

Children's reading levels determined by poverty, UK survey finds

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17 December 2011

"The Gift of Reading", a report by the UK's National Literacy Trust, highlights the link between reading for pleasure and reading attainment. Their research shows that one in three children do not own a book themselves, a fact they call "concerning".

In 2005, the figure stood at 1 in 10. Children from the poorest families, those who receive free school meals, are the most affected.

More than 18,000 children from 111 schools participated in the online survey, with the majority of pupils ranging between 11 and 13 years of age. The report details that book ownership means that children enjoy reading; read every type of print, not just books; read for longer and more frequently; and also visit bookshops and libraries. Of these, more than half have a higher reading level than expected for their age group, while among those from bookless homes, only one third read above the level expected.

Even having only 10 books at their disposal shows a benefit, with 29 percent reading above the level expected. The attitudes to reading expressed are disturbing.

Many children said they would be embarrassed to be found by their friends reading, and 19 percent had never received a book as a present. Twelve percent had never been to a bookshop, and 7 percent had not entered a library.

Young people who do own books are more likely to be girls, from higher grades in their schools, from better-off socioeconomic backgrounds and without a special educational need. They associate reading with pleasure, and their attainment skills in reading are above the expected level. Reading enables children to cut out other distractions and escape to their own imagination, and so advances their ability to study.

The closure of local libraries and independent

bookshops has a dramatic effect, especially on large housing estates. Other surveys actually chart that children are accessing libraries more often, but this is not the case with the bottom percentage. The increase is among those who are already seeking books for their education.

Tim Coates, who is a library campaigner and consultant, said, "I believe we will lose between 600 to 1,000 libraries in the next 12-18 months and that may be only the beginning. We are seeing the destruction of the public library service."

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat government is justifying its closure programme by claiming that volunteers can run libraries placed in community centres, pubs and shops. This would not only limit the selection of books, but also the opening hours and advice provided.

Even if children read when younger, as they reach their teens they drop out of pleasure reading as they find it difficult to find books that cater to their interests and because of other distractions. According to neuroscientists, television and the Internet have a detrimental effect on children's attention span, and the constant use of mobile phones also causes them to respond instantly to outside influences. A study by the Broadcaster Audience Research Board found teenagers now spend seven-and-a-half hours a day in front of a screen of some description—either a phone, computer or TV.

The National Literacy Trust's "Manifesto for Literacy" states, "As adults, poor communication skills will lock individuals out of the job market. Research shows that a job applicant's effective communication skills can outweigh formal qualifications in an interview."

"In the UK, 41 percent of employers are worried

about the basic literacy skills of their new recruits,” they continue. “Whether reading a novel or job-seeking online, the same skills are needed to read, speak, listen and write. Without literacy skills, the potential for exclusion from society is greater than ever before.”

The “A Gift for Life” survey found that “children who arrive at school with a head start in literacy tend to stay ahead during the first two years of schooling”.

Various funded schemes have been tried to interest younger children in books. Bookstart was started in the UK by a children’s book expert, Wendy Cooling, in 1992, and is backed by independent arts charity Booktrust. It is funded from the Department for Education and the government and more than 25 children’s publishers. Local public services professionals, including health visitors, and library staff, coordinate the service.

A Bookstart survey showed that children who had used its reading scheme performed better in school tests than those who had not been involved. It gave them a head start across the curriculum, not just in literacy.

Another reading programme is the Dolly Parton Imagination Library. The American singer set up the project in the US in 2000 and then visited Rotherham, England, to set up the first one in the UK in 2006.

For a cost of £24 per child per year, under-fives receive a book at regular intervals if their area participates. Once again, this is funded from grants, and the web site lists Rotary clubs, local businesses, civic groups, local authorities, private citizens, educational foundations, schools and churches as possible sources.

The Penguin Publishing group is heavily involved. However, to date, just over 17,000 under-fives are registered in the UK. Although laudable, children’s education cannot and should not be reliant on such limited bodies.

Far from the National Literary Trust report being merely “concerning”, it is a damning indictment of the standard of education that thousands of working class children receive and the education system’s target-driven curriculum.



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