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What Has *Harry Potter* Done for Me? Children's Reflections on Their '*Potter* Experience'

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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. 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, but regarding gender, intra-group variation is far greater than inter-group variation.

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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, focusing chiefly on boys. It is assumed in academia that boys are less enthusiastic readers than girls—. As international datasets highlight, this may translate into boys' lower attainments than girls on measures of literacy (OECD, 2014; Moss, 2007). In the UK, early concerns about boys' literacies intersected with anxieties about their overall educational accomplishments around the same time that *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling, 1997) was published and widely taken up (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, MacKay and Smyth, 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 contrast to femininity, may result in constructions of humans as members of binary gender groups and overstate or distort empirical findings, downplaying social contingency and variation within groups. Suggestions of behavioural or attitudinal differences between some girls and boys are

often uncritically presumed to apply to *all* boys or *all* girls (Moss, 2007; Sunderland, 2004). This overlooks analyses that indicate variation among *individual* boys and girls, fails to acknowledge findings of similarities *between* boys and girls, and discounts influences of ethnicity, socioeconomic status and social disadvantage (Watson, 2011; Zyngier, 2009). Some girls are just as turned off as some boys by the literary offerings in British schools (Marsh and Millard, 2000). Similarly, 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).

This said, girls appear more likely than boys to read as a leisure activity (Nestlé Family Monitor, 2003), and tend to "report higher confidence" in their literacy abilities (Archambault, Eccles and Vida, 2010, p. 806). On a related note, as associations of anything feminine can be more threatening for boys than those of masculinity for girls (Sunderland, 1995; Johnson, 1997), even when boys enjoy fiction they may find fewer opportunities than girls to "cross gender boundaries" in their choice of texts (Merisuo-Storm, 2006, p. 113). If so, one reason for the success of the *Harry Potter* novels among boys may be their lack of a gender boundary, alongside 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, Amy Hoffman and David Bauer (1997), boys strongly prefer books with male protagonists, while girls will read stories with either heroes or heroines (although boys may be willing to read about active, adventurous heroines; see Sunderland, 2011). Thus, stories featuring a boy engaged in chilling adventures interspersed with comic relief will likely appeal to both sexes. Claims have been made that the *Potter* novels provide an appropriate resource in particular for fiction-craving boys and have encouraged some former

bibliophobic boys (and girls) to take up reading and then try other books (Scholastic and Yankelovich, 2006 and 2008; Willis, 2007; Youde, 2011). Since such claims are often anecdotal (Dempster, Sunderland and Thistlethwaite, 2015), we address and question the effect of *Harry Potter* on children's attitudes to reading in this paper.

The Hegemony of School Literacies

Discussions about literacy and achievement tend to focus on *school* literacies in ways that 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 literacy practices and understandings have more value than others (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; see also Street, 1995). This is evident in the way many British educators have continually devalued the kinds of texts 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 poor or weak readers in school, as their chosen reading materials fail educators' criteria of quality (see also Moss, 2007; Watson, 2011). Such extracurricular literacies may, however, influence children's handling of school literacies. Home literacy practices may be gendered and relevant to the perception of fiction reading as feminine (Arnot et al., 1998), but when parents engage children in reading activities they also scaffold children's literacy skills and positive self-beliefs regarding their reading capabilities that can subsequently be deployed at school (Heath, 1982; Smith, 2004). When literacy activities at home do not occur or are devalued by teachers, it may be more difficult for children to connect with school literacy and/or develop a positive "Literacy Self-Concept" (Archambault, Eccles and Vida, 2010; Mata, 2011; Rouland, Rowley and Kurtz-Costes, 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, to include popular fiction, serial novels, and also film as starting points for exploring more complex texts (see also Burn and Durran, 2007; Marsh, 2005; Parry, 2012).

Harry Potter has had something of a home-school cross-over role, with huge numbers of adult readers, including parents of school-age children (Gupta, 2009), and our data suggest that parents often launch children on their *Harry Potter* journey. Because of the familiarity of *Potter* 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 gender stereotyping (Killoran et al., 2004). One reason for this familiarity is *Potter*'s position as a key global literary, cinematic and commercial phenomenon, but equally crucial is children's shared knowledge of and enthusiasm for the series.

The *Potter* novels could be seen to 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. The importance that Vygotsky places on interaction in learning processes casts into relief the social nature of literacy, which accords with Barton and Hamilton's view that literacy is best understood as a set of social practices. In the case of the "*Harry Potter* experience," this phenomen is exemplified by children sharing the text after reading: "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 shared talk about reading it and in other activities it inspires. These include reading and writing fan-fiction, watching *Harry Potter* films, and playing *Potter* playground and computer games. Suprisingly, given children's ubiquitous uses

of new technologies and online communication (Carrington and Marsh, 2005; Marsh 2011), *Harry Potter* computer games and fanfiction were not mentioned frequently in our data (see below), but there were numerous references to the films. We therefore include below a discussion on how the films intersected with and sometimes enhanced children's engagement with the print-based *Potter* books. We also acknowledge the importance of the films in *Harry Potter*'s success and in children's *Potter* experience overall.

The Current study: Context and Theoretical Underpinnings

The central issue for this paper is not whether literacy practices surrounding *Harry Potter* result in measurable increases in educational attainments. 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 *Harry Potter* experience. As both book and film series are now complete, an in-depth study of young readers' own perspectives can show what they make of the full experience, including the books, the films, the computer games, and possible relationships between them (Burn, 2005; Burn and Durran, 2007). The second decade of the twenty-first century is also a good vantage point from which to look both at perspectives of teenagers who have grown up with the series, and of younger children, for whom Harry still has currency. Work with *Potter* readers may thus shed light on the apparent "magic" of the series that has been proclaimed in the media and various anecdotes.

Our theoretical focus in this paper is readers' Literacy Self-Concept (LSC). Following Marsh and Richard Shavelson's multidimensional model of self-concept (1985), the 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 well because the security in their skills in a given subject area enhances positive motivational responses and perseverance. The 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 humanities (Marsh, 1990). Subject-specific self-concepts are further subdivided into perceptions of ability within components of each subject. In English this would include the Literacy Self-Concept, pertaining to a learner's beliefs about their reading, writing and oral skills. A positive LSC both influences and is influenced by positive attainments in reading (e.g. Archambault, Eccles and Vida, 2010; Mata, 2011; Rouland, Rowley and Kurtz-Costes, 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 promoting a positive self-view as a reader and potentially improve children's standing in English and other school subjects.

Research Design and Method

Our study involved two primary (PS1, PS2) and two secondary schools (SS1, SS2) in 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, 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 *Harry Potter* book.[2] From this subsample we invited 76 "enthusiasts" (34 boys and 42 girls) to participate in single-sex, semi-structured focus groups. Enthusiasts were

[2] For further details about the schools, sample and the results of the questionnaire, see Dempster, Sunderland and Thistlethwaite (2015).

children who had reported on their questionnaire that they had read four or more *Potter* novels, though to have sufficient participants for at least one boys' and one girls' focus group in each school 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 boys' and one girls' group in each primary, and four girls' and three boys' groups in the two secondary schools. Groups ranged from three to ten pupils; equal-sized groups were not possible due to pupil absences or subject teachers not permitting children to attend an entire session.

Focus groups can elicit rich, multi-faceted (sometimes contrasting) understandings, resulting from participants talking to others as well as the facilitator. They provide a context that we considered would be less intimidating than a dyadic interview with an unknown researcher (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). We opted for single-sex groups as we felt this allowed children to feel more comfortable if they wished to talk about gender issues. We also recognise potential problems of using focus groups with children, for example, children saying anything rather than nothing, or being destructive of others' views (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). However, 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 talk to each other, respond to and build on other members' comments and break silences. The seven *Potter* books were present in each group as a reminder of the titles and their sequence in the series, and to stress that we were mainly talking about the books—although we did also ask specific questions about the films.

In what follows, we report only findings concerning the children's perceived achievements (in relation to their LSC), although we draw on data relating to our two other areas of interest, literacy practices and responses (to the *Potter* series) where appropriate. Our research questions concerning perceived achievements relevant to the focus groups were:

(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 appreciate 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 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, Manion and Morrison, 2011). However, the purpose of focus groups is to gain insight into participants' understandings rather than garner 'facts'. The purpose is to learn how individuals *reportedly* "perceive a situation" as shown in words that we can also neither generalise nor "make statements about the population" from (Krueger, 1994, p. 3).

Analysis

Each focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed. The analysis began with a collaborative brainstorm of possible core categories related to our research questions. These included influences on children to read *Potter,* Literacy Self-Concept 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. Further categories emerged as a result of re-reading the transcripts e.g. certain authors were mentioned frequently, hence each was given their own code. The codes were also adjusted according to emerging patterns; for example, authors who were mentioned frequently

received their own code. We also devised a range of codes which could be used in conjunction with others. For example, the quotation 'I read when I go to bed', was coded 'pFG_girl', 'literacy event', and 'place_bed'. We also included a range of evaluative codes including 'like', 'dislike', 'easy', 'difficult'. The resultant extensive 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 from the focus groups in relation to each research question are outlined below. Each set is prefaced by brief observations from the earlier questionnaire study (Dempster, Sunderland and Thistlethwaite, 2015).

The first research question to be addressed 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 reportedly 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 were significantly associated with any of these.

As mentioned, the notion of a Literacy Self-Concept has been used to refer to self-belief in literacy. Attainments in reading may be influenced by and go on to influence an individual's LSC; thus, if one improves, so too may the other. To ascertain whether the *Harry 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 had rated the books as "easy" or "okay." Accordingly, very few focus group participants reported finding *Harry Potter* difficult to read. The one pupil (a boy in secondary school) who did, attributed this to being a non-native speaker of English. One secondary-school girl described *Harry Potter* as "light reading [...] in the middle of exams," whileanother said "I found them really easy to read [...] I just find these [*Harry Potter* books]

very light reading" (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 would suggest that *Harry Potter* is associated with light, comforting reading; one girl described the books as "cosy."

This "easy-reading" may be linked with the simple vocabulary reportedly used by Rowling (see Holden, 2000, and le Guin, 2004), as indicated in the following comments:[3]

> 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 has 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, it's good but it's still just too overrated." By contrast, many enthusiasts asserted that their reading skills and practices had not only changed, but improved as a result of reading *Potter*. Their responses related 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, for example: "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

[3] The quotations have been lightly edited to aid readability.

> 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.

This quote illustrates the importance of home literacy practices in children's LSC development. This pupil has learned a specific vocabulary building strategy driven by 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 mean and you like you can learn English as well. (SS2)

As the secondary school pupils probably had more sophisticated vocabularies, any vocabulary-learning potential of *Potter* may have been less salient for them than for the primary children. Alternatively, given that children tend to lose faith in their academic abilities as they get older (Marsh, 1989), they may have been self-conscious talking about this.

The Literacy Self-Concept also extends to writing which, while not the focus of our study and hence not asked directly about, 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* may have improved the writing element of his

LSC, particularly if he received positive feedback. One SS2 girl stated that *Potter* had "made my imagination a lot better." Lack of reference to writing may also be due to the children seeing writing and reading as distinct skills, rather than related and mutually reinforcing (Grabe, 2001). Teachers stressing links between reading and writing may help maximise benefits accrued through children's extracurricular reading of *Potter* and other popular fiction.[4]

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 literacies. *All* focus groups discussed the books' size, with thickness signifying a book's 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 *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.

[4] See also Parry (2013) on relationships between children's writing and film viewing.

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, "thicker" 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, may also encourage readers who complete the course to work up to other long books:

> Some of them books there, like that one [pointing to *The Half-Blood Prince*] which has like got 800-700 [...] 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 Jackson*s are pretty huge. (SS2 boy)

This glimpse into a pupil's home literacy practices, and the role of "talk around the text" with his mother in his reading development, shows the mother harnessing her son's new-found reading confidence by introducing him to another series of fantasy books after *Potter*. 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 Potter*s?
>
> 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 may have read such books irrespective of the existence of *Harry Potter*, as all self-identified in the questionnaires as good readers. However, for several children, there was a strong connection between the thickness of a book and its status as a "mature" or advanced book. For example, one SS2 boy said:

> Boy*:* *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.

And among the SS2 girls:

> 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 of *Potter* books and assessments of them as mature and/or "proper" books suggest that completing the series, particularly the larger books, provided pupils with a sense of achievement. This not only marks a transition to more challenging reading material, but also can make a positive contribution to their 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 their reading. These pupils (boys in 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:

> I think cos I've always loved reading that like reading [the *Harry Potter* series] didn't really make a difference to me cause I'd always had like the reading background so like anything that's helped my reading has always helped anyway.

Attitudes to Reading

The second research question of the project concerns the children's attitudes to reading: "Do children think the *Harry Potter* books have changed their attitudes to reading? To fiction?" While some children may already have enjoyed reading fiction prior to experiencing *Harry Potter,* the series may 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*. Accordingly, their pre-*Potter* reading material was deemed less challenging. For example, one secondary boy said that before *Harry 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*. After

this, she read all seven *Potter* books and, like several other pupils, identified *Harry Potter* as a point in her reading development where she actually started to *enjoy* reading. This highlights both a change in attitudes as well as perceived improvements. 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)
>
> […] cos *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.

There was little evidence in the groups of media claims that *Harry Potter* has converted boys from non-fiction to fiction. Only the boy above identified himself as more of a non-fiction reader prior to reading *Potter*. Additionally, although 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 reading the *Potter* novels 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 readers stated that *Potter* had inspired them to try other fiction, in the form of *The Hunger Games* (one secondary girl and one primary boy) and Michael Morpurgo's historical novels (in 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 number was non-significant. Likewise, the focus

groups did not suggest any relationship between gender and the perceived influence of *Harry Potter* on children's Literacy Self-Concepts; indeed, there were many differences *among* the individual focus groups as well as across the gender groups.

That said, subtle tendencies were noted. In particular, in two of the five boys' focus groups, a minority of boys stated 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. All five boys' groups mentioned magazines and annuals (particularly about football), alongside 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 gender differences, one interesting gender tendency did emerge from the analysis of *peer* influence. Our Atlas-ti report returned 21 extracts in which friends were mentioned, 19 of which came from girls, who started reading *Potter* because "my friends were reading it" (SS2). Only two boys mentioned friends, and just one of these credited a friend with being his main influence to read *Potter* (it was actually a *female* friend). The other talked about his German pen-friend, who was reading an English *Potter* novel to improve his language skills. This suggests that, for our sample, more girls than boys talked about their reading with their (female) peers.

Discussion

Many (though not all) of our enthusiasts consider *Potter* books as 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 this a positive attainment, which potentially heightened their LSC. Informed by Marsh and Shavelson (1985), we can see Literacy Self-Concepts having both *cognitive* and *affective* components. Thus, alongside a reader *knowing* that reading *Harry Potter* has benefitted their reading, they also 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 (see Archambault, Eccles and Vida, 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" for its full literacy-developing potential. When we asked what initially influenced 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, while 46% (N = 250) of cinema-goers reported not having read any *Potter* novel. 53% of those (N = 132) 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 films. Some participants also reported family members *discouraging* them from watching the films

until they had read the books. Comparably, Parry (2013) refers to one girl in her study, Eve, whose "film-viewing seemed to be carefully connected to her reading", and how Eve and her friend Matilda:

> 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.... Although Eve is considered average in terms of school-based literacy, she has an extremely positive view of both reading books and watching films for pleasure (p. 105).

It would be imprudent, however, to dismiss the *Harry Potter* films simply as 'motivators to read'. Although viewing is often perceived as 'passive' whereas reading is considered 'active', viewers can make additional sense of what they have seen. For example, Marsh (2004) reported that very young children sometimes act out what they watch on DVDs, while some of our participants mentioned acting out aspects of the Harry Potter series in playground games - though it was not clear if these were games inspired by the books or films. More specifically, Becky Parry (2013) points to productive relationships between young viewers' experience of films, their understanding of narrative, their own storytelling, and, indeed, their reading: "Through their talk about film the children [...] could clearly be seen to be reading films in the way Rosenblatt (1970) describes the reading of literary texts […] experiencing them aesthetically and developing strong affective responses to them" (p. 195). Films aside, home literacy 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 parental 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 also. The importance of out-of-school literacies cannot be overstated as positively relevant to 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 comparison 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.), with this last aspect reminding us that computer games can be included in such comparison.

Also, while the focus of this study was print literacy, this is rapidly changing both outside and within schools (Hassett, 2006). We have already referred to Marsh's (2011) study of children's use of the online "Club Penguin." Rachel Levy's (2009) study of very young children's digital literacies is also relevant, even though it does not focus on *Harry Potter.* Levy described how pre-school children in her study were already skilled in using digital texts independently. However, many lost confidence in these abilities while at school, feeling that they "needed to conform to the perceived definition of reading as the need to decode printed text" (p. 89), with potentially negative implications for their Literacy Self-Concepts. Levy concluded 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). This reflects our earlier comments regarding the importance of how cultural tools familiar to children facilitate learning, which, we argue, would also entail drawing on home literacies and popular culture. For *Harry Potter,* future studies could usefully look at students' in-school digitally-mediated reading practices, and at *Harry Potter*-related writing practices on the large range of *Potter*-related websites (although the official *Pottermore* site currently does not allow this), and at the digitally-mediated practices of reading and writing fiction more generally.

Conclusion

The positive findings of this study must be seen as part of a bigger picture, in which many British children may be readers of *Harry Potter* but have lacked motivation or interest to continue with the series beyond the first book. Indeed, our data suggest that around 50% of children have not read *Harry Potter* at all, and hence have not been able to benefit from the books. However, focus group data of *Harry Potter* enthusiasts suggest that the series can be influential and positive in changing children's attitudes to reading (and sometimes to fiction), and helping their reading skills in general. Furthermore, while we see the experience of those who have seen the films or played the computer games as a valid and potentially educationally useful part of the *Harry Potter* experience, we also welcome children's continuing enjoyment of print literacy. 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

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. Lancaster University's Ethics Committee approved the questionnaires and parent/participant information sheets prior to commencing fieldwork. The schools helped us inform parents via letters and email. 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, students' participation was entirely voluntary. Researchers involved in administering questionnaires and running focus groups had CRB clearance. There were no financial or non-financial conflicts of interests.

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