

What has *Harry Potter* Done for Me? Children's Reflections on their '*Potter Experience*'

Steve Dempster¹ · Alice Oliver² · Jane Sunderland³ ·
Joanne Thistlethwaite³

Published online: 11 January 2016

© The Author(s) 2016. This article is published with open access at Springerlink.com

Abstract This article reports findings from a small-scale focus-group study funded by the British Academy. Drawing on Herbert Marsh and Richard Shavelson's notion of "Academic Self-Concept" and David Barton and Mary Hamilton's view of literacy as context-specific social practices, the authors examine what young British *Harry Potter* enthusiasts perceive as the influence of the novels on their subsequent reading behaviour and academic development. Specifically, they consider whether these children feel that *Harry Potter* has helped improve their literacy skills and whether they think the books have changed their attitudes to reading.

Steve Dempster is a Lecturer in Higher Education at the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University.

Alice Oliver is the Coordinator of International Partnerships for the Haenicke Institute for Global Education at Western Michigan University.

Jane Sunderland is an Honorary Reader in Gender and Discourse in the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University.

Jo Thistlethwaite recently gained her PhD from the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University. Her thesis looks at the use of Irish in the linguistic landscape of an Irish town.

✉ Joanne Thistlethwaite
j.thistlethwaite@lancaster.ac.uk

Steve Dempster
s.dempster@lancaster.ac.uk

Alice Oliver
alice.oliver@wmich.edu

Jane Sunderland
j.sunderland@lancaster.ac.uk

¹ Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancs LA1 4YD, UK

² Institute for Global Education, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, USA

³ Department of Linguistics and English Language, Lancaster University, Lancs LA1 4YL, UK

Moreover, the article sheds light on the role of the films and the possible effect of gender. The authors conclude that the *Potter* enthusiasts they have interviewed see the series as formative in terms of their literacy. However, regarding gender, intra-group variation (differences among individual readers in a group of either boys or girls) is far more significant than inter-group variation (differences between single-sex groups of boys and girls).

Keywords Children's reading practices · Gender · *Harry Potter* · Literacy development · Academic self-concept

Against a backdrop of a moral panic in the Western world about children's scholastic achievements, press headlines such as “*Potter's* magic spell turns boys into bookworms” (Smith, 2005) and “The Harry Potter Effect: How One Wizard Hooked Boys on Reading” (Laucius, 2007) make it appear that J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has transformed children's reading. These examples also highlight how media concerns about children's literacy are gendered and chiefly focus on boys. It is often assumed in academia that boys are less enthusiastic readers than girls. As international datasets highlight, this lack of interest may translate into boys' lower scores on measures of literacy (OECD, 2014; Moss, 2007). In the UK, concerns about boys' literacy rates intersected with anxieties about their overall educational accomplishments around the same time that *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) was published (see Hutchison, 2004; Jackson, 2003; Shepherd, 2011; Zyngier, 2009). It is worth considering briefly some of the explanations for boys' literacy “failure.” Drawing on largely binary constructions of gender, some researchers suggest that boys view reading, and the subject of English, as feminine and antithetical to “appropriate” constructions of masculinity (Knights, 2008). A related idea is that boys are less interested in fiction (Hopper, 2005; Maynard et al., 2008), preferring non-fiction, comics and periodicals (Manuel and Robinson, 2003; Merisuo-Storm, 2006). They are consequently disadvantaged by English curricula where fiction predominates (Marsh and Millard, 2000) and are less likely to engage with “the modes of reading and writing that bring them success in academic work and examinations” (Millard, 1997, p. 95).

Dominant models of gender, which define masculinity in relation and often in contrast to femininity, tend to reduce human identity categories to gender binaries and overstate or distort empirical findings, downplaying social contingency and variation within groups. Observed behavioural or attitudinal differences between genders in limited samples are often uncritically generalized to *all* boys or *all* girls (Moss, 2007; Sunderland, 2004). These approaches overlook analyses that reveal variation internal to the broader categories of “boy” and “girl,” and fail to acknowledge similarities *between* these two groups. Similarly, they discount influences of ethnicity, socioeconomic status and social disadvantage (Watson, 2011; Zyngier, 2009). Some girls are just as demotivated as some boys by the literary offerings in British schools (Marsh and Millard, 2000). Moreover, while the majority of children who prefer non-fiction tend to be boys, studies repeatedly highlight that the *numbers* of such boys are small (Moss, 2007; Manuel and

Robinson, 2003; Millard, 1997). Indeed, Gemma Moss claims that children “who establish a firm view of themselves as readers do so overwhelmingly in relation to fiction texts. This is as true of boys as it is of girls” (2007, p. 162).

Having said that, girls appear more likely than boys to read as a leisure activity (Nestlé Family Monitor, 2003), and tend to “report higher confidence” in their reading abilities (Archambault et al., 2010, p. 806). On a related note, since feminine associations can be more threatening for boys than masculine ones for girls (Sunderland, 1995; Johnson, 1997), boys may find fewer opportunities than girls to “cross gender boundaries” in their choice of texts, even if they enjoy fiction (Merisuo-Storm, 2006, p. 113). As a result, one plausible explanation for the success of the *Harry Potter* series among boys could be its lack of a gender boundary, in addition to the series’ male protagonist, adventure, humour, fantasy and horror that many boys find appealing (Dungworth et al., 2004; Manuel and Robinson, 2003). According to Nancy Boraks et al. (1997), boys strongly prefer books with male protagonists, while girls will read stories with either heroes or heroines. Nevertheless, some boys may be willing to read about active, adventurous heroines (Sunderland, 2011). *Stories that feature a boy engaged in chilling adventures, interspersed with comic relief, thus appeal to both sexes*. It has been claimed that the *Potter* novels provide an appropriate resource in particular for fiction-craving boys and have encouraged formerly bibliophobic boys (and girls) to take up reading and then try other books (Scholastic and Yankelovich, 2006, 2008; Willis, 2007; Youde, 2011). Since such claims are often anecdotal (Dempster et al., in press), below we address and question the *Potter* effect on children’s attitudes to reading.

The Hegemony of School Literacies

Discussions of literacy and achievement tend to focus on school and marginalise home and other out-of-school literacy practices. David Barton and Mary Hamilton’s view of literacy as context-specific suggests that, in a given situation, certain reading practices and concepts of literacy have more value than others (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1995). This bias is evident in the way many British educators have continually devalued the kinds of texts that pupils *choose* to read outside the classroom, narrowing definitions of literacy achievement to children’s capabilities in handling “quality” fiction. Jackie Marsh and Elaine Millard (2000) highlight examples of children who read avidly out of school, but are designated as poor or weak readers in school, because their chosen reading material fails to meet educators’ criteria of quality (see also Moss, 2007; Watson, 2011). Extracurricular reading practices can, however, influence children’s handling of school literacy, since home reading may be gendered and relevant to the perception of fiction reading as feminine (Arnot et al., 1998). When parents engage children in reading activities, they also scaffold children’s literacy skills and confidence as readers; this can subsequently reinforce their school literacy (Heath, 1982; Smith, 2004). When reading activities at home do not occur, or are devalued by teachers, it may be more difficult for children to connect with school assignments and develop a positive “Literacy Self-Concept” (Archambault et al., 2010; Mata, 2011; Rouland et al.,

2013). We reiterate Marsh and Millard's argument that educators should be more accommodating of children's extra-curricular reading in their teaching of literacy by expanding curricula to include popular fiction, serial novels, and potentially film as starting points for exploring more complex texts (see also Burn and Durran, 2007; Marsh, 2005; Parry, 2013).

Harry Potter has crossed boundaries between home and school. It has a huge following of adult readers, including parents of school-age children (Gupta, 2009), and our data suggest that parents often launch children on their *Potter* journey. Because of the series' familiarity to many children, teachers have been able to use it to introduce symbolism and archetypes to their pupils (Kelley, 2013), as well as morphemes (in the characters' names; see Nilsen and Nilsen, 2005) and criticism of gender stereotyping (Killoran et al., 2004). One reason for this familiarity is the fact that *Potter* represents a global literary, cinematic and commercial phenomenon, but equally crucial is children's shared knowledge of and enthusiasm for the series. The *Potter* novels fulfil the role of what Lev Vygotsky (1978) terms "cultural tools": reference points that stimulate interaction and facilitate learning and cognitive development. The more familiar a cultural tool is to a child, the greater its potential benefit for learning. Vygotsky's emphasis on interaction in learning processes underscores the social nature of literacy, which reinforces Barton and Hamilton's view that literacy is best understood as a set of social practices. As part of the "*Harry Potter* experience," children share the text "in discussion with friends as highlights are recalled, on bulletin boards and websites, or at *Harry Potter* parties, where episodes and activities are relived" (Moss, 2007, p. 116). The potential benefits of *Harry Potter* for developing children's literacy lie, consequently, not only in the act of reading the text, but also in related discussions and other (shared) activities, such as reading and writing fan fiction, watching the films, and playing *Potter* playground and computer games. Surprisingly, given children's ubiquitous uses of new technologies and online communication (Carrington and Marsh, 2005; Marsh, 2011), *Harry Potter* computer games and fan fiction were rarely mentioned in our data (see below), but there were numerous references to the films. We therefore include below a discussion of how the films intersected with, and sometimes enhanced, children's engagement with the books. We also acknowledge the importance of the films in the series' success and in children's *Potter* experience overall.

The Current Study: Context and Theoretical Underpinnings

The central issue for this article is not whether literacy practices surrounding *Harry Potter* result in measurable increases in educational achievements. We are interested instead in what readers say about the series' impact on their reading, both in terms of chosen texts and genres, and in relation to their "Literacy Self-Concept." The findings reported here draw on a wider study in which pupils from four British schools were asked about their *Potter* experience. As the series is now complete, an in-depth study of young readers' perspectives can reveal how they conceive of the full experience, including the books, films, computer games, and any possible

relationships between these media (Burn, 2005; Burn and Durran, 2007). The second decade of the twenty-first century also supplies a unique vantage point from which to explore the perspectives of young readers, since it is now possible to juxtapose two datasets: teenagers, who came of age with the series, and younger children, for whom *Potter* remains relevant. Studies involving *Potter* readers can thus shed light on the apparent “magic” of the series that has been proclaimed in the media and various anecdotes.

We draw the term Literacy Self-Concept (LSC) from Marsh and Shavelson's multidimensional model of self-concept (1985). LSC is a subcomponent of a broader Academic Self-Concept (ASC), which refers to individuals' understanding and evaluation of their abilities in academic endeavours. Learners with a high ASC tend to achieve highly, because confidence enhances motivational response and perseverance. ASC is subdivided into Mathematical and Verbal Self-Concepts; the latter deals with children's beliefs in their abilities in subject areas such as English, foreign languages and the humanities (Marsh, 1990). Self-concepts can be further subdivided into perceptions of ability within components of each subject. In English, the Literacy Self-Concept pertains to a learner's beliefs about their reading, writing, and oral skills. A positive LSC influences, and is influenced by, positive attainments in reading (Archambault et al., 2010; Mata, 2011; Rouland et al., 2013). Our study seeks to ascertain whether and how *Harry Potter* contributes to children's development of a Literacy Self-Concept, which may be beneficial in developing a positive self-view as a reader and in improving children's achievement in English and other school subjects.

Research Design and Method

Our study involved two primary (PS1, PS2) and two secondary schools (SS1, SS2) in the North West of England and was carried out between November 2012 and June 2013. All four schools were co-educational and state funded. Both primaries and one secondary were affiliated to, and partially funded by, Christian denominations, which is characteristic of schools in the area. The first phase of this study involved a questionnaire with 621 respondents ($N = 621$) in which 56 % of primary and 48 % of secondary pupils self-identified as *Potter* readers, meaning they had read at least one of the books.¹ From this subsample we invited 76 “enthusiasts” (34 boys and 42 girls) to participate in single-sex focus groups. “Enthusiasts” were defined as children who reported on their questionnaire that they had read four or more *Potter* novels, though in order to have sufficient participants, we lowered the bar to two novels for boys and girls in PS1 and for boys in PS2 and SS2. We ran 11 single-sex focus groups facilitated by a same-sex researcher: one of boys and one of girls in each primary, and four of girls and three of boys in the two secondary schools. Groups ranged from three to ten pupils; equal-sized groups were not possible

¹ For further details about the schools, sample and the results of the questionnaire, see Dempster et al. (2015). The data is accessible online: <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/harrypotter>

because of absences or because subject teachers did not permit children to attend an entire session.

Focus groups can elicit rich, multi-faceted (sometimes contrasting) responses, because participants talk to each other as well as to the facilitator. They provide a context that may be less intimidating than a dyadic interview with an unknown researcher (Cohen et al., 2011). We opted for single-sex groups, as we felt it would enable children to feel more comfortable if they wished to talk about gender issues. With the exception of a stilted discussion with three very shy girls in PS1, all groups were forthcoming and lively, and pupils were largely respectful of one another's positions. Children were encouraged to break silences, talk to each other, and to respond to, and build on, the comments of other members. The seven *Potter* books were present in each group to serve as a reminder of the titles and their sequence, and to stress that we were mainly talking about the books—although we also asked specific questions about the films.

In what follows, we report only findings that concern children's LSC, although we draw on data relating to our two other areas of interest, reading practices and responses to *Harry Potter*, where appropriate. Our research questions concerning perceived achievements were the following:

1. Do children feel that *Harry Potter* has helped them improve their reading? If so, in what ways?
2. Do they think the books have changed their attitudes to reading? To fiction?
3. Are there any gender tendencies?

We acknowledge that the data refer to what was said and jointly constructed in the context of the focus group and, due to a myriad of factors—including relationships within the focus group, children not wanting to create conflict, or children seeing the facilitator as an authority figure—these words may not necessarily capture what the children *actually* thought, felt, believed or even did (see Block, 2000; Cohen et al., 2011). However, like Richard Krueger, we recognise that the purpose of focus groups is neither to generalise nor “to make statements about the population,” but to understand and outline the “range” of insights on how individuals *reportedly* “perceive a situation” (Krueger, 1994, p. 3). We are mindful of these considerations in our approach to data analysis and claims that can be made.

Each focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed. The analysis began with a collaborative brainstorm of possible core categories related to our research questions, such as influences encouraging the children to read *Potter*, LSC and comments about specific *Potter* characters, books, and films. The transcripts were uploaded to Atlas.ti computer software, which enabled the systematic coding (tagging) of these categories. We included a range of evaluative codes including “like,” “dislike,” “easy” and “difficult.” The resultant list enabled us to run subsequent searches on any number and combination of codes, which were then isolated from the main body of data and grouped together. The key findings for each research question are organized by focus group and outlined below. Each set is prefaced by brief observations from the earlier questionnaire study.

Reading Level and Vocabulary

The first research question was: “Do girls and boys feel that *Harry Potter* has helped them improve their reading? If so, in what ways?” The questionnaires indicated that Rowling’s books inspired a majority of *Potter* readers to read more books generally, to explore books more difficult than *Potter*, and to read more fiction. Neither gender nor school stage had a significant impact on these results. To ascertain whether the *Potter* books have contributed to children’s LSC development, we asked the pupils if they thought that reading the series had improved their reading more widely. The first category we addressed was the perceived level of reading, vocabulary and spelling. In our questionnaires, 95 % of readers rated the books as “easy” or “okay.” Accordingly, very few focus group participants reported finding *Harry Potter* difficult to read. The one exception, a boy in secondary school, attributed his difficulties to being a non-native speaker of English. One secondary-school girl described *Harry Potter* as “light reading [...] in the middle of exams,” while another said “I found them really easy to read” (SS1). Four pupils (a girl from SS2 and boys from PS1, PS2 and SS2) reported they liked reading the series in bed. These reading practices suggest that *Harry Potter* is associated with effortless, comforting reading; one girl described the books as “cosy.” Some pupils linked this “easy-reading” with the simple vocabulary used by Rowling (see also Holden, 2000), as indicated in the following comments:²

Even though it did get more mature, the vocabulary was always the same. (SS2 boy)

The vocabulary is not the best so it’s not really improving your knowledge on words in the English language. (SS2 boy)

When asked if he agreed with how the media constructed the *Potter* books as “a miracle” for children’s literacy, this boy responded: “No, I think it’s [...] majorly over exaggerated, it’s overrated.” By contrast, many other enthusiasts asserted that their reading skills and practices had improved as a result of reading *Potter*. Their responses testified to the enhancement of various facets of their LSC, including expanded vocabularies (particularly among primary pupils), improved spelling, increased reading confidence, and inspiration for creative writing. One PS1 boy said: “It’s just really good really helpful for your reading [...] because it’s got big words in.” A PS2 girl recounted how the books enabled her to actively build her vocabulary:

When I first read them it was kind of complicated then I got the hang of it, and then my dad always told me “write the words that you don’t know what they mean, and try to pronounce it, and write them down on a piece of paper once you finish the book, and you’ve got like loads of words—look them up in the dictionary.” And I would read it again and I’ll understand the words.

² The quotations have been lightly edited to aid readability.

This quote illustrates the importance of home literacy practices in children's LSC development, as this pupil learned a specific vocabulary building strategy from her father.

Improvements in vocabulary and spelling were self-reported less often by secondary-school pupils. Only three girls mentioned this, reflecting on reading *Potter* when they were younger:

- I probably I think I got a bigger vocabulary from reading them. (SS1)
 I learned most of my spelling from the *Harry Potter* books. (SS1)
 It had more tricky words in it so then you'd have to ask your parents what does it mean and you like you can learn English as well. (SS2)

Since the secondary-school pupils probably had more sophisticated vocabularies, it is likely that any vocabulary-learning potential of *Potter* would be less salient to them than to the primary children. Alternatively, given that children tend to lose faith in their academic abilities as they get older (Marsh, 1989), it is possible that self-consciousness made them reticent to talk about this.

The Literacy Self-Concept also pertains to writing, which, while not the focus of our study, was mentioned by two pupils in the focus groups. One secondary boy noted: "You can [...] use ideas from the *Harry Potter* series" in writing activities at school, which suggests *Potter* improved the writing element of his LSC, particularly if he received positive feedback. One girl (from SS2) stated that *Potter* had "made my imagination a lot better." In general, lack of reference to writing could be attributed to the fact that children may see writing and reading as distinct skills, rather than related and mutually reinforcing (Grabe, 2001). Teachers stressing the links between reading and writing could help maximise the benefits of extracurricular reading of *Potter* and other popular fiction (see also Parry, 2013).

Thickness of the Books and Confidence

The number of *Harry Potter* books and, especially, the *thickness* of Books Four to Seven appeared to be two of the series' most salient attributes in terms of children's perceived literacy. All focus groups discussed the books' size and related thickness to perceived difficulty. For two secondary boys, the thickness of the later books meant they would not commit to the whole series:

- I read like the first that much [indicates a section of *The Order of the Phoenix*] or something and then I was like "I cannot read this." (SS2)
 I don't like how thick these books are. I like them if they're like that [pointing to *The Prisoner of Azkaban*] but like 300 pages, I couldn't read that. There's more than 300 in there [pointing to *The Order of the Phoenix*], maybe about 700. (SS1)

These comments shed light on our questionnaire finding that, while more boys had attempted to read at least one *Potter* book, girls were twice as likely as boys to have read the whole series. Comments regarding the size of the books were, however, also made in several girls' focus groups. In SS2, for example:

Girl 1: That's [holding up *The Order of the Phoenix*] quite daunting to read isn't it?

Girl 2: It's quite a commitment.

Girl 3: I think it's the size of the books cos people can't be bothered reading them.

Girl 2: Yeah.

Girl 1: You can split that [holding up *The Order of the Phoenix*] into sort of four of them [holding up *The Chamber of Secrets*] cut them up and you'd get more readers from it.

While these girls suggest that the size of the books might deter potential readers, children who persevered gained confidence to go on to read other thicker, "bigger" books:

I've been reading all my life but *Harry Potter's* one of the first series that I've ever read and that got me into reading bigger books. (SS2 boy)

It helped me because I want to read more thicker books now than just short books. (PS2 girl)

It was when I was quite young, I was quite impressed that I could read the big books, it felt like I was sort of older because I could read the thick ones. (SS1 girl)

I think being able to read the last three in particular because they're so thick encouraged me to read things like *Lord of the Rings*. (SS1 girl)

Even for children who read independently from a young age, *Harry Potter* seems to have encouraged them to go on to read other voluminous books. The first quote above also emphasises the importance of *Potter* as a series: many children said having read the whole series made them feel more confident to read books that they might not have attempted otherwise. The fact that, as the series progresses, the books broadly increase in size, might also encourage readers who complete the course to work up to other long books:

Some of them books there, like that one [*The Half-Blood Prince*] which has like got 800–700 pages [...] as I was reading that I was like, "Mum this is awesome," and my mum's just like, "Yeah I know son"—"Are there any other books sort of like that?" She just saw some *Percy Jackson* and stuff like that, said "try this," and the *Percy Jacksons* are pretty huge. (SS2 boy)

This glimpse into a pupil's home reading practices shows the mother channelling her son's new-found reading confidence in the direction of another series of fantasy books. Indeed, at least one pupil in each focus group noted how they progressed to what they saw as "more challenging" texts as a direct result of reading the series. For example:

Boy: I've read *Artemis Fowl* and *Knights of the Cross* which was OK.

Moderator: And do you think you would've touched that if you'd not had a go with the *Harry Potters*?

Boy: Not really - I was like, I wouldn't think I'd have managed that, I'd stick with my comics. (SS2)

Certainly, these children might have read such books regardless of *Harry Potter*'s existence, as they all self-identified in the questionnaires as good readers. However, for several participants, there was a strong connection between the thickness of a book and its status as an advanced read. For example, one SS2 boy said: "*Harry Potter* was like my foundation of reading mature [...] books cause *Harry Potter* was like my first mature book that I read [...] and like from that I've been reading like bigger books." Among the SS2 girls the following discussion took place:

Girl 1: Well it was the first big book I read so it like made me read like other bigger proper books.

Moderator: Okay so do others agree that it made them read other long books afterwards?

Girl 2: Yeah I read *The Lord of the Rings* after.

Girl 1: Yeah I read *The Hobbit*.

Links between the big size and assessments of the *Potter* books as mature or "proper" books suggest that completing the series provided pupils with a sense of achievement. This not only marked a transition to more challenging reading material, but also made a positive contribution to some pupils' LSC, as suggested by the following comment:

I remember reading like *Order of the Phoenix* and then I said "Mum what's a novel?" and she said "it's like a sort of a longish fiction story like the *Order of the Phoenix*" and I thought [proud tone] "I'm reading a novel." (SS2 girl)

A minority of enthusiasts said they did *not* feel *Harry Potter* helped develop their reading skills. These pupils (five boys across PS1, SS1 and SS2, and three girls in SS1) indicated that they were good readers before embarking on the series. One boy said he had read *The Lord of the Rings* before *Harry Potter*, and that he had found the former more difficult. One SS1 girl said that reading books in general had improved her future reading, not *Harry Potter* in particular.

Attitudes to Reading

The second research question of the project concerns the children's attitudes to reading and fiction. While some children might have already enjoyed reading fiction prior to experiencing *Harry Potter*, the series could still have encouraged them to try what they considered proper or adult-sized novels. At least one pupil in each focus group gave an account of what they perceived as a "step up" in the level of the material they read after *Potter*. Likewise, their pre-*Potter* reading material was deemed less challenging. For example, one secondary boy said that, before *Potter*, he read *Captain Underpants*, a short comedy novel; yet after *Potter* he moved on to series such as *Spooks* and *Sherlock Holmes*. One secondary girl reported only ever having read the short novel *The Scruffy Pony* before being introduced to *Potter*. She then read all seven books and, like several other pupils, identified *Harry Potter* as a point in her reading development where she actually started to *enjoy* reading. This

shift highlights both a change in attitude and a perceived improvement. The following quotes further illustrate that impression:

When I was younger and I first read these [*Harry Potter* books], these were like the first books that I like properly read cause before that I hated reading, so after *Harry Potter* I then started to read other things. (SS1 girl)

Harry Potter's like an adventure type thing and I like adventures and that got me into reading. (SS2 boy)

Usually I did it [reading] for like the beginning chapter, the middle chapter, and then the end, and then I got the gist of the book, but I usually I got bored by the end, but I liked the *Harry Potters* so I read them and now I just like reading. (SS2 girl)

Contrary to what the media hype suggests, many of our enthusiasts, including boys, were already avid fiction readers *before* they started on *Harry Potter*. However, some children said *Potter* had influenced them to read more fiction, particularly fantasy. One of them was a boy from PS2:

Boy: before [*Harry Potter*] it wasn't mostly fiction but non-fiction books I was reading.

Moderator: Yeah, so it's turned you from a non-fiction reader to a bit more of a fiction reader, yeah?

Boy: Well now I'm pretty much all fiction reader but I do like the occasional non-fiction.

Except for the quote above, there was little evidence to support the media claims that *Harry Potter* has converted boys from non-fiction to fiction. None of our participants exclusively read non-fiction (see below). In the majority of the groups, participants said they read some non-fiction as part of a broader diet of texts and genres.

In terms of genre, the majority of children reported that, immediately after reading *Harry Potter*, they tried to find fiction that centred on fantasy, magic, action and adventure:

It inspired me to read like books like that have a bit of magic in it, a bit like *Harry Potter*, and like a boy in it like *Percy Jackson*. (PS1 boy)

Right after *Harry Potter* I started reading the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and stuff like that cos I thought that it would it would be a bit like a fantasy. (SS1 boy)

These data suggest that *Harry Potter* augmented some children's desire to read more magic and fantasy, which, as other research highlights, are perennial favourites of children irrespective of gender (Clark and Foster, 2005; Davila and Patrick, 2010; Dungworth et al., 2004). However, other children stated that *Potter* had inspired them to read other genres, for example Michael Morpurgo's historical novels (both primary boys' groups).

Gender

To answer our third research question, we specifically looked for gender-related tendencies in our data. The questionnaires showed no statistically significant gender differences regarding perceived improvements in, or attitudes to, reading. A higher percentage of girls than boys self-identified as good readers, but this was not significant. Likewise, the focus groups did not suggest any relationship between gender and the perceived influence of *Harry Potter* on children's LSC. Indeed, there were many differences among the individual focus groups as well as across the gender groups. Having said that, subtle tendencies were noted. In particular, in two of the five boys' focus groups, a minority of participants stated that the thickness of the books was why they *stopped* reading the series. In contrast, in the girls' groups, reading a thick book was consistently seen as an achievement. Similarly, boys reported reading a wider range of non-fiction material than girls. Across the five boys' groups a total of 24 boys mentioned magazines and annuals (particularly about football), as well as books on history, science, maths, computing, space and the weather. In four of the six girls' groups, a total of seven girls also reported reading non-fiction: two said they read football magazines, two read newspapers, and three told us they liked reading about history, archaeology and forensic science. It is possible that, just as the idea of boys not liking fiction is exaggerated by the media, so too is the idea of girls not liking non-fiction, a proposition worthy of further research.

Despite a general lack of significant gender differences, one interesting gender tendency did emerge from the analysis of *peer* influence. Our Atlas-ti report yielded 21 extracts in which friends were mentioned, 19 of which came from girls, who started reading a *Potter* because "my friends were reading it" (SS2). Only two boys mentioned friends. One credited a friend with being his main influence to read *Potter* (it was actually a *female* friend). The other talked about his German pen pal, who was reading a *Potter* novel to improve his English. This suggests that, for our sample, more girls than boys talked about their reading with their (female) peers.

Conclusion

Many, though not all, of our enthusiasts consider the *Potter* books a major contributor to both their self-identification as readers and their wider literacy development. Perhaps the most striking change they reported was the confidence and motivation to try more challenging books or more books in general. Thus, the *Potter* books—particularly the thicker ones—acted as a "Portkey" or "gateway," transporting readers into the world of more mature fiction. Pupils who persevered with the series considered it a positive achievement, which potentially heightened their LSC. As Marsh and Shavelson (1985) suggest, we observe that Literacy Self-Concepts have both *cognitive* and *affective* components. Readers thus *know* that reading *Harry Potter* has benefitted their reading; and moreover, they gain *emotional* payoffs such as pride and confidence in their abilities. These can motivate

them towards further reading and trying more complex texts, which may subsequently result in higher attainments in school literacy activities (Archambault et al., 2010).

While none of our participants suggested that their teachers devalued their out-of-school reading choices, it appears that schools have perhaps not harnessed the *Harry Potter* “craze” to the full extent of its literacy-developing potential. When we asked what initially motivated participants to read *Potter*, schools and teachers were hardly mentioned at all. Only four of 76 participants mentioned school, including a boy from SS2 who “started reading the books” after a school cinema trip to watch a *Potter* film.

The influence of the films also featured frequently in the wider study. Of our 606 questionnaire respondents who had “heard of *Potter*,” 89 % (N = 539) had viewed one or more films: 92 % of boys and 86 % of girls, 46 % (N = 250) of whom reported not having read any *Potter* novel. 53 % (N = 132) of those were girls. While it is tempting to criticise the films for diverting potential readers away from the books, many participants across all focus groups were inspired to read the books after watching one or more of the films. Some participants also reported that family members had *discouraged* them from watching the films until they had read the books. Comparably, Becky Parry refers to two girls in her study, who “described how they are reading the *Harry Potter* books before watching the film adaptations although this requires patience and care so that no one gives away the story to them” (2013, p. 105). It would be unwise, however, to dismiss the *Harry Potter* films simply as motivators to read. Although viewing is often perceived as passive and reading as active, viewers can draw additional meaning from what they have seen. More specifically, Parry points to productive relationships between young viewers’ experience of films, their understanding of narrative, their own storytelling, and, indeed, their reading. The children’s readings of the *Potter* films in her study resembled Louise Rosenblatt’s description of “reading of literary texts [...] experiencing them aesthetically and developing strong affective responses to them” (Parry, 2013, p. 195).

Films aside, home practices were the most influential factor on pupils’ initial reading of *Potter* and their LSC. The majority of pupils, across all focus groups, said their journey with the *Harry Potter* books began with a parent, other close family member, or, quite often for girls, a friend. Pupils frequently highlighted their parents’ enthusiasm for the series: they were fans themselves or recognised the literacy-building potential of *Harry Potter* and were keen to get their children hooked as well. The importance of out-of-school literacies cannot be overstated as a positive influence on literacy in school. To reiterate, we endorse Marsh and Millard’s advocacy of more use of children’s popular culture generally in school. Andrew Burn (2005), for example, makes the point that traditional film-book comparisons can go beyond character and plot to “point of view, location, narrative action, narrative temporality, system of address, emotion, and reader/viewer/player engagement” (n.p.). This last aspect serves as a reminder that the out-of-school practice of playing computer games can be included in such comparisons. Rachel Levy (2009) argues that, rather than devaluing children’s existing digital strategies, teachers should draw on them to enhance children’s handling of paper-based and

other screen texts (p. 90). Her assertion bolsters our claims regarding the importance of cultural tools that are familiar to children. These tools, which should draw on home practices and popular culture, represent an invaluable asset to learning facilitation. For *Harry Potter*, it would be useful for future studies to investigate students' in-school digitally-mediated reading practices, as well as writing practices on the wide range of *Potter*-related websites and, finally, the digitally-mediated practices of reading and writing fiction more generally.

The positive findings of this study must be seen as part of a bigger picture, in which many British children read *Harry Potter* but lack the motivation or interest to continue with the series beyond the first book. Furthermore, our data suggest that around 50 % of children have not read *Harry Potter* at all, and thus have not been able to benefit from the books. However, focus group data of *Harry Potter* enthusiasts suggest that the series can have a positive effect in changing children's attitudes to reading (and sometimes to fiction), and their perception of their own progress. The "magic" of *Harry Potter* in terms of its contribution to *some* children's Literacy Self-Concept in terms of reading seems undeniable.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interests There were no financial or non-financial conflicts of interests.

Funding This study was funded largely by the British Academy Small Research Grants Fund, with further contributions from the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University.

Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent Lancaster University's Ethics Committee approved the questionnaires and parent/participant information sheets prior to commencing fieldwork. Parents were informed that we required their consent for their children's involvement, and we did not involve in this research children who had been withdrawn. Names were retained in the data only until focus group participants had been identified and will not appear in any publications. All computers storing data are encrypted. While primary school questionnaires were administered in class, the secondary school ones were administered electronically. In both cases, students' participation was entirely voluntary. Researchers involved in administering questionnaires and running focus groups had CRB clearance.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

References

- Archambault, Isabelle, Eccles, Jacquelynne S. and Vida, Mina N. (2010). Ability Self-Concepts and Subjective Value in Literacy: Joint Trajectories From Grade 1 Through 2. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(4), 804–816.
- Arnot, Madeleine, Gray, John, James, M., Ruddock, Jean and Gerard, Duveen. (1998). *Recent Research on Gender and Educational Performance* London: The Stationery Office.
- Barton, David and Hamilton, Mary. (1998). *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community* London: Routledge.
- Block, David. (2000). Problematizing Interview Data: Voices in the Mind's Machine? *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(4), 757–763.
- Boraks, Nancy, Hoffman, Amy and Bauer, David. (1997). Children's Book Preferences: Patterns, Particulars, and Possible Implications. *Reading Psychology*, 18, 309–341.

- Burn, Andrew. (2005). Potter-Literacy—From Book to Game and Back Again: Literature, Film, Game and Cross-media Literacy. *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature*, 14(3), 5–17.
- Burn, Andrew and Durran, James. (2007). *Media Literacy in Schools: Practice, Production and Progression* London:Paul Chapman.
- Carrington, Victoria, and Marsh, Jackie (Eds.). (2005). *Digital Childhood and Youth: New Texts, New Literacies*. Special Edition of *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Clark, Christina and Foster, Amelia. (2005). *Children's and Young People's Reading Habits and Preferences: The Who, What, Why, Where and When* London:National Literacy Trust.
- Cohen, Louis, Manion, Lawrence, and Morrison, Keith. (2000, 2011). *Research Methods in Education*. London: Routledge.
- Davila, Denise and Patrick, Lisa. (2010). Asking the Experts: What Children Have to Say About Their Reading Preferences. *Language Arts*, 87(3), 199–210.
- Dempster, Steven, Sunderland, Jane and Thistlethwaite, Jo. (2015). Harry Potter and the Transfiguration of Boys' and Girls' Literacies. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 21(2), 91–112.
- Dempster, Steven, Sunderland, Jane and Thistlethwaite, Jo. (in press). *Children's Literacy Practices and Preferences: Harry Potter and Beyond*. New York: Routledge.
- Dungworth, Naomi, Grimshaw, Shirley, McKnight, Cliff and Morris, Anne. (2004). Reading for Pleasure? A Summary of the Findings from a Survey of the Reading Habits of Year 5 Pupils. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 10(2), 169–188.
- Grabe, W. (2001). 'Reading-writing relations: Theoretical perspectives and instructional practices'. In Belcher, D. and Hirvela, A. (Eds.), *Linking Literacies: Perspectives on L2 Reading-Writing Connections* (pp. 15–47). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Gupta, Suman. (2009). *Re-Reading Harry Potter*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. (1982). What No Bedtime Story Means: Narrative Skills at Home and School. *Language and Society*, 11, 49–76.
- Holden, Anthony. (2000) *Why Harry Potter Doesn't Cast a Spell Over Me*. Retrieved 10 February 2015 from <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/jun/25/booksforchildrenandteenagers.guardianchildrensfictionprize2000>.
- Hopper, Rosemary. (2005). What Are Teenagers Reading? Adolescent Fiction Reading Habits and Reading Choices. *Literacy*, 39(3), 113–120.
- Hutchison, Douglas. (2004). A Critical Evaluation of 'Raising Boys' Attainment'. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 20(1), 3–15.
- Jackson, Carolyn. (2003). Motives for Laddishness at School: Fear of Failure and Fear of the 'Feminine'. *British Educational Research Journal*, 29(4), 583–598.
- Johnson, Sally. (1997). Theorising Language and Masculinity: A Feminist Perspective. In Sally Johnson and Ulrike Meinhof (Eds.), *Language and Masculinity* (pp. 8–26). Oxford:Blackwell.
- Kelley, James. (2013). Exploring eNotes.com: A Grounded Theory of Harry's Place in Language Arts Pedagogy. In Valerie Frankel (Ed.), *Teaching with Harry Potter: Essays on Classroom Wizardry from Elementary School to College* (pp. 117–128). Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Killoran, Isabel, Panaroni, Marisa, Rivers, Sally, Razack, Yasmin, Vetter, Diane and Tymon, Dorothy. (2004). Rethink, Revise, React: Using an Anti-bias Curriculum to Move beyond the Usual. *Childhood Education*, 80(3), 149–156.
- Knights, Ben. (2008). *Masculinities in Text and Teaching* Basingstoke:Palgrave Macmillan.
- Krueger, Richard A. (1994). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide For Applied Research* London:Sage.
- Laucius, Joanne. (2007) The Harry Potter Effect: How One Wizard Hooked Boys on Reading. *The Ottawa Citizen* (3 October). Retrieved from Lexis Nexis.
- Levy, Rachel. (2009). 'You Have to Understand Words...But Not Read Them': Young Children Becoming Readers in a Digital Age. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 32(1), 75–91.
- Manuel, Jacqueline and Robinson, Dennis. (2003). Teenage Boys, Teenage Girls and Books: Re-viewing Some Assumptions About Gender and Adolescents' Reading Practices. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 2(2), 66–77.
- Marsh, Herbert. (1989). Age and Sex Effects in Multiple Dimensions of Self-Concept: Preadolescence to Early Adulthood. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 81(3), 417–430.
- Marsh, Herbert and Shavelson, Richard. (1985). Self-Concept: Its Multifaceted Hierarchical Structure. *Educational Psychologist*, 20(3), 107–123.

- Marsh, Herbert. (1990). The Structure of Academic Self-Concept: The Marsh/Shavelson Model. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82, 623–636.
- Marsh, Jackie and Millard, Elaine. (2000). *Literacy and Popular Culture: Using Children's Culture in the Classroom* London:Paul Chapman.
- Marsh, Jackie. (2005). *Popular Culture, New Media and Digital Literacy in Early Childhood* London:RoutledgeFalmer.
- Marsh, Jackie. (2011). Countering Chaos in Club Penguin: Young Children's Literacy Practices in a Virtual World. In Guy Merchant, Julia Gillen, Jackie Marsh and Julia Davies (Eds.), *Virtual Literacies: Interactive Spaces for Children and Young People* (pp. 75–88). London:Routledge.
- Mata, Lourdes. (2011). A Motivation for Reading and Writing in Kindergarten Children. *Reading Psychology*, 32, 272–299.
- Maynard, Sally, MacKay, Sophie and Smyth, Fiona. (2008). A Survey of Young People's Reading: Thinking about Fiction. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 14(1), 45–65.
- Merisuo-Storm, Tuula. (2006). Girls and Boys Like to Read and Write Different Texts. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 50(2), 111–125.
- Millard, Elaine. (1997). *Differently Literate: Boys, Girls and the Schooling of Literacy* London:The Falmer Press.
- Moss, Gemma. (2007). *Literacy and Gender: Researching Texts, Contents and Readers* London:Routledge.
- Nestlé Family Monitor/MORI. (2003). *Young People's Attitudes Towards Reading*. Croydon: Nestlé UK.
- Nilsen, Alleen Pace and Nilsen, Don L.F. (2005). Six Literary Functions of Name-Play in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Books. *Onoma: Journal of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences*, 40, 65–81.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2014). *PISA 2012 Results. What Students Know and Can Do: Student Performance in Mathematics, Reading and Science*. Retrieved 29 October 2014 from http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oeed/education/pisa-2012-results-what-students-know-and-can-do-volume-i-revised-edition-february-2014/a-profile-of-student-performance-in-reading_9789264208780-8-en#page1.
- Parry, Becky. (2013). *Children, Film and Literacy* Basingstoke:Palgrave Macmillan.
- Roulund, Karmen T., Rowley, Stephanie J. and Kurtz-Costes, Beth. (2013). Self-Views of African American Youth Are Related to the Gender Stereotypes and Ability Attributions of Their Mothers. *Self and Identity*, 12, 382–396.
- Scholastic and Yankelovich. (2006). *Kids and Family Reading Report*. Retrieved 10 February 2014 from http://www.scholastic.com/aboutscholastic/news/KFRR_0207.pdf.
- Scholastic and Yankelovich. (2008). *Kids and Family Reading Report*. Accessed 10 February 2015 from <http://www.scholastic.com/aboutscholastic/news/kfrr08web.pdf>.
- Shepherd, Jessica. (2011). *Girls Surge Ahead at GCSE to Open Up Record Gender Gap at 16*. Retrieved 15 January 2015 from <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/aug/25/girls-gcse-gender-gap-16>.
- Smith, David. (2005). Potter's Magic Spell Turns Boys Into Bookworms. *The Observer* (10 July). Retrieved 11 February 2014 from <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/jul/10/books.harrypotter>.
- Smith, Susannah. (2004). The Non-Fiction Reading Habits of Young Successful Boy Readers: Forming Connections between Masculinity and Reading. *Literacy*, 38(1), 10–16.
- Street, Brian. (1995). *Social Literacies* London:Longman.
- Sunderland, Jane. (1995). "We're Boys, Miss!": Getting Learners to Reflect on Their Own Classroom Behaviour. In Sara Mills (Ed.), *Language and Gender: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (pp. 160–178). London:Longman.
- Sunderland, Jane. (2004). *Gendered Discourses* Basingstoke:Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sunderland, Jane. (2011). *Language, Gender and Children's Fiction* London:Continuum.
- Watson, Ann. (2011). Not Just a "Boy Problem": An Exploration of the Complexities Surrounding Literacy Under-Achievement. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(5), 779–795.
- Willis, Margaret. (2007). Harry Potter and the Reading Revolution. *Literacy Today*, 52, 24–25.
- Youde, Kate. (2011). Harry, the Boy Who Transformed Britain For Ever. *The Independent on Sunday*. Retrieved 11 February 2015 from <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/harry-potter-the-boy-who-transformed-britain-for-ever-2305980.html>.
- Vygotsky, Lev. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Trans. M. Cole. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zyngier, David. (2009). Doing it to (for) Boys (Again): Do We Really Need More Books Telling Us There Is a Problem With Boys' Underachievement in Education? *Gender and Education*, 21(1), 111–118.