



National Literacy Trust Research Review

Literacy: A route to addressing child poverty?

October 2011

Summary of key findings

Nearly 4 million children in the UK grow up in poverty. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to do worse on a number of outcomes, including literacy, wider education and health. Children from poorer backgrounds also face much less advantageous 'early childhood caring environments' than children from better-off families.

However, research has repeatedly shown that one of the most accurate predictors of a child's achievement is not only parental income or social status. It is also the extent to which parents are able to create a home environment that encourages learning and communicates high, yet reasonable, expectations for achievement and future careers.

Parents involvement in their child's education is also key. In fact, family involvement in school matters most for children whose mothers have less education. Increases in family involvement in the school have been found to predict increases in literacy achievement for low income families.

Young people's aspirations and those of their parents influence their educational attainment and later life outcomes. In fact, research suggests that parental aspiration may be even more important for socially disadvantaged young people and crucial if young people are to realise their full academic potential.

Parents' beliefs in their own abilities are also key to raising the aspirations they hold for their children. It's vital that those working in disadvantaged areas are aware that they may be in a position to encourage parents to aim high for their children, to help empower parents to see their aspirations for themselves and their children realised.

Current government policy sees entrenched poverty as resting on low achievement, low aspiration and lack of employment. Literacy has a vital role to play in addressing all of these. Research shows that literacy skills do not just enable educational attainment; they underpin strong family relationships, better health choices and an individual's capacity (and confidence) to gain employment.

Socio-economic background and many other factors may be outside the control of an individual. However, what matters is that for many addressing literacy skills is a key first step in beginning to address and overcome other related factors that lock individuals into a cycle of disadvantage. Parents' involvement in their own literacy skills and their understanding of the hugely important role they play in developing their children's education and outcomes are crucial in breaking the cycle of poverty.

Introduction to this paper

This short document reviews research into the role of low literacy in poverty and disadvantage. It sets out evidence for the impact of parental engagement in home learning and the significance of attitudes, aspirations and literacy development. The National Literacy Trust hopes that this is a useful resource for those with responsibility for, and interest in, planning to address child poverty. Literacy skills are a vital foundation in both addressing access to employment and breaking inter-generational cycles of under-achievement.

Literacy, poverty and employment

The statistics are startling. Nearly 4 million children in the UK grow up in poverty (Department for Work and Pensions, 2011).

Research shows that literacy (and numeracy) skills play an important part in terms of employability and wages. Bynner and Parsons (2006) found that men and women with poor literacy had the lowest levels of full-time employment at the age of 30. 70% of men with poor literacy and/or numeracy were in manual jobs, compared with 50% of those who were competent in both.

Studies generally show a marked disparity in levels of literacy and employment rates. For example, data from national longitudinal datasets show that men and women with the lowest levels of literacy are also the least likely to be employed (e.g. Parsons and Bynner, 2006). Encouragingly, research also shows that even when controlling for other characteristics, improving literacy skills to Level 1 increases the likelihood of employment by about five percentage points. It also increases wages by seven percentage points (e.g. Layard et al., 2002).

Socio-economic background and many other factors may be outside the control of an individual. However, what matters is that for many addressing literacy skills is a key first step in beginning to address and helping to overcome other related factors that lock individuals into a cycle of disadvantage. The table (from Dugdale and Clark, 2008) outlines some of the impact literacy may have on an individual.

Table 1: Impact of literacy on individual's life

Profile of a person with poor literacy	Profile of a person with improved literacy
More likely to live in a non-working household. 22% of men and 30% of women with literacy below entry level 2 live in non-working households.	Becomes less likely to be on state benefits. Men who improve their literacy rates see their likelihood of being on state benefits reduced from 19% to 6%.
Less likely to have children. Individuals with low levels of literacy are more likely to lead solitary lives without any children.	Becomes more likely to own their own home A modest rise in literacy level sees the likelihood of a man owning their own house rise from 40% to 78%.
More likely to live in overcrowded housing. Individuals with low literacy levels are more	Becomes more likely to use a PC at work. Increased literacy rates improve the chances

likely to live in overcrowded housing with reduced access to technology.

Less likely to vote.

Men and women with the poorest literacy or numeracy skills were the least likely to have voted in the 1987 and 1997 general elections.

of using a PC at work from 48% to 65%.

Becomes more involved in democratic processes.

16% of men who improved their literacy between the ages of 21 and 34 had contact with government, compared to 0% of those whose literacy remained poor.

Policies and plans aimed at reducing poverty and social exclusion should consider the significance of low literacy in undermining employability and broader life chances.

Breaking the inter-generational poverty cycle: Literacy, parenting and the home

Differing outcomes as a result of poverty are noticeable much earlier than adulthood. Indeed, children who grow up in poverty are more likely to do worse on a number of outcomes, including literacy, wider education and health. For example, Washbrook and Waldfogel (2010) found that children from the poorest homes are almost a year behind middle class pupils by the time they start school. Perhaps the single most important study on the issue in the UK has recently been published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Goodman and Gregg, 2010). Using longitudinal datasets, this research shows that:

Educational deficits emerge early in children's lives, even before entry into school, and widen throughout childhood. Even by the age of three there is a considerable gap in cognitive test scores between children in the poorest fifth of the population compared with those from better-off backgrounds. This gap widens as children enter and move through the schooling system, especially during primary school years.

While not the sole explanation, the same research also found that “children from poorer backgrounds also faced much less advantageous 'early childhood caring environments' than children from better-off families.”

According to recent research by the Sutton Trust (2011), the gap between the poorest pupils and their better-off peers in struggling schools in England is wider than in other countries. Similarly, according to the findings from the latest PISA survey of 15-year olds (2010), across OECD countries, a student from a more socio-economically advantaged outperforms a student from an average background by about one year's worth of education, in reading (<http://browse.oecdbookshop.org/oecd/pdfs/free/9810081e.pdf>).

National Literacy Trust research shows that the gap in terms of literacy has not narrowed between young people who receive free school meals(FSM) and those who do not in the years since 2005. An almost identical proportion of young people who receive FSM still don't enjoy reading, still don't think highly of their own skills, still don't read as much and still don't think positively about reading compared with young people who don't receive meals (see Clark and Douglas, 2011).

However, while parent's socio-economic background is a big influence when it comes to child attainment, parental (and child) behaviours and attitudes also have a pivotal part to play in shaping attainment (Chowdry, Crawford and Goodman, 2011).

Indeed, what you do with your child appears to be as important as who you are. Parents are the first teachers and role models for their children, and therefore have a strong influence on their learning. Research (e.g. Sylva et al, 2004) has repeatedly shown that one of the most accurate predictors of a child's achievement is not only parental income or social status but also the extent to which parents are able to create a home environment that encourages learning, communicates high, yet reasonable, expectations for achievement and future careers (for more information see Clark, 2007).

For example, while Washbrook and Waldfogel (2010) found that children from poorer backgrounds lag behind their more privileged peers in terms of cognitive development, they also found that activities, such as reading to children and having fixed bed times, can significantly reduce this gap.

Similarly, findings from an international comparison study of 15-year-olds (PISA; OECD, 2010) showed that parents' engagement with their children's reading life has a positive impact on their children's reading performance. Students whose parents reported that they had read a book with their child "every day or almost every day" or "once or twice a week" during the first year of primary school performed higher in PISA 2009 than students whose parents reported that they had done this "never or almost never" or "once or twice a month".

According to findings by Goodman & Gregg (2010), compared with children from better-off backgrounds, there were significant differences in poorer children's and their mothers':

- health and well-being (e.g. birth-weight, breastfeeding, and maternal depression);
- family interactions (e.g. mother-child closeness);
- the home learning environment (e.g. reading regularly to the child); and
- parenting styles and rules (e.g. regular bed-times and meal-times).

Previous studies have provided ample evidence that parents who promote reading as a valuable and worthwhile activity have children who are motivated to read for pleasure. Involvement with reading activities at home has significant positive influences not only on reading achievement, language comprehension and expressive language skills (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich and Welsh, 2004), but also on pupils' interest in reading, attitudes towards reading and attentiveness in the classroom (Rowe, 1991).

The earlier parents become involved in their children's literacy practices, the more profound the results and the longer lasting the effects (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille et al., 2004). Although parental involvement has the greatest effect in the early years, its importance to children's educational and literacy outcomes continues into the teenage and even adult years (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). For example, Feinstein and Symons (1999) found that parental interest in their child's education was the single greatest predictor of achievement at age 16. Parent's involvement outside of home, such as participation in extracurricular activities also impacts on their children's reading, general knowledge, and mathematics knowledge and skills (Reaney, Denton and West, 2002).

In a study (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins and Weiss, 2006) for the Harvard Family Research Project, it was found that family involvement in school matters most for children whose mothers have less education. More specifically, the authors found that increases in family involvement in the school predicted increases in literacy achievement for low income families and that family involvement in school matters most for children at greatest risk. More specifically, Dearing and colleagues found that if families who were initially uninvolved in the school became more involved, their children's literacy improved. Importantly, their results indicated that even one or two additional involvement activities per year were associated with meaningful improvements for children.

The importance of aspiration and the role of parents and communities

Young people's aspirations and those of their parents influence their educational attainment and later life outcomes (e.g. St Clair, Kintrea and Houston, 2011). As Gutman and Akerman (2008) state: "Having high aspirations is an important mechanism in achieving good educational and occupational outcomes." For example, in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth, Khoo and Ainley (quoted in Strand and Winston, 2008) established that student's intention to complete school in Year Nine was a powerful predictor of actual participation in Year 12. Using the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, Strand (2007; in Gutman and Akerman, 2008) demonstrated that aspirations to staying in education beyond age 16 boosted KS3 scores by 1.6 points after taking into account family background and parental aspirations.

Parental aspirations for children also have a big impact on the child's success. Goodman and Gregg (2010) state:

The aspirations, attitudes and behaviours of parents and children potentially play an important part in explaining why poor children typically do worse at school... 81% of the richest mothers [said] they hoped their children would go to university, compared with only 37% of the poorest mothers. Such adverse attitudes to education of disadvantaged mothers are one of the single most important factors associated with lower educational attainment at age 11.

Socio-economic resources are related to parents' educational aspirations for their children and parental aspirations tend to increase in line with economic resources available to the family (Willets, Anderson, Tait and Williams, 2005, quoted in Gutman and Akerman, 2008). But even when controlling for family background, parental aspirations predict children's achievement; maternal aspirations for children aged nine were the single most important parental value or behavioural element in children's KS3 scores (Macmillan and Wahbrook, in progress, in Gutman and Akerman, 2008). In fact, research suggests that parental aspiration may be even more important for socially disadvantaged young people and crucial if young people are to realise their full academic potential (e.g. Schoon, Parkins and Sacker, 2004, in Gutman and Akerman, 2008).

Parents' aspirations for themselves can also have a big impact on their children. A US study (Brooks-Gunn, Guang and Furstenberg, 1993; in Gutman and Akerman, 2008) found that when a teenage mother aspired to go beyond high school in her child's first year of life, the likelihood of her child dropping out from High School was decreased significantly 20 years later. Hallam and Creech (2007; in Gutman and Akerman, 2008) state, "teenage mothers need to be supported in sustaining their personal and parental aspirations".

Parents' beliefs in their own abilities are also key to raising the aspirations they hold for their children. Studies have shown that Parent's self-efficacy [belief that one has the power to produce effects by one's actions] has been found to relate to aspirations for their children (Bandura et al., 2001). Therefore, "parents' beliefs in their ability to promote their children's engagement in academic pursuits may raise the academic aspirations that they hold for their children" (Gutman and Akerman, 2008). Gutman and Akerman (2008) go on to stress that it is important that those working in disadvantaged areas "are aware that they may be in a position to encourage parents to aim high for their children, and to help empower parents to see their aspirations for themselves and their children realised." Indeed, a key policy recommendation to help reduce educational inequalities suggested by Goodman and Gregg (2010) is: "Helping parents from poorer families to believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to higher education".

Although parents are the most important influence on children's aspirations, their community can also play a very big part. As we have seen children living in areas of deprivation tend to have lower aspirations. This isn't however universal; young people in some very deprived areas

have high aspirations. The Cabinet Office's Social Exclusion Task Force (2008) identified certain community characteristics that are associated with low aspirations. These include: close knit local social networks, low population mobility and a history of economic decline. Additional research suggests "groups who have been located for longest within an area of social deprivation may feel more reluctant to embrace the educational aspirations that promise an escape from it" (McLeod 1995, in Strand and Winston, 2008). As the factors involved vary from community to community, a local, area-based approach is recommended to mobilise the community, change attitudes and behaviours and to allow a co-ordinated, multi-agency approach.

Tackling low attainment in areas and individuals could have significant impacts. Goodman and Gregg (2010) suggest:

25% of the attainment gap between rich and poor children at GCSE level could be closed if policy were able to even out the differences in teenagers' attitudes, aspirations and behaviours...[this] would represent a significant achievement and would make a real difference to the lives of children. Moreover sustained policy interventions starting from the early years (or even prior to birth) through to the teenage years could be even more effective.

The way forward

Current government policy sees entrenched poverty as resting on low achievement, low aspiration and lack of employment. Literacy has a vital role to play in addressing all of these. Research shows that literacy skills do not just enable educational attainment; they underpin strong family relationships, better health choices and an individual's capacity (and confidence) to gain employment. We hope that this short paper provides evidence for local authorities, and others, to consider low literacy in their strategies to reduce child poverty and that it provides a framework for how family engagement is a cornerstone for any attempts to raise literacy levels.

References

- Bynner, J. and Parsons, S. (2006). *New Light on Literacy and Numeracy*. London: NRDC.
- Clark, C. (2007). *Why families matter*. London: National Literacy Trust.
- Clark, C. and Douglas, J. (2011). *Young people's reading and writing*. London: National Literacy Trust.
- Chowdry, H., Crawford, C. and Goodman, A. (2011). The role of attitudes and behaviours in explaining socio-economic differences at attainment at age 16. *Longitudinal and Life Courses*, **2**, 59-76.
- Dearing, E., Kreider, H., Simpkins, S., and Weiss, H. B. (2006). Family involvement in school and low income children's literacy performance: Longitudinal associations between and within families. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, **98**, 653-664.
- Desforges, C. and Abouchaar, A. (2003). *The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: A literature review*. London: Department for Education and Skills.
- Dugdale, G and Clark, C. (2008). *Literacy Changes Lives: An advocacy resource*. London: National Literacy Trust.
- Department for Work and Pensions (DWP, 2011). Households Below Average Income. Accessed 2/08/11 at <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai>
- Feinstein, L. and Symons, J. (1999). Attainment in secondary school. *Oxford Economic Papers*, **51**, 300-321.
- Gest, S.D., Freeman, N.R., Domitrovich, C.E. and Welsh, J.A. (2004). Shared book reading and children's language comprehension skills: the moderating role of parental discipline practices. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, **19**, 319-336.
- Goodman, A. and Gregg, P. (2010). The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children's educational attainment. Accessed 15 September 2011 at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/educational-attainment-poor-children>
- Gutman, L. and Akerman, R. (2008). *Determinants of Aspirations*. London: Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education, University of London.
- Layard, R., McIntosh, S., and Vignoles, A. (2002). *Britain's Record on Skills*. CEE Discussion Paper 23.
- Mullis, R.L., Mullis, A.K., Cornille, T.A., Ritchson, A.D. and Sullender, M.S. (2004). *Early literacy outcomes and parent involvement*. Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University.
- Reaney, L.M., Denton, K.L., and West, J. (2002, April). *Enriching environments: The relationship of home educational activities, extracurricular activities and community resources to kindergartners' cognitive performance*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association. New Orleans, LA.
- Rowe, K. (1991). The influence of reading activity at home on students' attitudes towards reading, classroom attentiveness and reading achievement: An application of structural equation modelling. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, **61**, 19-35.

Social Exclusion Task Force (2008) Aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities.

http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/109342/aspirations_evidence_pack.ppt

St Clair, R., Kintrea, K. and Houston, M. (2011). *The influence of parents, places and poverty on educational attainment and aspirations*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Strand, S. and Winston J., (2008) Educational aspirations in inner city schools. *Educational Studies*, 34 (4).

Sylva, K., Melhuish, E. C., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B.(2004).The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: *Technical Paper 12 - The Final Report: Effective Pre-School Education*. London: DfES / Institute of Education, University of London.

Washbrook, E. and Waldfogel, J. (2010). *Low income and early cognitive development in the UK*. London: Sutton Trust.