	8%	7%
Looking at/browsing books	24%	14%	40%	27%
Talking about books	21%	10%	16%	17%
Reading aloud	9%	16%	7%	15%
Other	8%	8%	6%	6%

The most popular reading activities at both levels were silent reading and listening to the teacher reading. Nearly half the Year 4 students identified reading with a buddy as an activity they like doing at school, but this was not as popular at Year 8. Boys at both levels indicated a greater preference than girls for looking at or browsing through books, and at Year 4 twice as many boys said they liked to talk about books. Girls at Year 4 were more likely to indicate written work and reading with the teacher.

READING WHEN NOT AT SCHOOL

Student involvement with and enjoyment of reading in their own time (when not at school) was surveyed in a number of different questions. Student responses to the Likert-type scale questions measured a number of aspects of reading for pleasure. The mean ratings for student responses to these questions are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Attitudes to Reading When Not at School

	Year 4		Year 8	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
How much do you like reading in your own time (not at school)?	3.20*	3.57*	2.91*	3.34*
How do you feel about getting a book for a present?	3.62	3.71	3.17*	3.35*
How do you feel about looking at books in a bookshop?	3.53	3.59	3.30	3.47
How do you feel about going to a library?	3.59	3.68	3.31	3.40

* These differences are statistically significant ($p = .01$)

Reading in their own time is an enjoyed student activity, especially at Year 4. At both levels, girls were more positive in their responses to these questions. This finding is not unexpected as "most surveys show that girls enjoy reading more than boys do, and that they read more often" (Elley, 1994, p. 69).

A general question on leisure activities was asked in a separate survey. A list of nine activities was presented to the students and they were asked to tick up to three activities which they most like to do in their spare time. The three favourite activities of Year 4 students were: playing video or computer games (49%), making things (42%) and doing art (40%). Reading was selected as one of the three favourite leisure activities by 16% of Year 4 students. The favourite activities of Year 8 students were playing games or sport (51%), playing video or computer games (45%), playing with friends (41%) and watching TV (41%), with 12% of Year 8 students selected reading as one of their three favourite leisure activities.

Boys were more likely at both levels to choose playing with video or computer games (more than twice as likely at both year levels) and watching television. At Year 8 boys are also more likely to choose "making things". Girls are more likely to choose talking on the telephone (and the gap between boys and girls for this increases at Year 8), and music (especially at Year 4). Girls at both levels are twice as likely to choose reading as one of the activities they like to do in their spare time.

It is also interesting to note that although reading was not identified as one of students' favourite leisure activities, it is still an activity that they enjoy doing. There has been concern expressed over the decline of reading for leisure with the rise of the use of television, video and computers as out-of-school activities (Elley, 1994). When asked how much they like reading in their own time, students gave a high rating, but when provided with a range of other possibilities for leisure activities, students were not selecting reading. It appears that students enjoy reading but it has to compete with other activities for their discretionary time.

Students also viewed books positively, giving high ratings for their feelings towards getting books for presents, visiting a library and looking at books in a bookshop. Year 4 students especially were very positive about getting a book for a present – 75% giving the highest rating compared to 45% of Year 8 students. Girls

were more positive than boys about getting books as presents. Going to the library and looking at books in bookstores were also enjoyed activities. For both these questions girls were slightly more positive than boys.

Students were also asked to say what they liked reading in their own time. A list of seven choices was given to the students, and an eighth option of saying something else (other) was also available. Students were asked to say what they liked the most, second most and third most. The proportion of students who selected each category is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: What Students Like to Read in Their Own Time

	Year 4		Year 8	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Fiction	69%	69%	64%	78%
Comics	62%	31%	43%	16%
Non-fiction	59%	53%	48%	44%
Poetry	26%	52%	14%	24%
Newspapers	22%	18%	29%	17%
Magazines	21%	32%	78%	51%
Junk mail	20%	15%	16%	11%
Other	14%	10%	26%	19%

There was some difference in the type of preferred reading in their own time between Year 4 and Year 8 students, and between boys and girls. Fiction was the preferred reading for both Year 4 girls and boys and Year 8 girls, but Year 8 boys' most preferred reading material was magazines. At Year 4, both boys and girls expressed a preference for reading fiction, but at Year 8, boys' preference for fiction had declined slightly while girls had increased. Interest in non-fiction decreases between Year 4 and Year 8, and for both these levels, boys expressed a greater interest in this than girls. Twice as many boys as girls said that they enjoyed reading comics, although interest in comics declined between years 4 and 8. Girls at both levels preferred poetry, but there was a big decline in interest in this between Years 4 and 8. More boys than girls at both levels said they liked to read newspapers, with the interest growing between Years 4 and 8. Interest in reading junk mail dropped between Years 4 and 8, and was preferred more by boys than girls at both levels.

PERCEPTIONS OF ABILITY IN READING

Students were asked to rate how good they thought they were at reading, and, in a separate question, how they felt about their own reading ability. Students were also asked to rate "How good does your teacher think you are at reading?" and "How good does your mum or dad think you are at reading?", with a "don't know" option available in the choice of responses. The mean ratings for student responses to these questions (excluding the students who selected the "don't know" option) are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Perceptions of Ability in Reading

	Year 4		Year 8	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
How good do you think you are at reading?	3.14	3.24	2.79	2.99
How do you feel about how well you read?	3.39	3.46	2.98*	3.16*
How good does your teacher think you are at reading?	3.40	3.45	2.92*	3.15*
How good does your mum or dad think you are at reading?	3.56*	3.72*	3.14	3.27

* These differences are statistically significant ($p = .01$)

Students had a positive perception of how good they are at reading, with Year 4 students being more positive about their ability than Year 8. Girls at both levels remained more positive than boys with girls of a similar age (9 – 10 years) being more likely to rate themselves as “very good” readers in the IEA Reading Literacy Study (Caygill, 1993). There was also a strong positive feeling by students towards how they feel about how well they are reading. Girls at both levels are again more positive than boys, the difference at Year 8 being statistically significant.

Over half of the students at Year 8 (55% of the girls and 51% of the boys) and 41% of the girls and 32% of the boys at Year 4 said they did not know how well their teacher thought they were reading. Girls were more likely to give this response. This could be because more capable readers required less individual assistance with reading, so opportunities for direct feedback from teachers were reduced.

Of the students who did rate how good their teacher thought they were at reading, the responses indicate that students believed that their teachers are more positive than they themselves are about how well they read. The mean response rates for “How good does your teacher think you are at reading?” were higher in every case than the mean response rates for “How good do you think you are at reading?”. Girls were more positive about their teachers’ opinions than boys.

Students indicated a higher level of awareness of how good their mum or dad thought they were at reading. A smaller proportion of Year 4 students (12% of the boys and 11% of the girls) than Year 8 students (28% of boys and 24% of girls) said they did not know what their parents thought. Girls were more positive than boys about their parents’ perceptions of their reading ability, especially at Year 4.

ATTRIBUTES OF ABILITY

Students were asked to say what they thought made a good reader. A list of 10 options was provided for the students and from that list students were asked to tick up to three. An 11th option (other) allowed the students to fill in something else a person needed to do to be a good reader that was not on the list. The proportion of students who ticked each option is shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Important Things a Person Needs to do to be a Good Reader

Reading Activity	Year 4		Year 8	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Learn hard words	49	38	25	17
Go back and try again	42	56	43	40
Concentrate hard	40	46	36	31
Sound out words	37	24	30	39
Listen to the teacher	29	28	8	11
Practise doing hard things	28	36	37	34
Enjoy reading books	26	29	54	50
Think about what is read	20	18	28	27
Read a lot	10	16	31	22
Choose the right book	1	2	1	2
Other	13	11	4	9

At Year 4, students identified "learn hard words", "go back and try again" and "concentrate hard" as the three most important things a person needs to do. The attribute identified by most girls at this level was "go back and try again", the attribute identified by most boys was "learning hard words". The important things identified by Year 8 students were "enjoy reading books" and "go back and try again". The next most important thing for Year 8 boys was practising hard things and for Year 8 girls, sounding out words. At Year 4, boys seemed to have a stronger focus on the technical aspects of reading, while girls reflected a belief that a person learns to read by reading. This difference was not apparent at Year 8. It is also interesting that at Year 4 more girls than boys emphasised reading a lot but at Year 8, this was reversed with more boys than girls choosing this. Previous research has suggested that students who are good readers considered that "personal attributes made them a good reader" whereas students who are not as good at reading are more likely to attribute reading success to external influences (Caygill, 1993, p. 75).

DISCUSSION

An examination of student responses to the survey questions shows a number of differences in the attitudes, motivations and preferences of boys and girls as readers. Reading, a reasonably popular subject at school, is more likely to be a girl's favourite subject. While reading did not win first choice as favourite subject, it was a highly popular activity in school. At Year 4, boys were slightly more positive about reading in school than girls, but at Year 8, girls were more positive about this than boys. Students liked being read to by their teacher, especially girls at Year 4 and boys at Year 8. Boys were less keen than girls on reading out loud to the teacher or the class. Silent reading is the favourite reading activity at school, but Year 8 boys indicated a stronger preference than the girls for browsing

through or looking at books and Year 4 boys liked to talk about books more than the girls.

Reading struggles in the competition for student leisure time, but girls liked to read in their spare time more than boys. Given the choice though, boys preferred to play computer or video games or watch television, while girls would rather talk on the telephone or listen to music. There were marked differences in reading material preferences for boys and girls, with girls preferring narrative text, and boys preferring non-narrative genre such as magazines, newspapers and junk mail. The preferences become more distinct as students got older. Fiction was the preferred reading material of younger students and Year 8 girls, while Year 8 boys preferred to read magazines. Twice as many boys as girls said they preferred to read comics, although interest in comics declined as students got older. Newspapers were more popular with boys, especially at Year 8.

Girls were more positive about their reading ability than boys, and were happier about their reading ability than boys. Girls were also more positive about their parent's opinions of them as readers than boys. However, girls were less likely to know what their teachers thought about their reading ability. When asked to choose the attributes of a good reader, younger students focussed more on the technical skills of reading, while older students placed a greater emphasis on enjoyment of reading. Younger boys perceived the process of reading somewhat differently to the girls. At Year 4, boys put more emphasis on skills relating to word knowledge while girls emphasised the need to try again or to concentrate.

The results from this survey are heartening. In general, both boys and girls were enjoying reading at school and at home and the students had a perception of themselves as good readers. This enjoyment and positive attitude will, surely, be contributing to their further success in reading.

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