CLOSING THE GAP:

THE LINK BETWEEN LOW SELF-ESTEEM AND POOR READING ATTAINMENT

GL Assessment®

Tom had the potential to be an able student but he was struggling at school and he believed his poor performance was because he lacked the ability to do well. He tended to avoid challenges and when presented with one gave up easily.

Even though Tom's teachers suspected he could do better, he never shared their belief in his potential. In fact, as far as Tom was concerned, every failure was merely confirmation of his own poor ability. When he saw his classmates succeeding he only drew one lesson – that he could never hope to emulate or aspire to their success.

He rarely put much effort into tasks he was set and what he did produce rarely reflected his true ability. Unsurprisingly, because he felt he couldn't do what was asked of him he was easily distracted. It wasn't unusual for Tom's frustrations with himself to be expressed as anti-social behaviour, which ranged from low-level disruption in the classroom to occasional fights and general mischief-making at break times.

Most teachers will know a student like Tom. They have negative attitudes to school and a poor opinion of their own abilities. And even though their teachers may be fairly confident that their discontent and poor behaviour are not symptoms of any special need or identifiable condition, they do realise that there is a problem.

The question is, how much of a problem are students' negative attitudes? Can they be readily identified and, if so, what can be done to reverse them?

Negative attitudes and reading

Negative attitudes towards school and learning have been long thought to be associated with low attainment. But new research from GL Assessment, which is based on data from more than 40,000 students who have taken the *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School* (*PASS*) measure and the *New Group Reading Test* (*NGRT*), has found that specific attitudes and reading attainment are linked. These attitudes are, namely, low self-regard, poor motivation, unpreparedness for learning and a lack of confidence in their own learning capabilities.

Tom's opinion of his capabilities is classified by researchers as 'learner self-regard', which can be defined as a student's long-term view of their ability to take the necessary steps to achieve their goals. Its generic equivalent is more commonly called self-esteem, though self-regard is more focused on learning and consequently has a greater correlation with achievement. Students who believe in their own long-term efficacy tend to perform well; conversely those who do not tend to perform worse academically.

Some children may exhibit a relatively temporary disbelief in their own efficacy, or 'perceived learning capability' as it is termed, which provides a snapshot of a student's attitudes at any given moment. They may feel overwhelmed by the immediate expectations placed on them by a teacher or by a specific situation, for instance, but they still believe that they will be successful in the long run. Such children would probably score poorly for perceived learning capability but highly for learner self-regard.

Children such as Tom would most likely score poorly on both measures and on two other metrics, too. The first, motivation, or 'response to curriculum demands' as it is called, which simply put means the best learning happens when students are intrinsically motivated by the curriculum. Students like Tom typically do not see the point of learning or how its outcomes are supposed to benefit them.

The second is 'preparedness for learning', which is all about self-regulation. Do students feel they have enough self-regulatory skills – concentration, attentiveness, study skills – to 'own' their learning? Again, students like Tom would tend to score poorly in this metric.

The research

According to GL Assessment's research, of the children who doubt that they are clever, **half (50%)** score in the bottom third for reading attainment. To a certain extent that is to be expected. What is less expected, however, is that almost a **fifth of these pupils (19%)** score highly on *NGRT*.

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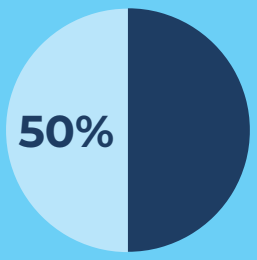
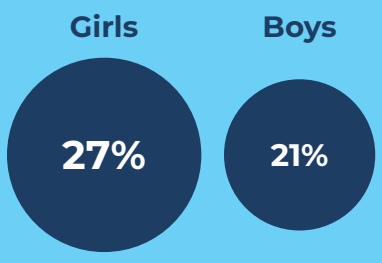
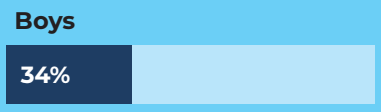


27% of girls say that they don't know the meanings of lots of words compared to **21% of boys**.



Girls are less likely than boys to say they are very clever – 27% vs 34%.



Boys are **more than twice as likely** as girls to admit to behaving badly – 11% vs 5%.

Similarly, of the **quarter of students (24%)** who say they struggle to understand what words mean, while **just under a half (46%)** are indeed in the lowest ability group for reading, a **fifth (21%)** are in the highest. Negative responses to both questions are suggestive of poor perceived learning capability.

Of the **two-fifths of pupils (39%)** who say they need help with their work – an indicator of low self-regard and poor motivation – **46% had low scores** on the reading test, yet **23% scored highly**.

One indicator of lower learning self-regard is where children admit to finding school work a real challenge. Over a **quarter of those pupils (27%)** completing *PASS* felt this, and while **half (50%)** had lower reading ability, a **fifth (20%)** scored highly. This suggests that even if they are performing well academically they may be doing so against what they feel are considerable odds, which in turn could indicate unresolved wellbeing issues.

Although there is little gender variation across most indicators, there are some notable exceptions. Girls appear to be particularly hard on themselves, compared to boys, when it comes to saying that they don't know the meanings of lots of words **(27% vs 21%)** and to disagreeing that they are clever **(23% vs 19%)**. Interestingly, they are also less likely than boys to agree strongly that they are clever **(27% vs 34%)**, even though girls significantly outperform boys at every key stage.

8% of children admit not behaving well in class, an indicator of preparedness for learning. Boys are more than twice as likely as girls to admit behaving badly – **11% vs 5%**.

There is little variation by age, with as many children in Year 6 just as likely as those in Year 11 to doubt that they are clever. However, negative attitudes to school and learning tend to worsen across the board at Key Stage 3 before improving slightly at Key Stage 4.

Addressing negative attitudes

The good news is that children like Tom can be helped. If appropriate interventions are put in place negative attitudes that are barriers to learning can be nullified and even reversed.

Beccie Hawes, Head of Service at North Star Inclusion Advisory Team in Birmingham, gives an example of two Year 7 boys whose behaviour left a lot to be desired and who persistently misbehaved to the chagrin of their teacher. "They clearly didn't want to read The Hobbit and were instead busy disrupting the lesson with a series of behavioural challenges," she says.

However, she suspected that there was more than naughtiness going on: "I had a hunch that what we were observing was actually behaviour that served as a form of protection against the potential humiliation of being two boys who couldn't read aloud, since they weren't yet fully functioning readers.

"As far as these pupils were concerned, behaving badly would result in their ejection from the classroom – which in turn would mean that they didn't have to read. To me, their avoidance strategies showed innovation and their swagger indicated confidence – both markers of potential success. We just needed to find the key that could unlock them. And I was convinced that the key was reading."

In this case, Beccie used *NGRT* to confirm that hunch. The assessment allowed her to tailor and put in place appropriate interventions such as games and challenges that increased their vocabulary and created a positive experience before any books were opened. After they had learnt to 'read' pictures, they graduated to graphic novels and eventually a range of strategies for decoding and reading books.

"We also identified something exciting happening in the boys' personal records – a decrease in the number of consequences, especially in lessons that required lots of reading. We also repeated our earlier attitude survey, which demonstrated a marked positive shift."

Recommended interventions

There are several measures teachers can take to tackle low learner self-regard, from effective feedback and celebrating failure as a learning opportunity to raising expectations and encouraging students to learn independently.

The following questions may be useful as an initial approach if you suspect a student has poor learner self-regard:

- Do they see mistakes and failures as learning opportunities?
- Do they set realistic expectations for themselves?
- Do they acknowledge their efforts and achievements?
- Do they know how to ask for feedback?
- How do they view their abilities in relation to their peers?
- Are they able to identify their own emotions?
- Do they have the right support for home learning?

Visit the website or contact one of our experts.

Further Information: gl-assessment.co.uk/NGRT
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Beccie Hawes, Head of Service at North Star Inclusion Advisory Team

The study analysed a dataset of 40,243 pupils who sat both GL Assessment's attitudinal survey (*PASS*) and adaptive reading assessment (*NGRT*) between 2016 and 2018. Pupils were aged between 7 and 16 years old and from UK schools.