

University of Southampton
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Title: What Impact do Boys' Goal Orientations have on their Reading Achievement?

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Abstract

Underachievement in boys' reading attainment remains a concern in schools in England, despite numerous interventions. Many factors have been considered as influencing boys' reading activity and subsequent academic achievement. These factors have included motivation. Recent motivational research has focused on *goal orientations*. This essay examines the evidence regarding boys' goal orientations and considers their impact on reading achievement. *Mastery* goals are considered beneficial to the reading process. *Performance* goals are debated as adaptive or maladaptive. A multi-goal theory is considered with the resulting argument that performance goals are detrimental for reading development. The essay argues that boys are more performance-orientated than girls. The development of performance related goals is examined and found to initiate from an early stage, even pre-school. A conclusion is reached that goal orientations do impact significantly on boys' reading achievement with an acknowledgement of an important impact from environmental factors. A joint influence of personal and contextual goals is the resulting conclusion. Alternative factors impacting on reading achievement are considered. These include peers, home environment, and attitudes to reading. The implications for Educational Psychologists are outlined.

What Impact do Boys' Goal Orientations have on their Reading Achievement?

“I only read because I have to.”

Being literate, particularly being able to read is a key determinant of school achievement and later economic success. Recently the Government emphasised, “Learning to read is the first and most important activity any child undertakes at school. Having this basic foundation unlocks all the other benefits of education.” (Department for Education, DfE, 2010, p.43). Reading is a set of complex processes which need to be acquired and practised in order to achieve an adaptable skill. In reading, boys are consistently outperformed by girls, as measured by National Literacy comprehension tests in England at age eleven (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, DCSF, 2007). To address this imbalance and improve reading generally, numerous interventions and teaching approaches have been implemented at school level. These have included; National Literacy Strategy (1998); Every Child a Reader (2005); and an emphasis on synthetic phonics following the Rose review in 2006. However, the concern regarding boys' reading remains. To date, school reading models have focused on the technical skills of reading and on formal teaching methods. This approach neglects any motivational factors associated with reading. Parents and teachers certainly have concerns regarding the frequency of boys' reading. This becomes a more salient concern if we consider that studies have shown that increased reading activity leads to academic achievement (Baker & Wigfield, 1999). However, to enhance boys' reading competence, we need to investigate not only boys' apparent lack of motivation to read but, perhaps more importantly, the goals they set themselves for reading.

Goal orientations are, "A pattern of beliefs about goals related to achievement in school." (Woolfolk, 2008, p.449). Goal orientation theory has focused mostly on two main orientations. Ames (1992) labelled these mastery and performance goals. Despite some divergence in literature in the use of these labels (Brophy, 1998) the essay follows this terminology. Mastery goals are concerned with; a focus on the task; acquiring new information; and having confidence in the ability to do so. Performance goals are concerned with obtaining high performance and outperforming others. A social constructivist approach (Vygotsky, 1978) is assumed as the essay argues for the active participation of pupils as learners with a goal orientation construct and an interactional impact of factors affecting motivation.

This essay claims that boys primarily adopt performance goals enhanced by classroom performance goal contexts and resulting in less effective learning of reading skills. The essay examines the fairly extensive academic literature which exists on types of goal orientation (e.g., Dweck, 2000) and their adaptive or maladaptive impact on achievement (e.g., Midgley, Kaplan & Middleton, 2001). Evidence regarding gender differences in achievement goals is critiqued. This essay also debates the relative impact of *performance-avoid* and *performance-approach* goals (Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot & Thrash, 2002). It is argued that although pre-school boys have established goal orientations (Lever-Chain, 2008), environmental factors also impact to some extent. Of the many potential factors that may influence boys' reading achievements, the essay considers; peer influence; home environment; and attitudes to reading. It concludes that goal orientations need to be considered as a key factor if we are to adapt boys' motivation to acquire and develop the skills of reading.

The essay has five main sections. In section one, mastery and performance goals are discussed. In section two, gender differences are examined in relation to their goal

orientation. The development of goal orientation and impact of environmental factors are outlined in section three. Section four considers other factors that may impact on reading achievement. In the final section, implications for the practice of Educational Psychologists are suggested.

Mastery and Performance Goals

"I'm no good at reading; I'm only level three."

Most studies find a positive relationship between mastery goal orientation and achievement (e.g., Urdan, 1997). To support this, Lepola (2004) found an association with high mastery orientation and phonemic awareness progression. However this study was based on low achieving children and so generalisation cannot be assumed for all pupils. In contrast, from a meta-analysis of studies, Kaplan and Maehr (2007) found only a weak relationship between achievement goals and academic success. A limitation of previous research was a difference in the definition of mastery orientation. Some studies had a limited definition omitting a challenge element, crucial for mastery. Also self report questionnaires were often used to measure motivation, using Likert scales. These could have been completed over-optimistically by young children and sometimes with perceived socially acceptable responses.

Dweck's (1986) early goal theory illustrates why mastery orientation would lead to reading success. According to Dweck, *incremental* theorists believe their ability is malleable and through embracing challenge, new skills can be developed and ability enhanced. This leads to a mastery orientation. Clearly challenge is embedded in reading acquisition as new phonemes or words are presented to the developing reader daily through readily available texts and literacy-rich environments. Mastery orientation allows the pupil to develop competence in reading with a persistent approach. More controversy has surrounded

performance goal orientation. As this essay argues that the adoption of performance goals is a key cause of boys' reading difficulties, this is now investigated further.

From Dweck's (1986) theory, *entity* focused children with performance orientated goals will be reluctant to put effort in and avoid challenge. These pupils have low persistence following failure. This relates to some boys' experiences with reading. In class independent reading sessions boys often select easy books with little challenge. When reading aloud, boys give up easily when meeting unfamiliar words. Indeed, Grant and Dweck (2003) found performance goals impaired motivation when pupils met setbacks. In contrast, Elliot, Macgregor and Gable (1999) claimed performance goals were adaptively linked to increased effort. A positive relationship between performance goals and self regulatory strategy use has also been found (Muryama & Elliot, 2009; Wolters, Yu & Pintrich, 1996). However Muryama and Elliot's study involved Japanese students. Arguably they originate from a culture that is already more self reflecting and self regulatory than Western culture. The study by Wolters et al. can also be criticised for using over learned tasks as a performance measure, with no challenge to students. It seems probable that performance goals do lead to increased effort as pupils try to be the "best" in class but the learning may be more superficial. In support of this, Midgley et al. (2001) acknowledged that students were trying in their study, but using strategies not suitable for deeper understanding. Muryama and Elliot only showed improvements in achievement in multiple choice exams, requiring superficial memorisation and rote learning skills. These strategies are not applicable to the complex process of reading which involves deeper processing such as phonemic blending and use of multiple cues to check understanding.

Harackiewicz et al. (2002) emphasised the need for a multi-goal theory as they believed that the studies finding performance goals maladaptive were based on performance-avoid goals rather than more adaptive performance-approach goals. The former focus on the

possibility of failure whereas performance-approach goals focus on the possibility of achieving success. Kaplan and Middleton (2002) agreed that performance-approach goals may be adaptive for some areas of learning but not for long term learning or retention. For reading, pupils with performance-approach orientation will try to demonstrate ability. This may be through simply scanning books in order to finish and move up to the next reading level. This reading approach will not develop or embed the complex skills needed. Additionally, when faced with a perceived risk of failure, performance-approach goals (trying to be the best) could change easily to performance-avoid (avoiding looking silly).

This distinction between avoidance and approach has also been applied to mastery goals (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007). *Mastery-approach* goals are concerned with mastering the task whereas *mastery-avoid* goals are concerned with avoiding misunderstanding. However, either mastery orientated goal will allow the pupil to focus on reading as a skill-based process rather than as a comparative task with an end result. This essay argues that boys are more likely to adopt the maladaptive performance orientated goals than girls.

Gender Differences in Goal Orientation

“Reading is for girls.”

Relatively little empirical evidence exists on differences in gender goal orientation, however it can be argued that for reading, boys are more performance orientated than girls. Lepola (2004) found boys showed lower task orientation than girls for word recognition and reading comprehension. Kenney-Bensen, Pomerantz, Ryan, and Patrick (2006) also argued that girls were more mastery and less performance orientated than boys. This allowed girls to adopt better learning strategies. It should be noted however that this was based on mathematics performance rather than reading.

In contrast, Dweck and Leggett (1988) claimed that girls were more likely to hold an entity theory of intelligence and were therefore more likely to seek out tasks they would definitely do well at, adopting performance goals. However their research was experimental and only included high achieving females. Dweck's explanation for the gender differences was that society held stereotypes of females as less competent than males. She also emphasised society's prohibition against females as high achievers. This view may be out-of-date. It can be argued that today females are perceived in a very different way by society, where high achieving women are often celebrated. Further supporting this notion, reading is seen as a typically female activity (Kenney-Bensen et al., 2006).

Stereotypically boys are more competitive than girls. This is supported by Anderman and Midgley (as cited in Midgley et al., 2001) who found that boys were more concerned with how clever they were relative to each other than their academic progress. Schools seem to encourage this competitiveness in boys' reading with sponsored reading initiatives. Reading schemes also centre on performance outcome (as you move up levels) rather than content learning. Dweck (2000) stated that boys were more mastery orientated because they behaved less well and consequently teachers placed more emphasis on boys' effort. An alternative explanation is that schools encourage competition as a way to engage boys who behave less well and are less attentive. The issue is that these strategies used by school are impacting on, and enhancing, a goal orientation construct that boys have already adopted for themselves, potentially at an early age. Developmental and environmental factors are now considered.

Developmental and Environmental Influences

"I can't read; only school books."

Before boys even go to school they may have developed a belief about their ability to achieve, potentially impacting on their subsequent academic achievement. In support of this

assumption, Smiley and Dweck (1994) have shown a relationship between task-competence beliefs and achievement when pre-schoolers attempted to complete challenging jigsaw puzzles. Further supporting young boys' performance goal orientations, Lever-Chain (2008) claimed boys' experiences of reading in the first year of school were that it was "a matter of proficiency" (p.89). Boys already viewed reading as a measurable competence by which their ability would be compared with others. Although the results showed scores on a reading attitude scale were biased towards the positive, Lever-Chain argued that qualitatively the negative attitudes were more explicit and strongly related to the belief that reading is a compulsory non-enjoyable school process.

Some studies have revealed that older students showed more performance-related goals when they transferred to secondary school (Midgley & Edelin, 1998). One reason for this may be pupils' self-theories of ability. Nicholls (1984) suggested that by age eleven pupils saw ability as fixed and so were less likely to have mastery goals. As reading is taught much less as a discrete process in secondary schools, skill acquisition may be less important than which set they are in for English. Boys' goals may become more performance-related as they are ranked by ability and low-achievement made more obvious. Indeed, Lepola (2004) found the motivation of boys with low reading ability decreased as they achieved less. Performance goal-oriented pupils seem more likely to be negatively affected when faced with difficulties.

Ames and Archer (1988) argued that the environment impacts significantly on achievement orientations. In support of this, Midgley and Edelin (1998) found personal performance-approach goals were related to performance goal contexts as measured by self-reports. However in contrast, Muryama and Elliot (2009) claimed from classroom analyses that performance-approach structure in classrooms was not related to personal goal orientation. The differences may have been due to methodological variations. Muryama and Elliot noted that any results showing a relationship between personal goal constructs and the

goal orientation of the learning environment cannot be interpreted as a causal relationship, only as an association. Boys' performance orientations may influence teacher expectations and consequent teaching strategies or vice versa. A joint influence of personal and contextual goals on reading success seems likely.

For a mastery orientation, there is certainly a need to decrease the competitive and norm-referenced classroom factors impacting on the quality of boys' motivation to read. It could be argued there is moral justification in teaching more of an acceptance and celebration of individual differences and reducing the amount of comparative activities in schools. This is probably not a local or an easy option. The current ethos of the U.K education system is one of testing, comparison and focus on ability. This looks likely to increase following the recent Government white paper (DfE, 2010) which emphasises scrupulous testing. Even if feasible, Muryama and Elliot (2009) claimed it may not be enough to decrease the emphasis on social comparison. It may also be necessary to also encourage mastery goals for reading. This could be achieved through enhancing the perceived value of reading. Furthermore, teachers' rewards need to be linked to goals for improvement, not performance. If boys adopted a more mastery approach, they are more likely to receive critical feedback from teachers positively. They may then accept challenge and ultimately achieve more reading success with enjoyment. Boys' reading is determined to some extent by what's happening in the classroom but also by which goal orientation they have adopted. This essay believes that although goal orientation is a crucial factor for boys' reading success, other factors may have some impact. The essay now moves to discuss a few of these factors.

Other Factors Influencing Boys' Reading achievement

Peers' Influence

"My friends don't think it's cool to read."

As learning is a socially constructed process (Vygotsky, 1978), it appears obvious that peers will influence academic achievement. The research indicated a more tentative relationship. Henry and Rickman (1997) found that the ability level of peers had a direct effect on pre-schoolers' early language and reading skills. Additionally, Urdan (1997) found that if adolescents had positive peer relationships then academic achievement increased. However, it is possible that the presence of high ability peers meant there was less disruptive behaviour, therefore more learning opportunities. Veronneau, Vitaro, Brendgen, Dishion and Tremblay (2010) proposed a transactional model whereby peer experiences and achievement are mutually influential over time. Conversely in their study they only found peer rejection associated with achievement. There was not a significant association between peer acceptance and academic achievement. In a review of the research, Veronneau and Vitaro (2007) concluded that results from studies were inconclusive mostly due to methodological limitations. The research also relied on an assumption that peer acceptance remained stable over time.

It seems more likely that peers influence reading achievement through a mediating factor, such as goal orientation. Interactions with peers may lead to a specific goal adoption: By cooperating with others in activities such as guided reading, a mastery orientation is adopted and pupils will learn reading skills. As girls are more mastery orientated, it is likely that they gain more from their peers in this way. Also girls tend to use their peer group for support more than boys (Veronneau et al., 2010) and so are more likely to be influenced by them. Alternatively, pupils may adopt goals for social reasons. If boys adopt a performance goal orientation, they may read a certain number of books to seek approval from their peers. On the contrary, they may avoid reading so they don't look silly in front of friends. In this way, a norm of low achievement could be encouraged by peers. Wentzel (1999) argued for *social goals* which can either hinder learning through avoiding the "swot" label. On the other hand,

they can support learning through socialising with academically supportive peers. Although argued as a separate goal, this pursuit of peer group acceptance seems directly linked to performance goal orientation as the resulting consequence of social goals impacts on achievement. An alternative factor to consider is the home environment as this also involves significant others: parents.

Home Influences

“My mum doesn't read to me at home.”

In Western society, children are already familiar with books and reading before they start school. It is reasonable to assume that this environment would impact on pupils' literacy success. Some research supports this. Burgess, Hecht and Lonigan, (as cited in Van Steensel, 2006), found that active involvement in literacy-related activities (including television watching) at home led to higher literacy scores. The recent study by Van Steensel (2006) showed that literacy scores in vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension were related to the home literacy environment. However, there was no relation to spelling or word decoding. Van Steensel concluded that these were skills that needed to be formally taught at school. Additionally, children's literacy achievements may be impacted on by the process of modelling by parents. Evidence to support this was provided by Myrberg and Rosen (2007) who found a direct effect of parents' educational level on children's reading attainments. If parents model high reading frequency, assumed by a high education level, then children may copy this behaviour. There were many limitations of studies examining the relationship between the home literacy environment and literacy skills. One limitation of the qualitative research was that it only included small samples and so could not be generalized. Also previous quantitative research focused on a narrow conceptualisation of literacy activity,

usually having included only shared reading. Furthermore these studies relied on self-reports from parents. Social acceptability may have biased these responses.

This essay argues that parents' attitudes may influence reading through impacting on their children's goal orientations. It is suggested that parents assume reading to be a predominantly female activity and so closely monitor girls' reading progress (Kenney-Bensen et al., 2006). Girls then believe that reading ability can be increased through hard work and practice, encouraging a mastery approach. In contrast, if parents assume boys are more competitive, they may encourage social comparisons; celebrating moving up the levels of the reading scheme. This superficial approach to the reading process would negatively impact on boys' attitudes to reading.

Attitudes as Influences

"I hate reading, it's boring."

Many studies have identified a relationship between reading ability and attitude to reading (e.g., Logan & Johnston, 2009). In most research girls have been found to have a more positive attitude to reading than boys at all ages (Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004). A possible explanation for this is that girls read more enthusiastically than boys (Twist, Gnaldi, Schagen & Morrison, 2004). Boys' underachievement in reading activities may result from a lower frequency of reading and a more negative attitude. Certainly reading involves an emotional commitment for the reader. Feedback is immediate and constant. Over time a poorer reader may find this a frustrating process resulting in a cyclical process of a more negative attitude and less success in reading ability. This is supported by Twist et al. (2004) who reviewed large scale studies of reading attitude and ability. They found the relationship between the two variables grew stronger over time.

Although the argument for attitude impacting on reading ability appears robust, there are some weaknesses. Logan and Johnston (2009) found the relationship between reading frequency and reading ability was statistically stronger than between reading attitude and ability. Also the larger scale studies can be criticised as the direction of causality is not always apparent: It could be achievement that impacts on attitude. Additionally with the use of pupil self-report questionnaires, lower ability pupils may not fully comprehend all items. For all studies there is a variance in the definition of attitude to reading. In some studies (e.g., Logan & Johnston) attitude involved engagement with reading. In other studies (e.g., Guthrie & Wigfield (as cited in Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004), attitude was seen as part of a broader concept of motivation.

If boys' attitudes to reading were positive and boys read more frequently, goal orientation theory would still emphasise the need for boys to have a mastery purpose for their reading. This would lead to higher level skill acquisition and better academic success. In contrast, even if reading frequency was high, a performance goal orientation may mean boys' attitudes to reading are more negative following failure or difficulties. Goal orientation must be considered by all involved with a pupil's educational progress.

Implications for Educational Psychologists

Educational Psychologists may be involved at an individual, school or community level. The profession is, "currently undergoing a period of rapid change and uncertainty" (Gersch, 2009, p.9). Therefore, Educational Psychologists must be open to involvement at all levels regarding the quality of boys' motivation for reading. An awareness of an individual pupil's goal orientation will add to the "whole picture" created in an attempt to understand learning

or behavioural difficulties. Assessment with this in mind may affect the suggested interventions.

Secondary schools in particular may not identify motivation as the source of difficulties as often the consequence of a frustrated reader is behaviour difficulties. Schools may mistakenly confuse maladaptive goal orientations with behaviour difficulties or a lack of motivation. If schools require advice regarding the motivation of a specified group of pupils, an Educational Psychologist may present the possibility of a predominantly performance goal environment that can be adapted.

From the perspective of a wider context, the focus has been on inclusion. Performance goals encourage social comparison, potentially impacting negatively on an inclusion ethos. In an advisory role, Educational Psychologists can actively promote mastery goals to be included in policy amendments.

Further research into goal orientation theory and its impact on achievement is needed. This may focus on the strengths of personal and contextual goal influences and the potential adaptive nature of performance-approach goals. Additionally, there is need for further research regarding gender differences in goal orientation and how these may affect achievement in different subjects.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that goal orientation impacts significantly on boys' reading achievement. Boys as active learners bring a motivational purpose for developing reading skills to their learning context. This essay has argued using supportive evidence that this is primarily a performance-orientated set of goals. Research suggested that these are maladaptive for reading success as they serve as a comparative tool for acquiring superficial

skills. In contrast, a mastery orientation would allow boys to acquire new high level processing skills and have confidence to take on more difficult challenges. An assumption has been made that reading success goes beyond decoding words and involves deeper cognitive processes and longer term learning. It has also been assumed that, although developed early in life, goal constructs are malleable and can be changed through adaption of the learning environment. Research has shown that both personal and contextual goal orientations interact resulting in learning achievements. From this perspective the school curriculum needs to take account of boys' motivational factors for reading. This is not just regarding the possible lack of motivation to read but also the quality of motivation to read.

There are many social, environmental, cognitive and behavioural factors that impact on boys' reading achievements. For the purposes of this essay, only a few have been examined. Peers may have an indirect effect, influencing a pupil's goal orientations. Additionally parents and the home environment play a role through shared experiences and modelling. Evidence has shown an association between boys' attitudes in reading and their reading ability but the direction of causation is unclear. The goal purpose of boys' reading must be considered if boys are to achieve more; subsequently become more literate; and ultimately achieve academic and later economic success. (3995)

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