GL Assessment

LOST GIRLS:
The overlooked children struggling to understand the written word

Report 2016

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INTRODUCTION

It is easy to overlook, in any battery of statistics, the different patterns that lie behind the main conclusion. When it comes to literacy, the national as well as the international conversation has focused almost exclusively on the problem with boys. The gender gap between higher performing girls and poorer performing boys is so obvious and so historical that the issue of reading problems amongst girls has been neglected.

Our survey, Lost Girls, tries to address that neglect. It does not deny that on average more boys than girls have literacy problems. Indeed, our figures also confirm it. But it is designed to show that the overwhelming focus on poorly performing boys has tended to obscure the very real literacy problems of a significant minority of girls.

The numbers of girls who struggle with reading are not insubstantial. Thousands of girls as well as boys have trouble understanding the written word. Moreover, teachers can find it hard to spot any latent literacy issues with girls because many of them, according to specialists, tend to hide their frustration when they don't understand rather than express it as boys do.

The key as always is to identify the problem. Elsewhere in this report, the former Chief Executive of nasen, Lorraine Petersen and others describe how girls are adept at covering up their learning problems, what teachers can do to penetrate their disguise and what strategies they can deploy to solve them. I hope you will find them useful and that this report plays its part in shining a spotlight on our overlooked and neglected 'lost girls'.

GREG WATSON, Chief Executive of GL Assessment

LOST GIRLS: THE OVERLOOKED CHILDREN STRUGGLING TO UNDERSTAND THE WRITTEN WORD

A report based on **GL Assessment's** New Group Reading Test

We know that when it comes to literacy boys, on average, are weaker readers than girls. Several academic studies have shown that girls outperform boys in reading at all ages, though the gap tends to narrow towards adulthood. Moreover, the divergence is international – girls did better than boys in all of the 65 countries that participated in the last PISA rankings in 2012[1]. And the gap has persisted for a long time – for more than 60 years in the UK and the US[2].

The weight of research, however, has tended to obscure another vital finding: the significant minority of girls who have problems with reading. This report attempts to rectify that neglect. It too finds that boys are weaker readers on average than girls. But it also finds that substantial numbers of girls – **11%** of 10 year olds and **12%** of 12 year olds – have significant literacy problems, and many more have difficulty with some aspect of reading, though not with all.

To put those percentages in a national context, our findings suggest that approximately more than 40,000 girls in each year group have severe trouble with reading. The even larger number of boys with similar problems has tended to overshadow the real difficulties reading presents for this substantial minority of girls and the challenge that presents for their schools.

Indeed, the situation could be worse than generally thought because a growing body of academic evidence indicates that girls with learning difficulties are far better at masking their condition and less likely to express frustration than boys[3].

According to scientists, one of the reasons girls with behavioural issues such as autism or attention deficit disorder are less likely to be diagnosed than boys is because their lack of engagement is harder to detect. They daydream, retreat into themselves or learn to mimic the behaviour of more confident peers. So while boys with ADD will usually display erratic and impulsive behaviour, for instance, girls with the same condition are more likely to display a lack of activity rather than hyper activity. The same 'coping mechanisms' can often hide unidentified dyslexia in girls, as Lorraine Petersen points out elsewhere in this report.

Literacy test

Our survey, which is based on data from over 60,000 10 and 12 year olds in England and Wales, looked at two components of literacy: sentence completion and passage comprehension. Sentence completion asks the child to pick the right word to finish a phrase or sentence. Students are given very few contextual cues so they have to rely on their decoding skills and knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to complete the task.

Passage comprehension assesses a child's ability to understand the meaning and context of a piece of writing. It asks students to draw on a broad hierarchy of skills – from retrieval, through inference and deduction to the writer's use of language and the historic and cultural tradition in which they are writing.

High scores in sentence completion coupled with weaker performance in passage comprehension could indicate that a child has mastered phonics and how to decode successfully but does not really understand the meaning of words and text. Conversely, high scores in passage comprehension and weaker performance in sentence completion could suggest that a child has problems decoding and can be a sign of dyslexia.

The findings

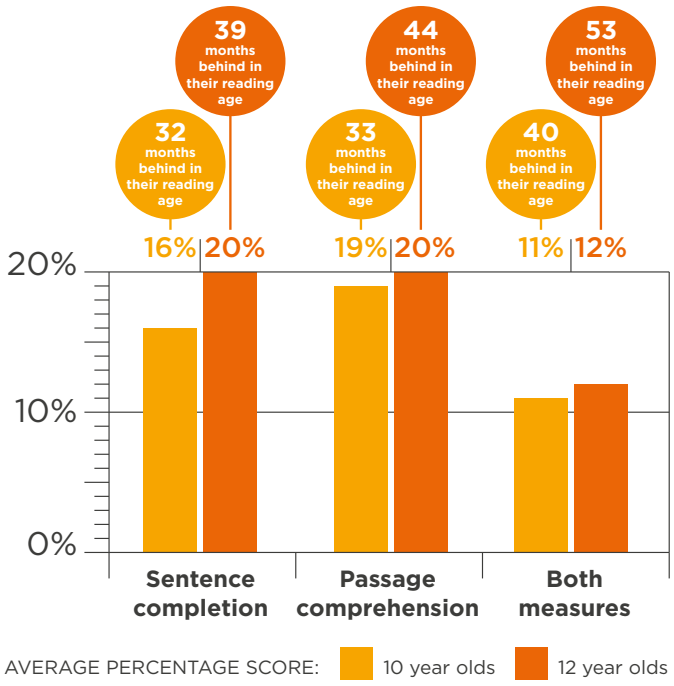
Our survey is based on two cohorts of children: 10 year olds in primary schools and 12 year olds in secondary schools.

An analysis of the assessment data of 10-year-old girls reveals that **16%** of them score so poorly in sentence completion that they are 32 months behind in their reading age. The proportion of 10-year-old girls who have trouble with passage comprehension is even larger – **19%**, which means their reading age is 33 months behind the average. **11%** of 10-year-old girls score below average in both measures, which means they are 40 months behind.

Nationally, approx 40,000 10 year old girls have the **reading age of a seven year old**

The situation deteriorates in secondary school. The proportion of 12-year-old girls who score poorly in sentence completion rises to **20%**, which means they have a reading age 39 months below the average. The same proportion – **20%** – have trouble with passage comprehension. They have a reading age 44 months behind the norm. **12%** of 12-year-old girls score poorly on both measures. That suggests that they are 53 months below the average, which indicates that they have a reading age of an eight year old.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a significant number of girls in both age groups who scored poorly on both measures were Free School Meals students. Interestingly, however, the proportion of girls, if not the absolute numbers, who were FSM students was even larger for girls than for boys. **39%** of 10-year-old girls who scored poorly on both metrics were FSM students, compared to **36%** of boys, and **38%** of 12-year-old girls who scored poorly in both measures were FSM students, compared to **33%** of boys.



Conclusion

As our figures show, the numbers of girls affected nationally by poor literacy are significant. But they have been overshadowed by the even worse performance of boys and the effective ways girls often have of disguising their learning problems.

The research and focus on literacy in boys has undoubtedly had an effect on teaching practice. The obvious nature of boys' reading difficulties means they have tended to attract more attention than girls who do not act out their frustration in the same way.

Substantial minorities of girls have problems with sentence completion and passage comprehension. The fact that more girls aged 10 have a problem with the latter than the former could indicate that an over-reliance on phonics in primary is obscuring a deeper problem with comprehension.

There are, however, strategies teachers can put in place to improve poor literacy once the problem has been properly identified. Our experts outline what can be done elsewhere in this report.

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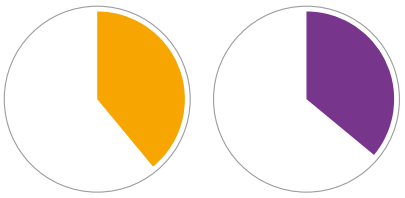
[1] The Gender Gap in Reading, Brookings Institution, 2015

[2] Gender and education: the evidence on pupils in England, Department for Education and Skills, 2007

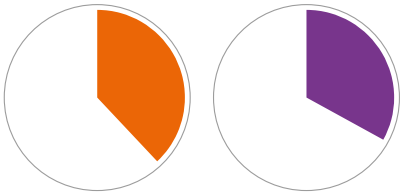
[3] Living with Dyslexia, Barbara Riddick, 2012; Essentials of Pyschiartry, Robert E. Hales, 1994

Percentage of pupils who **score poorly on both measures** who are FSM



39% of girls **36% of boys**

(10 year old pupils)



38% of girls **33% of boys**

(12 year old pupils)

HOW TO SPOT UNDETECTED PROBLEM READERS – AND HOW TO HELP THEM

Steve Cox and **Cath McCarney** from Bluecoat Academies Trust give their advice for making sure that hidden problem readers are not allowed to remain under the radar.

The obvious issue with undetected problem readers is that they can be very difficult to identify. Children may have spent years hiding their issues and at large schools like ours – which face more visible challenges like a high special educational needs and disability cohort and many English as an additional language students – it is easy to imagine that a child who secretly struggles with reading might fly under the radar.

This could be the pupil whose hard work and positive attitude to learning masks their poor literacy skills. It could be the child whose inability to access the curriculum leads to poor behaviour, which then becomes the focus. Or it might be the pupil who can read aloud fluently without understanding the meaning of the words.

We must not let these pupils go unsupported simply because their difficulties are less visible than those of their peers.

Five strategies we have found for identifying and supporting hidden problem readers:

1. Discover each child's reading age

All teaching staff should be aware of the reading ages of the pupils they teach. This should be considered as important a part of the contextual information for a class as data on special educational needs or pupil premium. As such, it should always be referred to when planning a lesson.

2. Dig deeper

To get to the root of any issues, we screen our whole cohort, testing phonics, sight-word knowledge and comprehension. We also use an attitudinal survey to cross-reference what teachers have noticed about attitudes to learning. This enables us to be specific about any necessary interventions.

3. Support and challenge from the beginning

We prioritise determining literacy levels as soon as children join the school. If preliminary data suggests a need for it, we also screen for dyslexia and refer the child to our SEND department. We hold literacy lessons and phonics groups in Year 7 for those who need extra support, and challenge the more able with advanced activities such as peer mentoring.

4. Personalise resources

There is no way that every pupil will be able to access and understand exactly the same written material. But you can differentiate texts using freely available readability score websites. This doesn't take up a lot of time and allows you to provide resources that students of all abilities can grasp.

5. Make reading a whole-school focus

We've set each child an aspirational target of progressing two reading age years for every one academic year. To accurately map progress, we've put stringent benchmarking and monitoring in place. This focus means that staff are more aware of the need to look out for problem readers and it also means that those who struggle are less likely to go unnoticed.

Steve Cox is assistant principal and Cath McCarney is vice-principal at Bluecoat Academies Trust in Nottingham. This feature first appeared in tes.com

WHY GIRLS WITH READING PROBLEMS CAN BE HARD TO SPOT

Lorraine Petersen, independent educational consultant and former Chief Executive of nasen.

Recent statistics indicate that more than 1.25 million children in the country have a special educational need and that the difference in gender is very apparent, with 14.7% of boys being on SEN support compared to 8.2% of girls.

The question we may need to ask is this a true reflection of the school population or is there an under-identification of girls who may elicit very different traits to boys and who therefore get "lost" in the system?

Boys who are not able to access learning often behave badly, whereas girls may internalise their frustrations and try to please in other ways. The boys gain attention through negative behaviours while girls tend to be overly positive and quietly "get-on".

Boys may also be more vocal and physical in class, while girls who may have significant social, emotional and mental health issues remain quiet and go unnoticed.

Girls and boys learn differently – and yet the school system often takes no account of the way an individual learns. Data from over 24,000 students who took part in the standardisation of the *Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT4)*, for instance, shows that girls are often more biased towards verbal rather than spatial thinking. And, of the 1.5 per cent of students nationally with an extreme bias towards spatial thinking, three quarters are boys[1].

[1] Key findings from the *CAT4* standardisation in 2012 include:

- 19% of girls in primary schools have a verbal bias (bias defined as mild, moderate and extreme) compared to 13% of boys. In contrast, 19% of boys in primary schools have a spatial bias compared with 13% of girls.
- In secondary schools, 20% of girls have a verbal bias compared to 15% of boys.
- Overall, 2.3% of boys aged seven – 16 years show an extreme bias towards spatial thinking across all school years, compared with only 0.8% of girls. The bias is less differentiated by gender for those with an extreme bias to verbal thinking, with 1.8% of females and 1.3% of males being this category.

The findings of this report indicate that there is a significant problem with the under-identification of girls. So why might that be?

- Initial Teacher Education does not offer any training on child development. Teachers have to use their professional judgement when they think a pupil requires additional support, which is very often triggered by a pupil displaying different behaviours. Boys being more challenging they receive more attention.

- Girls may not find aspects of the curriculum compatible. Many prefer to read fiction. Well-developed standardised assessments will always minimise gender bias and provide a balance of material with wide appeal. However, reading assessments that focus on narrative may accentuate the gender gap compared to more factual-based assessment. Boys may perform significantly better on a reading comprehension task involving factual content compared to one based on narrative content.

- Girls mature earlier than boys and many will enter puberty at a much earlier age. Major hormonal changes may result in some girls performing less well in certain subjects.

This may also result in young girls experiencing social, emotional and mental health difficulties at a young age. Peer group pressure, the constant use of social media and the need to be part of a recognised group may lead to withdrawn and internalised behaviours that may go unnoticed both by school and parents.

Teachers need to look for the signs that girls may be having difficulties:

- **Changes in everyday behaviours** - becoming quiet, withdrawn and not answering questions or engaging in lessons. Teachers can encourage the pupil to take part and ask direct questions to elicit both their understanding and also their emotional state. A pupil who is engaged in the learning process will be positive and offer appropriate answers; one who is having difficulties might be curt, defiant and mono-syllabic.

- **Changes in demeanour or body language** - moving to sit at the back of the classroom out of the teacher's direct view or keeping their head down and only looking up when required to do so. Teachers can instigate a classroom seating plan and ensure that pupils causing concern are seated in their direct view.

- **Punctuality becomes an issue** – arriving late can be an indication of a pupil not wanting to go to school or a particular lesson. It may also be an indication that the pupil has particular issues at home. Schools should have a robust tracking system that can indicate patterns of punctuality and address these immediately.

- **Making inappropriate friendships** – girls may have significant social, emotional and mental health difficulties if they are struggling with certain aspects of school life. The need to be wanted and liked can lead them to make inappropriate choices in terms of the people they mix with. Teachers should be alert to friendship groups and look out for those girls who make inappropriate choices.

- **Constant use of social media** – girls may use social media to keep in touch with "friends" or to bully other pupils. Most schools have very strict guidance on the use of electronic devices during school hours but those wanting to "keep in touch" will become quite devious in using them.

This does not mean that boys do not display any of these but it is more likely that girls will be quiet and controlled about what they are doing **and will have strategies so that they don't get caught.**

Top 10 Tips: Supporting children with reading

Sue Thompson, GL Assessment's Senior Publisher, provides parents with some top tips on encouraging children to read, supporting those who need help and stretching competent readers further.

1. **Make time for reading every day.** It is important to foster a love of reading from an early age, both at school and at home. A set routine enables children to get into the habit of reading so try and set aside a dedicated time each day to share books.

2. **Make the most of their interests.** Reading a variety of different materials is needed for continual improvement and phonic development. If a child is interested in a certain topic make the most of it. They are more likely to read more when they are reading about a hobby or a topic they enjoy.

3. **Read aloud to your child.** Regularly reading aloud to children throughout primary school and even into secondary school has been shown in studies to produce significant improvements in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and the decoding of words. This, in turn, will increase their desire to read independently. Scholastic Education's report[1] into reading found that 40% of children aged between 6-11 years old did not want their parents to stop reading to them.

4. **Keep a large range of reading material readily available.** A large supply of books, magazines, and posters at their reading level will keep children interested.

5. **Talk about what they've read.** It's important that a child can both read the words and understand what they mean. Asking them about it is a great way to see how well they have understood the story.

6. **Let them read their favourite books again and again.** Re-reading helps children develop a deeper understanding of what they have read[2]. Repetition helps children identify sight words and remember vocabulary, and it's also a confidence booster.

7. **Develop the library habit.** Enthuse children by taking them to the library for 'trips' every few weeks. This way you can explore the different purpose of books from fiction to poetry to history and sport, and see which he/she engages with more as time goes on. This is a key opportunity to help them recognise that certain books are targeted at certain readers like fantasy, humour, and languages.

8. **Go online.** Allowing a child to be part of an online library is beneficial. Research evidence is mounting that digital textbooks give children a reading edge: 'Reading in a digital learning environment is an incentive for younger and lower performing students, and that feedback in e-books and apps plays a powerful role for staying engaged and motivated'[3].

9. **Try different kinds of activities that involve reading.** Where possible, introduce other dimensions of reading with activities such as labels around the classroom/home or even simple instructions at their desk.

10. **Support independent readers through discussion.** Talk to your child at every opportunity – it's not just about reading. There is a huge amount of research[4] that shows how children spoken language and especially vocabulary will determine their success as readers. Use new and interesting words and talk in full sentences; this will help children become comfortable with complex syntax.

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[1] Scholastic, Reading Aloud Report, March 2015

[2] Roskos and Newman, The Reading Teacher, April 2014

[3] Grinshaw, Dungworth, McKnight, & Morris, 2007; Zucker, Moody, & McKenna, 2009

[4] The authors of the *York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension* have researched and published widely on the contribution of oral language to reading and comprehension

IDENTIFYING THE BARRIERS TO LEARNING

Sarah Haythornthwaite, GL Assessment's Sales and Marketing Director, explains how the company's **New Group Reading Test (NGRT)** fits in with their whole-pupil approach to education.

GL Assessment has worked in partnership with schools for over 35 years to develop a range of assessments that support better outcomes for pupils. We believe that, through regular assessment, tests such as *NGRT* provide teachers with a comprehensive overview of a pupil's abilities while providing a wealth of diagnostic information that helps identify where they may be experiencing difficulties.

NGRT allows teachers to assess the reading and comprehension levels of pupils in a single test, helping to identify, for instance, competent readers with weak comprehension skills who would benefit from a follow-up individual assessment and learning support. The assessment also measures how an individual pupil is performing compared to their peers at a national level.

NGRT is ideal for monitoring progress over time and facilitates the evaluation of teaching methods.

Additionally, it can be used as a group screening test to identify those pupils who need to be assessed individually by a specialist for Access Arrangements.

As this paper has demonstrated, poor sentence completion and comprehension are major barriers to pupils accessing the curriculum across both primary and secondary schools. *NGRT* is a key resource in our portfolio that shows not only current performance in both decoding and comprehension but also how each pupil is progressing.

For further information please visit gl-assessment.co.uk/ngrt. To contact your local area consultant to organise a school visit or a free quote please visit gl-assessment.co.uk/consultants or to discuss your specific requirements, call 0330 123 5375.

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