

Reading – a pleasure or a pain? Attitudes to reading in years 4 and 6

Do children enjoy reading? What do children like to read and how confident are they at doing it? **Claire Hodgson** reports on findings from a questionnaire survey of pupils in year 4 (8–9 year olds) and year 6 (10–11 year olds), which investigated children's attitudes to reading.

Background

In June 2007, NFER ran a reading survey to find out about children's attitudes to reading. As this was the third time that the survey had been run (having been run previously in 1998 and 2003) it was possible to make comparisons and monitor changes in attitude over time.

there are differences in attitude in terms of both gender and age Two samples of pupils took part in the survey. The 'main sample' (2278 pupils from year 4 and 2199 pupils from year 6) was drawn from 61 schools in England and was nationally representative. In addition to this was a 'repeat sample' (1053 pupils from year 4 and 964 pupils from year 6) which was drawn from 27 schools which had participated in the surveys in the previous years.

Children taking part in the survey answered a questionnaire made up of 18 questions designed to gauge their enjoyment of and confidence in reading. The first 13 questions required the children to respond to first person statements expressing an attitude towards reading (e.g. 'I like reading stories' or 'I like watching television better than reading books') using a 'yes', 'no' or 'not sure' response. The latter part of the questionnaire asked about reading at home. It invited responses to questions about how

often they read at home, what they read at home, if someone else reads to them and if anybody listens to them reading.

In addition to information about attitudes to reading, information was also gathered about the pupils' gender and their teacher-assessed reading levels.

The survey gave rise to some interesting findings in terms of current attitudes to reading and with regard to changes since the 2003 survey. Where appropriate, the samples are discussed in terms of up to four groupings based on gender and year group (year 4 boys, year 4 girls, year 6 boys and year 6 girls).

Findings about current attitudes (based on the 'main sample')

Analysis of responses from the main sample reveals that there are differences in attitude in terms of both gender and age.

Overall, girls enjoy reading more than boys

In considering the whole sample of children (year 4 and year 6 combined), girls indicated a much more positive attitude towards reading. When responding to the statement 'I enjoy reading', girls were significantly more

likely to respond positively than boys (73 per cent of girls compared to 56 per cent of boys).

Reading enjoyment declines between year 4 and year 6

In reply to the same question, 'I enjoy reading', 70 per cent of year 4 pupils indicated a positive response compared to 59 per cent of year 6 pupils.

Comics and magazines are more popular than stories, poems and information books

In response to the statement 'I like reading comics or magazines', 74 per cent of all pupils (year 4 and year 6 combined) gave a positive response. This compares to 65 per cent of pupils liking stories and 42 and 39 per cent of pupils liking poems and information books, respectively.

These findings are further supported by the responses to the question asking what children read at home, which are summarised in Table 1.

Children in year 4 tend to be less confident readers than their peers in year 6 and need more support

This is not an altogether surprising finding, with analysis revealing that 11 per cent of year 4 children think reading is difficult compared to just 8 per cent of year 6 children.

Although only small, this was a statistically significant difference. Further support for this finding was demonstrated through the response to the statement 'I like reading with a grown-up to help me', with 33 per cent of year 4 pupils responding positively compared to 20 per cent of year 6 pupils. This was also a statistically significant difference.

Changes since 2003 (based on the 'repeat sample')

Overall, attitudes to enjoyment of reading and children's confidence as readers have remained much the same between 2003 and 2007. However, analysis provides some interesting information.

Difference in reading enjoyment between 2003 and 2007

No significant difference was found. Between 1998 and 2003, reading enjoyment significantly declined. In 2007, 71 per cent of children in year 4 and 63 per cent of children in year 6 indicated that they enjoy reading. These were very close to the percentages reported in 2003, which indicates that there has been no further decline in reading enjoyment.

Difference in reading confidence between 2003 and 2007

No significant difference was found. Although reading enjoyment declined

Table 1 What children read at home

Which of these do you read at home?	all children	Responses %	
		year 4	year 6
Magazines	73	68	78
Comics	57	59	56
Stories	76	78	73
Information books	41	46	35
Poems	41	48	33

between 1998 and 2003, reading confidence significantly improved. However, as was seen with reading enjoyment, there was no significant difference in reading confidence between 2003 and 2007.

Enjoyment of reading poems

This declined significantly in all groups. Poetry remains more popular amongst girls than boys in both year 4 and year 6 with more than half of all girls in both year groups indicating that they like reading poems. However, there has been a decline in enjoyment of poetry amongst all groups, with the fall in percentages being greater amongst girls. For example, between 2003 and 2007 there has been a fall in interest in poetry of more than 10 per cent for year 4 girls compared to a fall of 7 per cent for year 4 boys.

Enjoyment of reading stories

Although not necessarily their favourite text, a substantial majority of children still enjoy reading stories. Girls indicated a more positive response to stories. Over 70 per cent of girls in both year 4 and year 6 indicated that they enjoy reading stories, compared to around 60 per cent of boys in each year group. Furthermore, it is interesting to see that there has been a slight increase in enjoyment of stories amongst year 6 children, with 59 per cent of boys indicating a positive response to reading stories in 2007 compared to 51 per cent in 2003 (although this is not a statistically significant increase). Although the change in response amongst girls was much smaller (just over one per cent), there was nevertheless an increase.

Reading comics

Reading comics has overtaken other text types in popularity since 2003. There has been a marked increase in the popularity of comic reading amongst most children between 2003 and 2007. The popularity of comics has risen amongst all children in

year 4 (a 4 per cent increase amongst boys and an 8 per cent rise amongst girls) and amongst year 6 boys (an increase of 9 per cent). Interestingly, year 6 girls' enjoyment of comics has fallen by about 5 per cent between 2003 and 2007.

Reading at home

Reading at home has declined with children saying they now read fewer stories, newspapers, information books and poetry than they did in 2003. Whilst there was a general decline in the numbers of children reading each of the different text types at home, the biggest decline was in the percentage of children reading poetry at home, which fell by 15 per cent and 11 per cent, amongst year 4 and year 6 children, respectively.

It is not the case, however, that children are more likely to switch on the TV than read. Children's preference for watching television rather than reading has generally declined since 2003 and it is year 4 girls who are least likely to switch on the TV, with just 39 per cent of them indicating that they think that watching television is better than reading



reading comics has overtaken other text types in popularity

books. Although year 6 boys are more likely to prefer to watch TV than read a book, there has been a marked decline in this preference from 72 per cent to 62 per cent between 2003 and 2007.

It is possible to theorise that children are now enjoying a wider range of leisure activities beyond reading and watching television as a result of the development of electronic entertainment, mobile phones and increased computer usage and gaming. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to monitor these changes via the reading survey because the questionnaire was devised in 1998 and has remained unchanged since then in order to be able to make comparisons over time.

Further analysis

Reading at home

As well as the findings about what children like to read at home outlined above, data was also gathered about how often children read at home, whether or not a grown-up reads to them and whether or not an adult listens to them read. The findings from these questions show that about four-fifths of all children like reading at home and approximately half of all pupils did so most days.

In terms of being read to, approximately two-fifths of year 4 children indicated that they had a grown-up at home who read to them compared to just under a quarter of year 6 children. There was also an obvious difference

between year 4 and year 6 in terms of the children being listened to reading, with just over 70 per cent of year 4 children responding positively to the statement ‘Does any grown-up at home listen to you read?’ compared to half of year 6 pupils. Girls tended to respond more positively in each of these areas, indicating that they are more likely to read or be read to at home than boys.

Library visits

The survey revealed that fewer year 6 than year 4 children enjoy visiting the library. Closer analysis of the ‘repeat sample’ shows that, since 2003, the percentage of children indicating a positive response to the statement ‘I like going to the library’ has generally declined. The data is summarised in Table 2.

The percentage of girls indicating that they like visiting the library has decreased more than for boys, with a decrease of around 7 to 8 per cent of girls across years 4 and 6 between 2003 and 2007.

The pattern for boys is less clear. The percentage of year 4 boys indicating that they like visiting the library decreased by around 3 per cent between 2003 and 2007 whilst the percentage of year 6 boys stating that they liked going to the library increased by 3 per cent. The percentage of year 6 boys who gave a positive response was, however, the lowest for all groups – less than 40 per cent compared to at least half of respondents for all other groups.

Table 2 Percentage of children who enjoy visiting the library

		2003 (%)	2007 (%)	Difference (%)
Year 4	All	61.7	56.8	-4.9
	Boys	52.4	49.8	-2.6
	Girls	71.3	63.0	-8.3
Year 6	All	46.9	44.3	-2.6
	Boys	36.0	39.2	+3.2
	Girls	51.3	44.2	-7.1

The decline in enjoyment of libraries seems to mirror the findings concerning the use of libraries reported in the PIRLS survey (further details below) which indicated that in 2001, 46 per cent of children in England borrowed books from the school or local library at least once a week, compared to 39 per cent in 2006.

Comparison with PIRLS findings

I have previously reported on the findings from the Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) 2006 survey, which indicated a small but significant decline in reading enjoyment (see pre issue 39). Whilst it is very interesting to consider these studies alongside each other, it is important to note that the results of the two surveys cannot be directly compared for two main reasons. Firstly, the PIRLS results were based on a comparison from 2001 to 2006, whereas comparisons in this survey are between 2003 and 2007, and secondly, PIRLS data is based on the responses of pupils in year 5 rather than pupils in years 4 and 6. Despite the differences in these two surveys, the outcomes can be seen as compatible.

What next?

The findings from this reading survey reveal that children's reading confidence and reading enjoyment have remained fairly static between 2003 and 2007. Whilst it is good news that there has not been a decline in children's attitudes over this period, it is worth considering how to provoke an upturn in attitudes and promote increased reading confidence and enjoyment.

As the survey revealed the popularity of comics and that children do still enjoy reading stories, these may be the best text types for encouraging reading enjoyment and developing reading confidence. Given the decline in children's enjoyment of poetry, a re-acquaintance with poetry which sparks the imagination and reignites interest may also be beneficial.

However, every child and every class is different so you might want to find out a bit more about the opinions of *your* class. Figure 1 shows part of the reading attitudes survey which you could use to find out the attitudes of *your* class – go on, give it a try!

Weblinks

The full report of the NFER Reading Attitudes Survey is available for free download at www.nfer.ac.uk/research-areas/pims-data/summaries/attitudes-to-reading-at-ages-9-and-11.cfm.

PIRLS national report for England
www.nfer.ac.uk/pirls/

The National Year of Reading
www.yearofreading.org.uk
www.sla.org.uk

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the NFER Research and Development Fund.

About the author

Claire is a senior research officer at NFER. Before joining NFER, Claire taught in a junior school. Her main research interests are in reading, children's literature, science education (primary), assessment and Assessment for Learning.

Contact details

c.hodgson@nfer.ac.uk

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Figure 1 Reading Survey

For each of these statements

- tick *yes* if you *agree*
- tick *no* if you *disagree*
- tick *not sure* if you are *not sure*.

		yes	not sure	no
1	I like reading stories.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	I am not interested in books.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	I like reading comics or magazines.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	I like reading poems.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	I think reading is difficult.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	I like reading silently by myself.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	I like watching television better than reading books.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	I don't like reading at home.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	I like reading information books.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	I like reading with a grown-up to help me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11	I enjoy reading.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12	I think reading is boring.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>