



DOUBTING MISS DAISIES:

THE LINK BETWEEN LOW SELF-ESTEEM AND
UNDER-PERFORMANCE IN GIRLS



Daisy rarely got into trouble and was generally thought to be a diligent if rather quiet pupil. However, she had recently started to struggle in one or two of her lessons. As she had little experience of failure, she had scant understanding of how to cope with this unwelcome and surprising setback.

Being rather shy, Daisy did not think to ask for help even though she suspected that with the right support she would be capable of doing much better. But she could not put her finger on what was wrong and exactly what help she needed.

Overwhelmed by the immediate expectations she felt had been placed on her, she became increasingly anxious about school and retreated into herself. Yet as she rarely misbehaved or gave any serious cause for concern, her predicament was overlooked, even as her academic progress stalled.

Most teachers will know a pupil like Daisy. They become slightly disengaged at school and have an unexpectedly poor opinion of their own abilities. And even though their teachers may be fairly confident that their temporary lack of progress is not a symptom of any special need or identifiable condition, they do realise that there is a problem.

The question is, how much of a problem are pupils' poor perceptions of their own learning? Can they be readily identified and, if so, what can be done to reverse them?

Looking at attitudes

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

Daisy's opinion of her abilities is classified by researchers as 'perceived learning capability', which can be defined as a pupil's short-term view of their ability to take the necessary steps to achieve their learning goals. It offers a snapshot of their impressions of their own 'self-efficacy', or what in generic terms is more commonly called self-esteem, at a particular moment in time. A low score for perceived learning capability is likely to be related to a specific subject, experience or a change in environment, such as a move from junior to senior school, for instance.

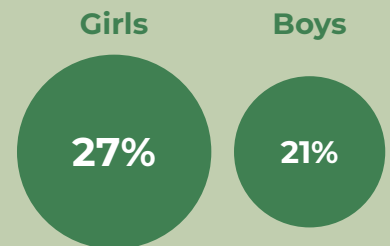
These attitudes are usually temporary. But if they are not tackled, they can become self-reinforcing and entrenched. A pupil who may have negative feelings about a single subject or teacher could develop a long-term, poor attitude to their entire school experience. This is then termed low learner self-regard. Pupils with high self-regard tend to perform well; conversely those who do not, tend to do worse academically.

If children like Daisy do become increasingly doubtful of their own abilities and negative towards school, they may score poorly on two other metrics. Motivation, or 'response to curriculum demands' as it is called, which simply put means the best learning happens when pupils are intrinsically motivated by the curriculum. Pupils like Daisy, who may feel overwhelmed by immediate expectations, may get into a rut and not see the point of learning or how its outcomes are supposed to benefit them. They can also increasingly doubt their own skills or 'preparedness for learning'. If pupils feel they lack these self-regulatory skills – concentration, attentiveness, study skills – they fail to 'own' their learning.

The research

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

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

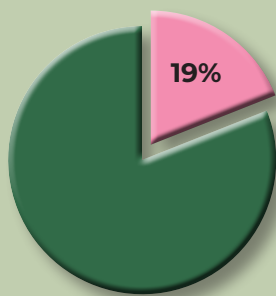
Girls

27%

Boys

34%





Of the children who doubt they are clever, **19% score highly on NGRT**. They may be hiding an inner struggle.

Of the children who doubt that they are clever, a **fifth (21%)** of all pupils who completed *PASS*, **half (50%)** score in the bottom third for reading ability. To a certain extent that is to be expected. What is less expected, however, is that almost a **fifth of these pupils (19%)** score highly on *NGRT*.

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

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

Of the **two-fifths of pupils (39%)** who say they need help with their work – another indicator of low self-regard and poor motivation – **46% had low scores** on the reading test, yet **23% scored highly**. Again, this highlights pupils who may seem fine on the outside but could be concealing an inner struggle.

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

Addressing negative attitudes

The good news is that children like Daisy can be helped. With the correct assessment and relevant interventions negative attitudes can be addressed and even reversed.

Dr Andrew Fordham, Deputy Head (Curriculum) at Wellingborough School in Northamptonshire, offers the example of a Key Stage 3 girl (we'll call her Sophie, not her real name) who displayed the typical profile of a pupil who had low perceived learning capability, in her case triggered by the long summer holidays.

"Sophie had been at the school for a number of years but was beginning to show signs of a 'summer dip' in reading. She scored highly in the *New Group Reading Test* in May but fell back significantly in September, a pattern that was picked up by the test. This dip was undermining her confidence and discouraging her from fully contributing in class."



“After discussions with her parents, we realised that skills that were being emphasised in term time were not being used over the summer. In particular, she was not reading texts closely or more than once. As soon as we had identified the issue, we were able to put in place personalised learning targets and encouraged her to read more generally.”

“This has boosted her confidence and enabled her to play a much more active role in lessons. She smiles more, the quality of her written work has also improved and I’m glad to report that she did very well in her end-of-year exams.”

“This was a case of an assessment accurately identifying an underlying issue that had the potential to progressively undermine a child’s confidence if it hadn’t been addressed. Fortunately, her teachers were able to put in place the necessary interventions and she is a happier and better pupil as a result.”

Sean Jordan, Youth and Wellbeing Worker at Greenwood Academy in Birmingham, gives the example of a pupil who scores poorly for perceived learning capability and learner self-regard, and was piling on too much pressure on herself: “She’s attended 40 extra lessons this term already so is clearly putting in the effort. However, she still doesn’t think she’s doing enough and is heaping far too much pressure on herself.

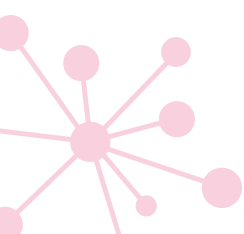
“We are working with her to take the pressure off and relax a bit. We are reassuring her about her ability and how her hard work is paying off, but it’s more than that. We need her to eat well, drink well and sleep 8–10 hours a night. All of these things will boost her wellbeing.”

Sean also points to the importance of addressing peer-to-peer relationships: “Friendship groups can provide encouragement and support, but they can also cause a great deal of angst. It’s a particularly big issue in Year 11, but we want to proactively address it as a preventative measure rather than a reactionary one so we hold a weekly group for four girls at a time, specifically to trouble-shoot friendship issues.

“In each session, we sit down with a cup of tea and talk about a specific topic, such as appearance, exam stress or relationships with peers. We use them as coaching sessions, asking, for instance, ‘If you were in Year 7 now, what advice would you give yourself?’ We also use Year 11 case studies to provide them with role models. It’s hugely powerful when they know the pupils we’re talking about and their successes are within reaching distance.”

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Dr Andrew Fordham,
Deputy Head of
Wellingborough School
in Northamptonshire





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

Recommended interventions

There are several measures teachers can take to tackle low scores in perceived learning capability, from recognising effort and helping pupils measure their own progress to encouraging curiosity and developing pupils' organisational skills.

The following questions may be useful as an initial approach if you suspect a pupil has poor perceived learning capability:

- Does the pupil understand their strengths and weaknesses?
- Do they worry about inadequacies and shortcomings?
- Do they have strong problem-solving skills?
- Do they know how to ask for help?
- Do they feel validated in their contributions to the learning environment?
- Do they have opportunities to help others at school?
- Do they play an active role in their learning process?
- Do they shut down when they feel that they have failed at something?

Visit the website or contact one of our experts.

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