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Citation for published version:

McGeown, S, Bonsall, J, Andries, V, Howarth, D, Wilkinson, K & Sabeti, S 2020, 'Growing up a reader: Exploring children's and adolescents' perceptions of 'a reader'', *Educational Research*, pp. 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2020.1747361>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/00131881.2020.1747361](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2020.1747361)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Educational Research

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Educational Research on 13 April 2020, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/00131881.2020.1747361>

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Growing up a reader: Exploring children's and adolescents' perceptions of 'a reader'

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Word count (exc. figures/tables): 6,763

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in "Educational Research" on 13 April 2020, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/00131881.2020.1747361>

Abstract

Background

Over the last two decades, the reading habits of children and adolescents have evolved. Research shows some similarities in the reading experiences of children and adolescents, but there are also differences. For example, adolescents are more likely to read digitally and generally report poorer attitudes towards reading. With this in mind, we asked: how do young people define a reader?

Purpose

This small scale, in-depth study sought to understand how children and adolescents describe ‘a reader’ and examine similarities and differences in their responses.

Methods

In total, 33 children aged 9-11 and 30 adolescents aged 15-16 from one primary school and one secondary school in the UK were individually interviewed, to explore their perceptions and descriptions of a reader. Using a participatory approach, adult researchers interviewed student researchers, who then in turn interviewed their peers. Transcribed data were analysed qualitatively, using a data-driven, inductive thematic analysis approach.

Results

Our analysis revealed some common themes in terms of children and adolescents’ perceptions of a reader. For example, readers were described as those who enjoy reading, read frequently, choose to read and, primarily, read print books. Readers were also described as those who are skilled at reading. However, subtle differences between children and adolescents were also found. For example, adolescents were more likely to say that readers choose a broader range of reading matter and did not need to read as frequently to be described a reader.

Conclusions and implications

Our analysis offers insights into how children and adolescents defined a reader. Understanding more about how children and young people describe readers may help teachers who are working towards strengthening reading cultures in their primary or secondary school contexts. Broadening the conceptualisation of what it means to be a reader could arguably lead to a more inclusive use of the term and ultimately encourage more children and adolescents to self-identify as readers. Further, from a methodological point of view, we encourage researchers to consider a participatory research approach where appropriate, as this involvement in the research process can support primary and secondary school students in the development of their own research skills.

Keywords: reader; literacy; participatory research; children; adolescents; primary education; secondary education

Introduction

The reading habits of children and adolescents have changed considerably over the last two decades. Recent research suggests that text messages, websites, song lyrics, social networking sites, followed by fiction books, are among the leisure time reading matter most read by children and adolescents at present (Clark and Teravainen, 2017). As reading habits evolve, it is ever more important to understand children's and adolescents' perceptions of 'a reader' and to what extent they share similar and different ideas about what it means to be a reader in the 21st century.

Research seeking to explore the specific question of how children and adolescents define a reader, in depth, is relatively limited, although studies of reader identity are relevant. Reader identity has been defined as '*how capable individuals believe they are in comprehending texts, [the] value they place on reading and their understanding of what it means to be a particular type of reader*' (Hall, 2012, p. 369). Studies of reader identity among school populations most commonly make the distinction between students who self-identify as good/skilled readers and those that self-identify as poor/struggling/non-readers (e.g., Clark, Osborne, and Akerman, 2008; Hall, 2012, 2016;), although there are exceptions. For example, Sellers (2019) recognised four reader identities: the resistant reader, the indifferent reader, the outsider reader and the social reader. The reader identities children and adolescents construct are shaped by past and current reading experiences (successful or not), their environment (home and school) and messages conveyed by important others (i.e., family, peers and school) (Clark et al., 2008; Frankel, 2017; Glenn, Ginsberg, and King-Watkins, 2017; Sellers, 2019).

In a large-scale quantitative study which sought to explore the differences between children (aged 9-14) who identified as readers (n = 1,143 pupils, 71% of sample) and those who considered themselves non-readers (n = 471, 29%), it was those who self-identified as readers who were significantly more likely to rate themselves as good at reading and reported

reading more frequently (Clark et al., 2008). Furthermore, when asked about their reading habits, readers were more likely to read a wide range of texts outside of school. However, differences in fiction book reading (readers – 59.6% vs non-readers – 11%) were much wider than differences found across all other text types (e.g., magazines: readers 74.3% vs non-readers – 66.5%). Furthermore, when asked what a reader enjoys reading, fiction book reading was, by far, the most common response, while digital texts (e.g., websites, emails, blogs networking website) were less frequently endorsed. Indeed, beliefs about the reading practices of a reader were shared by both the self-identified readers and non-readers. Finally, when asked how reading made them feel, readers were more likely to associate positive feelings with reading (e.g., calm, happy, curious, clever/intelligent), while non-readers were more likely to report negative feelings associated with reading (e.g., bored, stressed). More recent mixed methods research by Hall (2012; 2016) with young adolescent readers (aged 11-14) is also relevant here, as it focused on school students' reading identities. In her research, she examined how students who self-identified as high, average and low performing readers talked about texts and strategies they used when reading. Interestingly, the conceptualisation of a reader was very much tied to students' perceptions of their ability.

Such distinctions undoubtedly have value in allowing clear comparisons to be drawn and provide an opportunity to highlight the benefits of self-identifying as a reader (e.g., Clark et al, 2008) or a high performing reader (Hall, 2012). However, positioning a child or adolescent as a reader vs non-reader (Clark et al., 2008), good vs poor reader (Hall, 2012; 2016), fast vs slow reader (Barajas and Aronsson, 2009), willing vs unwilling reader (Barajas and Aronsson, 2009) can, in some situations, create an unhelpful dichotomy which can potentially be harmful to students (Frankel and Brooks, 2018). It is possible, then, that broadening the conceptualisation of what it means 'to be a reader' may lead to a much more inclusive use of the term, so that it becomes something with which a wider range of the school

age student population can identify. Indeed, recent research by Korobkova and Collins (2018) explored adolescent user experiences on story-sharing platforms, examining the literacy roles, practices and identities that story sharing apps foster, recognising that many adolescents are engaging in less traditional, yet highly engaging, literacy experiences.

Purpose

Against this background, our study did not seek to investigate reader identity per se. Rather, we sought to explore children's (aged 9-11) and adolescents' (aged 15-16) perceptions of what it means to be a reader. The reading attitudes and habits of these age groups are very different, so there is good reason to predict that their perceptions and definitions of a reader may differ. In 2017/18, in a survey based on 49,049 children and young people, a higher proportion of children aged 8-11 reported positive attitudes to reading compared to adolescents aged 14-16 (77% compared to 44.3%) (Clark, 2019). Furthermore, a higher proportion of children reported daily reading outside of class (46.7%) compared with adolescents (21.9%). There were also clear differences in the reading habits of children and young people. For example, children reported more fiction and non-fiction paper book reading (68.2% fiction & 60.1% nonfiction) than adolescents (44.5% fiction & 34.7% non-fiction). On the other hand, reading on websites, text messaging and instant messaging were less common among children (68%, 63.2%, 43.4% respectively) than adolescents (93%, 96.2%, 93.4% respectively). Given that the majority of research in this area to date is quantitative, an in-depth, small scale qualitative study was designed to investigate, in detail, children's and adolescents' perceptions of 'a reader' and explore the similarities and differences in their accounts. With this aim in mind, our study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do children (aged 9-11) and adolescents (aged 15-16) describe 'a reader'?
2. What are the similarities and differences in children's and adolescents' descriptions of a reader?

Method

Background

This project, Growing Up A Reader, was an interdisciplinary research project (Psychology, Education, and English Literature) in collaboration with a non-academic partner, Scottish Book Trust. It involved training primary and secondary school students (hereafter named student researchers) to interview their peers about their perceptions of a reader, in addition to what they read and why. All student researchers received a full day of research training at the University of Edinburgh (primary and secondary school students received training on different days). During their research training, student researchers learnt the aims of the project, received guidance on ethics and interview approaches, and also had the opportunity to practise interviewing each other, after being interviewed themselves. The decision to train students as researchers was to create an environment where our participants might feel more at ease speaking about this topic (i.e., encouraging conversations between children/adolescents and their peers about reading). We were also interested in whether the nature and content of conversations about reading would differ when students spoke to their peers rather than an adult researcher. Finally, we were eager to engage school students more fully in the process of conducting research, as participatory approaches have previously done (e.g., Levy and Thompson, 2015). A full description and reflective account of our participatory approach is currently being written up for publication elsewhere.

Ethical considerations

Written parent consent was required for both primary and secondary school student researchers/participants. Students only took consent forms home if they were willing to participate in the study, after receiving information about it. Prior to each interview, participants were given information about the interview and informed again that the interviews would be audio recorded. At this point, students had the opportunity to withdraw from the

study if they wished. Following the interviews, all audio recorded files were stored securely, transcribed within six months of the interview and then deleted. To ensure anonymity, no personally identifiable information (e.g., names, contact details) were collected during the interviews and participants were told not to use student names during the interview. In two instances where a name was spontaneously mentioned (e.g., “X likes reading this type of thing too”), their names were removed during transcription. This project was approved by the University of Edinburgh’s School of Education ethics committee.

Participants

Participants were primary and secondary school children. A total of 33 primary school children (12 student researchers and 21 of their peers, 16 female), aged between 9 and 11 years, from a city centre primary school in Scotland participated. The primary school describes itself as “multicultural” and approximately 80% of pupils reached the expected level of reading at the end of primary school in the year prior to the study. In addition, a total of 30 secondary school students (10 student researchers and 20 of their peers, 16 female) aged 15-16 from a city centre secondary school in Scotland participated. In the year of the study, approximately 20% of pupils from this school left with five or more Scottish Higher qualifications (national qualifications in Scotland). A school teacher in the primary school and a librarian in the secondary school selected the student researchers and were asked to invite students with a range of reading interests and experiences. The vast majority of the participants had English as their first language and all participants had sufficient English skills to contribute fully during the interviews.

Data collection

Twenty-two individual interviews were conducted by adult researchers (authors 2, 3 & 4), who interviewed the primary and secondary school student researchers. The interview started by asking students what they thought it meant to be a ‘reader’, followed by what they read, why

and how reading made them feel. The adult researchers were known to the student researchers, as they had met during the University research training day. Data related to children's and adolescents' perceptions of a reader were analysed for the study reported here. After being interviewed by an adult researcher, the student researchers interviewed one or two of their chosen peers (with an adult researcher present), resulting in a further forty-one interviews. The student researchers asked the same questions but were encouraged to add their own questions if they wished.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed in full by the adult researchers (authors 2, 3 and 4) and shared with the research team. Themes were identified using a data-driven inductive thematic analysis approach, using the six phases of thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). The research team read through the interview transcripts several times, either in a group (authors 2, 3 and 4), or individually (authors 1 and 5) and generated initial codes. These initial codes constituted brief summaries of the interview transcript (e.g., reads a lot, reads every day; reads because they want to, chooses to read). Following this, the research team met as a group to identify broader themes from the codes (e.g., reads frequently; intrinsically motivated to read) within the data (Phases 1-3). The research team then met twice further to review, define and name the themes. This was to ensure there were clear and meaningful distinctions between each of the themes identified and that they accurately represented the data (Phases 4-6). Some themes were more prevalent than others; however, all themes identified are shared in the paper, as we sought to provide a comprehensive account of children's and adolescents' perceptions of a reader. Conventions to convey prevalence are used in the paper (Braun and Clarke, 2006); in keeping with our qualitative approach, we have not quantified our data fully. Initially, interviews conducted by the adult researchers and student researchers were transcribed and analysed separately initially (Phase 1-3); however, as it became evident that themes emerging

after Phase 3 were the same regardless of interviewer, the data was integrated during Phases 4-6. Findings related to primary and secondary school students were analysed separately.

Results and discussion

In this section, the findings from our in-depth analysis of the rich interview data are presented and discussed. Insights from the primary school and secondary school data analysis are firstly presented separately, and then compared. Where relevant, anonymised quotations from the transcribed data are included to illustrate and illuminate points from the analysis.

Insights from the analysis of the primary school children's interviews

In terms of considering what it meant to 'be a reader', it was evident that, for most of the primary school interviewees, someone who enjoys reading or reads for enjoyment (30/33) was key. For example, one child observed, '*someone that enjoys reading, doesn't think of it as a chore*'; another commented '*A reader is somebody who definitely likes reading, somebody who enjoys books*'; a third said, '*I think a reader is a person who loves reading books, and is always engrossed in a book*'. Furthermore, many felt that a reader was someone who reads frequently (22/33). As some students expressed it: '*A reader is somebody who ... reads almost all the time*'; '*I think someone who reads, like, every day*'; '*reading almost every minute of the day. Well, not every minute, but quite a lot of the time*'. This description of a reader as someone who reads frequently and enjoys reading resonates with findings in previous large-scale quantitative research (Clark et al., 2008).

When a text type was spontaneously mentioned in relation to being a reader (19/33), books were unanimously the kind of text mentioned, with far fewer references to other reading matter (see also Clark et al., 2008). Indeed, throughout the interviews, students often had to be prompted to discuss other kinds of texts, suggesting their concept of a reader is still

synonymous with someone who reads books rather than other reading matter. Nevertheless, while almost all conceptualisations of reading were generally tied to reading books, a couple of students reported that readers do not only read books, but also other material. For example, one observed: *'Someone who reads books and enjoys them. And not only books, but comics, and other things to read, and newspapers to read'*. This broader conceptualisation of a reader aligns with data indicating that children aged 8-11 are involved in a broad range of reading activities outside of school (Clark, 2019).

Other, but less common perceptions of a reader included someone who would choose to read over other activities and was intrinsically motivated to read. As some students explained: *'A reader is somebody who enjoys reading and who would take pleasure and choose to read over do – over doing something else'*; *'A person who reads, but doesn't just read because they have to, reads because they want to.'* Indeed, studies of reading motivation frequently cite the benefits of intrinsic reading motivation (i.e., being internally motivated to read) more than extrinsic reading motivation (i.e., being motivated to read due to external factors, e.g., for recognition or a reward) (McGeown, Norgate, and Warhurst, 2012; Troyer et al., 2019; Wigfield and Guthrie, 1997; Wang and Guthrie, 2002).

According to a couple of children, a reader is also someone who knows their own reading interests. As described by one student, a reader: *'knows what book isn't right for them, and makes the right choices in books'* or is someone who is a skilled reader. For example: *'I think a reader is someone who reads a lot, enjoys it a lot and does it very well...'*; *'to be considered a reader, you need to be able to understand the text that you're given'*. It is interesting to note that, while reading skill has previously been closely associated with notions of a reader (Clark et al., 2008), in this study, reading skill was not often mentioned by children when sharing their perceptions of a reader.

Finally, being a reader was described by one child as being a knowledge gatherer: *'Yeah, someone who likes to read, and gather information, fill their minds with what they like to read and how they read'*, and another described a reader as an imaginative person: *'So, I think it's someone who... almost has their own world, in a way. When they read, that produces more and more imagination and things. So I think a reader is an imaginative person, who can take a chance.'*

In our small, in-depth study, the responses from children were both similar to and different from those from a large-scale quantitative study exploring children's conceptualization of a reader (Clark et al., 2008). In the large-scale study, with 1,620 children (aged 9-14), using questionnaire items, when asked what kind of person a reader was, most common responses, in order, were, a reader was someone who was clever/intelligent, would do well in life, was happy and was also a geek/ nerd. As a general point, this exemplifies the importance of bearing context in mind: i.e. being mindful that differently worded questions and different approaches to data collection on the same topic may yield different findings.

Insights from the analysis of the secondary school students' interviews

Many adolescents mentioned enjoyment of reading (16/30) as being integral to the concept of a reader, regardless of the type of reading matter. For example, one student commented, *'I'd say a reader is anyone who enjoys reading, no matter what it is. It could be books, magazines, the newspaper, articles online anything. If they enjoy reading, then they are a reader'*; another observed that a reader was *'Someone who likes to read, maybe not just books'*. Indeed, although books were primarily mentioned initially by the adolescents in the study, they tended to mention other kinds of texts spontaneously more than the primary school students when describing a reader. For example, one adolescent explained that a reader was *'Someone who reads things. Like, books, magazines, articles.'*; another said that *'they tend to be more toward reading books, maybe newspapers or different articles'*. This finding chimes

with Moje, Overby, Tysvaer and Morris (2008), who highlighted the importance of recognising the varied reading habits of adolescents and the different experiences that they offer.

Nevertheless, it was evident from the analysis that books were still considered central to the description of being a reader: approximately half of the secondary school students spontaneously mentioned that a reader was someone who reads books (15/30). For example, one reflected *'I would say that someone who is a reader is someone who's constantly on a book'*; another said *'I think a reader is someone who reads books'*. Indeed, many were not unsure if some forms of reading, would count., For example, one of the secondary students observed, *'Yeah, well I don't know if you'd count reading messages and stuff! ... Well, I guess Instagram, Snapchat. But I don't know if I'd really count that, to be honest'*.

Reading frequency was also mentioned in adolescents' descriptions of a reader (15/30), as is evident from the following quotations from the transcripts: *'Someone who reads a lot. Or, well, most of the time'*; *'I think it would probably be someone who, like, reads quite a bit'*; *'someone who reads – not on a daily basis, but often'*. These varied definitions indicate that, while reading frequency is regarded by many as a feature of being a reader, the precise frequency of reading is up for debate. Indeed, while children tended towards suggesting a reader was someone who read very frequently, for adolescents, less frequent reading – or any book reading at all – were still regarded as appropriate criteria to be regarded as a reader. Clark's (2019) recent national survey of children's and adolescents' reading found that a higher percentage of children report reading daily outside of class compared with adolescents. In our study, daily reading did not appear to be integral to 'being a reader', particularly from adolescents' perspectives.

Similar to the responses from children, the adolescents seemed to think that a reader was also someone who was intrinsically motivated to read: that is, a reader chooses to read over other activities and/or actively sought out opportunities to read. Interviewees commented

as follows: *'someone who, like, actively sits and like reads a book'*; *'Someone who just reads books for fun, and in their free time. Don't have to be forced, or anything'*; *'someone who actually goes out of their way to read them'*; *'I would say a reader is someone always up for reading'*; *'Somebody who reads books for enjoyment, rather than, like, just out of necessity'*. These different insights from adolescents align with reading motivation research which distinguishes between intrinsic reading motivation (i.e., choosing to read for internal reasons, for example out of curiosity to learn, or desire to become immersed in a story) and extrinsic reading motivation (i.e., choosing to read for external reasons, for example, to achieve good grades or please parents/teacher). The former is more closely associated with reading skill and engagement in reading activities (Hebbecke, Förster, and Souvignier, 2019; McGeown et al., 2015; Troyer et al., 2019). Whilst the majority of more recent reading motivation research has been quantitative in nature, and carried out primarily with children (Conradi, Jang, and McKenna, 2014), we would suggest that there is also an important role to play for qualitative research, particularly with adolescents, in order to better understand reading engagement and behaviours.

Finally, our analysis identified vastly different descriptions of what it means to be a reader. These ranged, on the one hand, from considering simply that the act of reading made someone a reader to, on the other, describing that a reader was someone who has been inspired by books for a long time. For example, one said *'like a billboard or something - if you've read something, it makes you a reader'*; another observed, *'somebody that's interested in books, from when they were young. And inspired by it'*. While these responses were only mentioned by one student each, it is important to include their perspectives: these two descriptions appear to be at opposite ends of a spectrum of responses in terms of the level of engagement a reader will have with reading. Recent research by Frankel, Ward, and Fields (2019) is particularly relevant to these findings from adolescents. When Frankel et al., (2019) asked adolescents

what someone needs to know or be able to do to be a reader, the themes of engagement (exploring areas of own interests, enjoying reading, knowing the types of books you like), agency (having autonomy and confidence, finding yourself/your way, being different to other readers) and comprehension (learning new vocabulary, acquiring new ideas, retaining meaningful information) were most common.

Further discussion and implications

In the presentation of findings above, similarities and differences between the children's and adolescents' perceptions of what it means to be a reader have been alluded to already. In this section, further comparisons will be presented and discussed. When considering differences in the responses, it is important to appreciate that the experiences these students will have had in their education settings will have influenced their perceptions of what it means to be a reader. Therefore, the descriptions of a reader by these students, and the similarities and differences that have arisen, may not only reflect age differences, but also the different contexts in which they have evolved as readers and in which they are currently readers. With regard to similarities, both children and adolescents described readers as individuals who enjoy reading, spend time reading, choose to read/are intrinsically motivated to read and primarily read books. However, as we have reported, other types of reading matter were mentioned, particularly by adolescents. In addition, other, less frequent definitions of a reader were given: for example, some considered that a reader is someone who is skilled at reading (children and adolescents); knows their own reading interests (children); is an imaginative person (children); likes to gather information (children); reads regardless of content/nature (adolescents); or has had a close level of engagement with books over a long time (adolescents). Overall, this array of responses suggests that a broader understanding of what it means to be a reader is important, and may even be helpful if we are to encourage more children and young people to see themselves as readers.

Alvermann (2001) argues that *'often our identities as readers are decided for us, as when others label us as avid readers, slow readers, mystery readers and the like'* (p676). Furthermore, Glenn et al., (2018) recently reported that adolescents are particularly *'vulnerable to the influence of school-ascribed reading identities they defined as negative'* (p315). This has also been shown in research with children in primary school contexts (Scherer, 2016). While our study did not focus on students' perceptions of themselves as readers, nor reader identity specifically, a broad implication of our study is that primary and secondary school teachers should encourage and provide opportunities for children and adolescents to develop their own identities as readers. For example, by giving them opportunities to recognize the broad range of reading activities they are involved in and what reading offers them specifically. Self-identifying as a reader does not necessarily have to mean being a skilled reader who only reads books; it can be knowing what you do and do not like to read, being a knowledge gatherer who reads to learn, or an imaginative person who likes to get immersed in stories, and so on. Supporting children and adolescents to understand that how they read and use texts may change with time, as their reading habits change, is also important. Hall (2012) argues that, by the time students enter secondary school, they will have established a history and identity of themselves as readers. It is extremely important to understand how this evolves over time and the factors that influence shifts in students' reader identities. For those who self-identify early on as poor readers or non-readers, the consequences are potentially damaging. Indeed, this study also raises interesting questions about how far children and adolescents believe that being a reader is about quantity (e.g., reading frequently) or quality (e.g., enjoying reading). We argue that broadening our conceptualization of what it means to be a reader could be beneficial and allow more children and adolescents to self-identify as readers. It is encouraging to report on initiatives and campaigns within the UK that support this broader approach. For example, in Scotland, the First Minister's Reading Challenge (FMRC) has an emphasis on

developing a love of reading, encouraging schools to provide and discuss texts in formats, styles and genres of interest to their pupils (<https://www.readingchallenge.scot/>). With the FMRC, there is also an emphasis on celebrating progress, for example, in the first year, one child with English as an Additional Language won an award for reading one book – the first they had ever read. In England, the Read On Get On (ROGO) campaign, launched by a coalition of charities and educational organisations, recognizes that reading well is more than just being a skilled reader: it also means having positive attitudes towards reading and engaging in reading activities. This broader definition not only allows more children and young people to self-identity as someone who is ‘reading well’, it also provides more opportunities and routes towards becoming a ‘good reader’ (see Clark and Teravainen, 2017).

Limitations and considerations

The small scale, in-depth study we report in this paper was carried out in one primary and one secondary school. This clearly restricts the extent to which these findings reflect a comprehensive account of children’s and adolescents’ perceptions of a reader. Therefore, further qualitative research across a larger number of demographically different schools is necessary before it will be possible to develop a theoretical framework to better understand children’s and adolescents’ perceptions of a reader. Nevertheless, it is important to note that our intention was not to conduct research which could be widely generalised, but instead provide an in-depth account into these children’s and adolescents’ perceptions of a reader. Interestingly, even with this small sample, a varied range of responses were given, which provides an indication that we should consider broadening our conceptualisation of a reader. While there is a considerable body of research highlighting the importance of book reading, as opposed to other text types, for reading skills (Jerrim & Moss, 2018; Torppa, Niemi, Vasalampi, Lerkkanen, Tolvanen & Poikkeus, 2019) finding a wider range of ways to help students identify as a reader may be an initial step towards encouraging book reading.

Furthermore, it is also important to understand how cues from students' environments (e.g., school, teacher, parent and peer messages) shape and develop their perceptions of a reader. Indeed, Frankel (2016; 2017; 2019b) rightly highlights the need for more research adopting a sociocultural approach to understand how classroom practices (e.g., messages about reading) influence students' perceptions of a reader. Furthermore, Sellers (2019) recently discussed the role of peer groups in young adolescents' development of their reader identity. We recognise that the context of the children's and adolescents' school environment and experiences will have influenced their answers to our question. On a related point, our student researchers understood that we were interested in understanding reading in its broadest sense (i.e., not simply book reading), which may have also influenced their descriptions of a reader.

Future research directions

The study we conducted is relevant to the specific age groups that we examined. As children's reading skills develop and their experiences with reading different text types change, their perceptions of what it means to be a reader are likely to evolve. For example, research by Moller (1999) focusing on young children's perceptions of a reader in the earliest stages of learning to read, identified different themes (e.g., power, performance, pleasure). Therefore, for future research, it would be interesting to examine developmental changes in children's perceptions of a reader, following the same children over time, to examine shifts in their conceptualisations as their reading skills develop and reading habits change. In addition, our interview questions specifically asked for students' perceptions of what it means to be a reader. If we had asked them what it means to be a 'good reader' (e.g., Scherer, 2016) we may have received very different responses. For example, when Clark et al., (2008) asked students about their conceptualization of a good reader, using predefined questionnaire constructs, a good reader was considered to be someone who could read long books, read often and read different

materials. Future research could explore the similarities and differences between terms such as “reader” and “good reader”.

As we have noted above, our study was not designed to examine young people’s reader identities, but rather their perceptions of what it means to be a reader. Reader identity, as it is commonly defined within the literature, reflects a broader concept relating to students’ beliefs about *themselves* as a reader, which typically includes their perceptions of their own reading abilities and, in some cases, the extent to which they value reading. Compared to the study of other affective aspects of reading (e.g., reading attitudes, reading motivation), the study of reader identity is still in its infancy (Clark and Teravainen, 2017). Indeed, this is a complex construct where theoretical boundaries are blurred, and a conceptual review, similar to that conducted in the area of reading motivation (Conradi et al., 2014), may be beneficial to help develop a shared understanding and common use of the term ‘reader identity’.

Finally, from a methodological point of view, we draw attention to our participatory approach to data collection. As we have described, a large proportion of the data collected from this study (41/63) was from primary school and secondary school student researchers, who led the interviews with their peers, in the presence of an adult researcher. We would encourage researchers to consider participatory research approaches in the future, in situations where the methods used and research topic are suited to this approach. Studies can vary considerably in their levels of participation from children and young people in the research process (see Levy and Thompson, 2015). We believe that training students as researchers develops investigative skills and confidence in young people. It can also be beneficial in raising awareness and understanding of higher education activities, which could inspire them to consider pathways to higher education or a career in research.

Conclusions

This study offers a description of children's and adolescents' perceptions of what it means to be a reader. We found that a reader was most consistently described as someone who enjoys reading, reads often, chooses to read, and primarily is someone who reads books. However, other descriptions of readers were also shared. For example, a reader is someone who simply reads, or a knowledge gatherer, an imaginative person, a person who know their own reading interests or a person who reads different text types. We believe that developing a fuller understanding of children's and adolescents' perceptions of what it means to be a reader is crucial for teachers, as it can support them to create a reading culture and environment that supports all students to see themselves as readers. This is important, as children and young people who identify as readers may be more willing to engage in reading activities.

Funding

The project was funded by the University of Edinburgh's Challenge Investment Fund.

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the involvement of the children and young people from the primary school and secondary school in which the study took place. In particular, we would like to thank the student researchers from these schools for their important contribution to this project.

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