

Social inclusion and reading An exploration

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This paper investigates the link between social inclusion¹ and reading. It examines the findings of a survey of children and young people's reading habits in the light of whether or not the respondents received free school meals, and also considers the differences between boys and girls in these groups. These findings are set within the context of the existing research evidence around the links between educational attainment, reading and social exclusion.

Reading for pleasure is associated with numerous educational and social benefits. For example, it has been associated with increased reading attainment and writing ability, greater breadth of vocabulary and greater general knowledge (e.g. Cox and Guthrie, 2001). Children who read very little do not reap these benefits, and studies show that when struggling readers are not motivated to read, their opportunities to learn decrease significantly (e.g. Baker, Dreher and Guthrie, 2000). This can lead to strong negative feelings about reading and create a vicious circle in which poor readers remain poor readers (Juel, 1988).

However, evidence from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment shows that although social background is a powerful factor influencing performance, poor performance does not automatically follow from low socio-economic status: 15-year-old students whose parents have the lowest occupational status, but who read regularly and feel positive about it, are better readers than students with home advantages and weaker reading engagement (OECD, 2002). **The research evidence suggests that encouraging reading for pleasure could be a way of contributing towards raising educational standards and combating social exclusion.**

In the light of this, the National Literacy Trust conducted a survey of school pupils' reading habits and preferences in 2005 (Clark and Foster, 2005). The sample consisted of 8,206 pupils from 57 primary and 41 secondary schools, who completed a 23-point self-report questionnaire. There was an almost equal

¹ There are various definitions of the term social inclusion or, as is perhaps more common, social exclusion (for an overview see Bird and Akerman, 2005). According to the Government's Social Exclusion Unit, social exclusion results when people or communities face a combination of problems including unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004). Others see social exclusion as a lack of participation in everyday life, whether education, employment, community life or citizenship (Parsons and Bynner, 2002). A third view focuses on one particular indicator – that of low income (Palmer, North, Car and Kenway, 2003). The findings of the National Literacy Trust study of reading habits reported here are based on this factor, as indicated by the uptake of free school meals.

representation of boys and girls within the sample (52.9% and 47.1%, respectively). The ages ranged from five to 17 years, with the majority of students being 12 (27.9%) and 13 (21.1%) years old.

The survey also considered the pupils' responses in relation to their socio-economic background, using self-reported uptake of free school meals (FSMs) as a crude indicator of socio-economic status. It should be noted that although this indicator is used frequently in social research it may be misleading as it excludes pupils whose parents are not in receipt of income support but who are in fact on low incomes². 11.9% (N = 263) of primary and 11.5% (N = 652) of secondary pupils said they receive FSMs, which is comparable to national take-up figures (primary: 14.5%, secondary: 10.7%; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2004).

Reading enjoyment

There is evidence to suggest that children from more deprived backgrounds are less likely to achieve at school (e.g. Blanden, 2006). There is also some indication that children from deprived backgrounds do not enjoy reading as much as children from more privileged groups (Neuman and Celano, 2001). Consistent with this research, the present study found that a significantly higher proportion of pupils receiving FSMs (14.7%) stated that they do not enjoy reading at all compared with pupils who do not receive FSMs (10.7%). Boys receiving FSMs tended to enjoy reading less than girls receiving FSMs.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, a greater proportion of pupils who did not receive FSMs than those receiving meals stated that they read outside school every day or almost every day (22% versus 15%). By contrast, a greater proportion of pupils receiving FSMs reported that they never or almost never read outside school (39% vs 31%). A greater number of boys receiving FSMs (17%) tended to report that they never or almost never read outside school than girls receiving FSMs (9%).

There was also a relationship between self-reported reading confidence and receiving FSMs. Pupils were asked to indicate how good a reader they think they are on a scale from 1 (Not a very good reader) to 10 (A very good reader). We found that pupils not receiving FSMs (M = 7.22) rated themselves as significantly more confident readers than pupils receiving FSMs (M = 6.89; $t(7272) = -4.697$, $p = .000$). There were no significant gender differences.

Resources in the home

Access to educational resources is an important factor in increasing literacy attainment. Time and again, studies have shown that pupils who have greater

² For more information on the use of free school meals as an indicator of deprivation please see a DfES publication (2006) *Social Mobility: Narrowing social class educational attainment gaps*

access to educational material tended to achieve better academically than students who lack such access (e.g. Neuman and Celano, 2001). Indeed, while high performing readers are shaped by their environments in ways that enable them to become better readers, conversely, low performing readers are shaped by their environments in ways that inhibit them, and therefore sustain their position as poor readers (Stanovich, 1986).

As already outlined, research also frequently relates reading achievement to socio-economic status. However, this relationship is likely to be mediated by other factors, such as the number of educational materials at home and the importance parents place on education. Yet, although socio-economic status has an impact on educational achievement, there is evidence to suggest that engagement in reading can “compensate” for low family income and educational background (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000).

In a question similar to those asked in the OECD Reading for Change study, pupils in this survey were asked to estimate how many books they have in the home. For the sample as a whole, there was a significant and positive relationship between reading enjoyment and the number of books in the home. However, there were significant differences in the number of books pupils from the two groups estimated were in their home. Table 1 shows that a greater proportion of pupils who do not receive FSMs reported having larger numbers of books at home than pupils who receive FSMs. While the data did not allow for any complex relationships to be tested, further statistical analyses showed that pupils who received FSMs and who estimated having fewer books in the home enjoyed reading less than pupils who received FSMs and who estimated having a greater number of books at home.

Table 1: Estimated number of books in the home

Books at home	FSM pupils %	NFSM pupils %
None	2.6	1.0
1-10	15.6	6.9
11-50	29.9	18.1
51-100	21.1	22.5
101-250	14.0	22.5
251-500	8.6	16.2
>500	8.2	12.8

For the sample as a whole there was also a significant and positive relationship between reading confidence and the number of books in the home. Further analyses indicated that pupils who received FSMs and who reported to have few books in the home rated themselves as less confident readers than pupils who received FSMs and who believed they had a greater number of books at home.

Pupils were also asked to indicate whether they had access to a number of educational resources at home, such as a computer and a desk of their own. OECD findings showed that 15-year-olds who live in homes where a greater number of such resources are present achieve higher literacy scores than students who do

not. For the sample as a whole, there were significant positive relationships between reading enjoyment and having a desk of their own, books of their own and access to magazines at home. Compared with pupils receiving FSMs, a significantly greater percentage of pupils not receiving FSMs indicated that they have a computer (93% as opposed to 82%), a desk of their own (75% as opposed to 61%), books of their own (90% as opposed to 83%), and access to a newspaper (73% as opposed to 63%) and magazines (86% as opposed to 79%). However, further analyses showed that there was a difference in reading enjoyment only in whether or not they had books of their own at home. More specifically, pupils who received FSMs and who reported having no books of their own at home enjoyed reading less than pupils who received FSMs and who reported having books of their own.

Similarly, there were significant positive relationships between reading confidence and each of the five home resources. With respect to reading confidence, further analyses again showed that there was a significant difference in reading confidence only in whether or not they had books of their own at home. Similar to the findings noted above, pupils who received FSMs and who reported having no books of their own at home rated themselves as less confident readers than pupils who received FSMs and who reported having books of their own.

Literacy interactions in the home

In addition to access to educational resources, other factors within the home environment also exert a significant effect on children's literacy practices and motivation to learn. For example, studies have shown that children who know adults who read for pleasure take it for granted that reading is a worthwhile and valuable activity (e.g. Sonnenschein, Baker, Serpell and Schmidt, 2000). Table 2 shows that when asked about their parents' reading, a greater percentage of pupils receiving FSMs than those that do not reported that their mother and father do not spend any time reading, a difference that was particularly pronounced with regard to the father's perceived reading behaviour. Pupils receiving FSMs were also less likely than those who did not to state that they talked about reading with their mother or female carer (53% as opposed to 58%) and father or male carer (34% as opposed to 43%).

Table 2: Does your mum, dad or carer spend time reading?

	FSM pupils %	NFSM pupils %
Mother/carers		
No, not at all	19.7	13.0
Yes, sometimes	45.5	47.3
Yes, a lot	34.8	39.7
Father/carers		
No, not at all	37.1	24.0
Yes, sometimes	41.9	49.6
Yes, a lot	21.0	26.5

Not only were there differences in reading role models at home, but there were also differences in the extent to which pupils reported encouragement to read from their family. There were no significant differences in the extent to which both groups of pupils reported being encouraged to read by their mother (see Table 3).

However, compared with pupils not receiving FSMs, a greater percentage of pupils receiving FSMs reported that their father does not encourage them to read. In particular, a greater percentage of boys than girls who receive FSMs stated that their father does not encourage them to read. This finding is particularly concerning in the light of recent research that has shown that those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to improve their economic position if their parents take an interest in their schooling and if they read to them as children (Blanden, 2006).

Table 3: Does your mum, dad or carer encourage you to read?

	FSM pupils %	NSFM pupils %
Mother/carers		
No, not at all	19.8	16.0
Yes, sometimes	45.4	47.3
Yes, a lot	34.8	36.7
Father/carers		
No, not at all	37.2	28.0
Yes, sometimes	38.1	43.2
Yes, a lot	24.7	28.8

Attitudes to reading

Given the importance of reading attitudes to reading enjoyment, pupils were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with nine attitudinal statements on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree, see Figure 1).

All pupils, regardless of whether they receive FSMs or not, said that reading is important and that they would be happy if someone gave them a book as a present. However, pupils receiving FSMs were significantly more likely to agree that reading is more for girls than for boys, that reading is boring and hard, and that they cannot find books that interest them. These pupils were also significantly more likely to say that they like going to the library. On the other hand, as suggested earlier, pupils not receiving FSMs were more likely to agree that they read outside school. There were significant gender differences in attitudes towards reading within pupils who receive FSMs: a greater proportion of boys receiving FSMs tended to agree that reading is for girls, that reading is boring, and that they cannot find books that interest them.

Figure 1: Mean levels of agreement with attitudinal statements

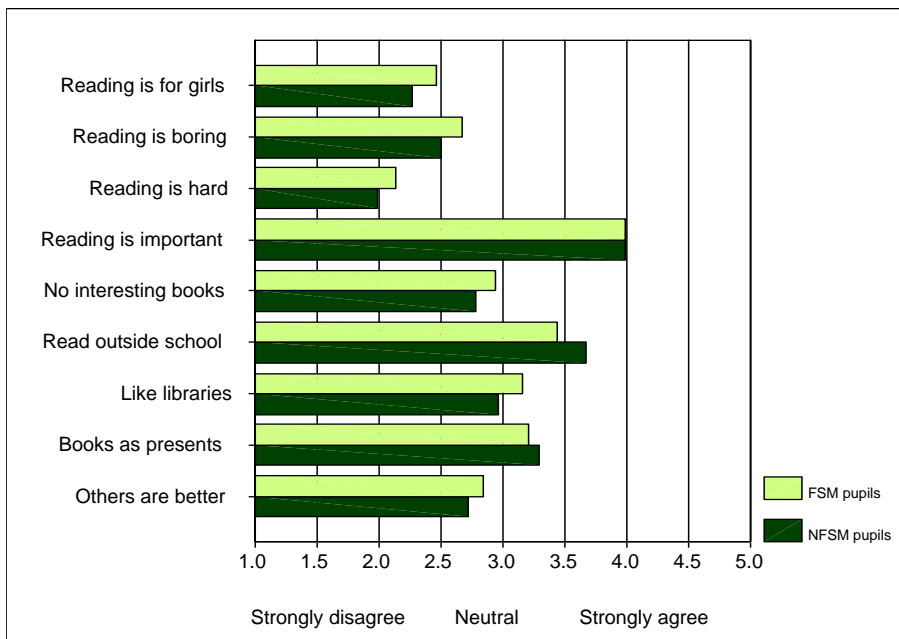
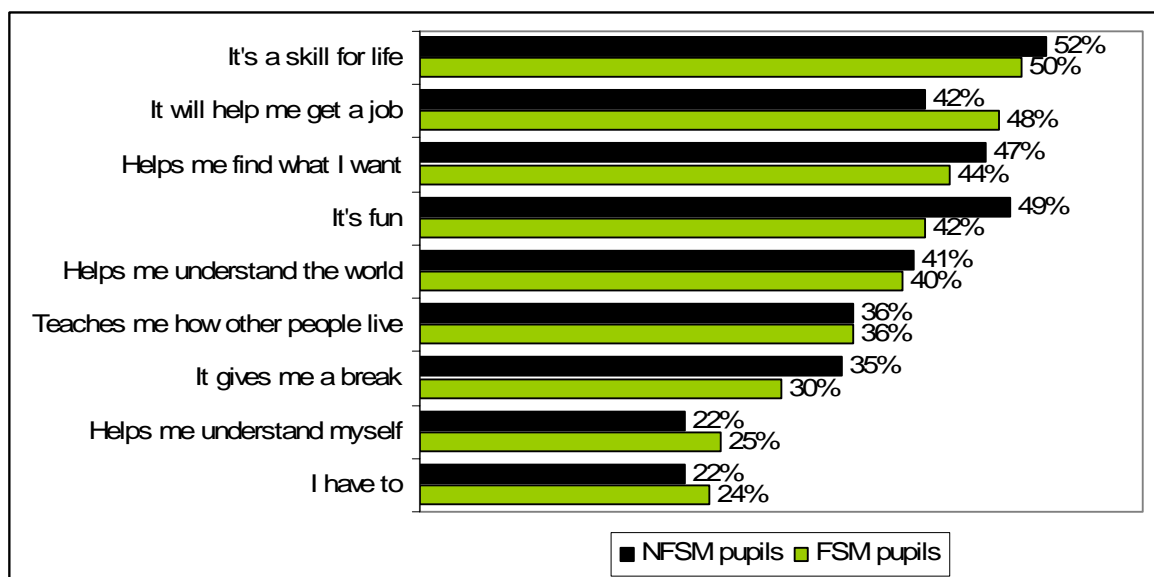


Figure 2: I read because ... (in percentages)



In addition to their attitudes towards reading, pupils were also asked to indicate the reason why they read. An almost equal proportion of pupils stated that they read because: it is a skill for life; it teaches them how other people live and feel; it helps them understand the world; it helps them find what they want/need to know; they have to; and it helps them understand themselves better (see Figure 2). However, a significantly greater number of pupils receiving FSMs stated that they read because it will help them get a job. By contrast, a significantly greater percentage of pupils not receiving FSMs reported that they read because it is fun and because it gives them a break.

Reading promotion

Given that more pupils who receive FSMs do not enjoy reading and hold more negative attitudes towards reading, what could be done to engage them in reading? To find out, pupils were asked to indicate what would make them more likely to read. The majority of pupils, irrespective of whether or not they receive FSMs, indicated that they would read more if they had more time. However, a greater number of pupils receiving FSMs than those who did not indicated that they would read more if: books had more pictures; someone read aloud to them; libraries were closer; they found reading easier; their family encouraged them more; and they had better eyesight. By contrast, a greater percentage of pupils not receiving FSMs reported that they would read more if books were cheaper.

Although both groups said that time constraints were the greatest barrier to reading, information from both groups on the other factors that would make them more likely to read could be used to help encourage reading for pleasure: see the recommendations at the end of this article.

When given a range of options of reading activities, a greater percentage of pupils who received FSMs than those who did not indicated that reading groups, reading games, writing book reviews, helping younger children to read and reading books for prizes would encourage them and others to read more. Writing book reviews and rating books were the two least favoured options, however. More boys than girls receiving FSMs tended to indicate that reading groups, reading games and reading books for prizes would make them want to read more.

Discussion

The findings that children from poorer families read less, enjoy reading less, and receive less encouragement to read from their parents are not surprising. Nevertheless, they are concerning because children who read for pleasure less are less likely to develop their literacy skills, and are therefore less likely to be able to access the curriculum.

Research frequently shows that there are gender differences in reading achievement and interest, with girls outperforming boys on literacy tasks (for a review of the gender gap in academic achievement see Younger and Warrington, 2005). We also found that boys receiving FSMs did not enjoy reading as much and held more negative attitudes towards reading than girls receiving FSMs. Boys from low socio-economic backgrounds therefore seem to be at a double disadvantage. While previous research has shown that socio-economic background is more important than gender in determining differences in reading achievement and educational attainment (e.g. Gillborn and Mirza, 2000), it is noteworthy that a greater proportion of boys than girls on FSMs do not read for pleasure, and are therefore at risk of achieving less at school.

There is ample evidence that parents who promote the view that reading is a valuable and worthwhile activity are more likely to have children who are motivated to read for pleasure (Baker and Scher, 2002). Furthermore, Blanden (2006) found that boys are more likely to improve their socio-economic status if their father shows an interest in their education. The same can be said of girls and their mothers. It is therefore worrying that more boys on FSMs are apparently not encouraged to read by their fathers – or at least that this is their perception. More needs to be done to ensure that parents, and fathers in particular, are aware of the significant contribution they can make to their children’s learning by providing a stimulating environment for language, reading and writing.

Being a poor reader as a child can predict adult social exclusion, especially for individuals who are at high risk because of other factors (Parsons and Bynner, 2002). Studies also indicate that educational attainment, and the outcomes measured through qualifications and test scores during compulsory schooling, is the most frequent and most effective predictor of adult outcomes, and of social exclusion (Sparks and Glennister, 2002). There is also evidence that those who are poor at age 30 are 15% to 20% more likely to have left school at the minimum leaving age with no O levels/CSE grades and to have fewer qualifications (Blanden, 2006).

Research shows that those who reach adulthood with poor basic skills (including literacy), who are also at risk of social exclusion through other factors, are less likely than those with good reading skills to feel satisfied with their lot, or to feel in control of their lives (Parsons and Bynner, 2002). There are significant differences in health-related practices and mental health between those with poor basic skills and those with good basic skills (Bynner and Parsons, 1997), and there is also a statistically significant connection between repeated offending and poor basic skills (Parsons, 2002; but also see Rice, 1998).

This deprivation is part of a cycle: according to the Government’s Social Exclusion Unit, the most disadvantaged people do not use services, including education, as much as others do, or gain from them as much when they do use them (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004). However, although there is a causal relationship between educational failure and the process of social exclusion, it can be reversed. The OECD study referred to above concluded that “Finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change.” (OECD, 2002).

Policies such as Sure Start, Neighbourhood Renewal including New Deal for Communities, and Excellence in Cities have also aimed to improve wider outcomes for children, parents and communities. Improving the life chances of children, especially the most vulnerable, is the focus of Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003), with its key outcomes of being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and economic well-being. Its vision of integrated children’s services offers the opportunity to develop a strategy to

ensure the home literacy support that will enable the most vulnerable children and their families in every local area to engage with reading (Bird and Akerman, 2005).

In view of the findings of the present study, the National Literacy Trust makes the following three recommendations:

1) Create a school culture in which all children and young people are encouraged to be enthusiastic readers. Schools with effective approaches consult with students to learn of their interests and to ensure that the range of reading materials available in school reflects those interests. They recognise that a diverse range of reading materials will encourage students to read, for example websites, comics and magazines. They engage children in the planning and delivery of reading and library activities, offering them the opportunity to select and purchase reading materials for their use.

2) Target resources at schools/ communities that deal with disadvantaged children and their parents. Consistent with previous research, this study showed that there is a link between a lack of reading enjoyment and a lack of access to reading opportunities.

3) Consider how we can support parents in encouraging reading in the home. The role of the home is important for all children. Home-school practices that successfully involve all parents in children's home and school reading, in ways they value, need to be shared between schools.

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