

UK: Poorest children lag behind on language skills

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Four out of ten of England's poorest boys start school without the language skills needed to learn. The poorest girls do not fare as badly as boys, but 27 percent were below the basic language level at age five.

Girls go on to outperform boys at every level of education, with boys lagging 15 months behind their peers at the age of five and possibly never catching up.

A report by the national campaign to get every child in the UK reading well by the age of 11 was carried out using research body Education Datalab, who analysed the National Pupil Database (UK) and data from a longitudinal study of 19,000 children to see how many children in England were reaching the expected level in language at age five.

They also looked at last year's national results of the Early Years Foundation Stage—an assessment of children's ability carried out in schools at the end of Reception year.

This report follows research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in April that showed a direct link between reading and wages later in life. It found that among children from poor families, the best readers at age 10 will go on to earn the equivalent of an extra day's wages each week, or the difference between earning the minimum wage, or a so-called "living" wage.

A fifth of children in England leave primary school unable to read well, including over a third of poorest children. Clearly, the gap in literacy of the poorest is not confined to gender.

To address the issue of poverty and literacy levels, the approach of the department for education has been focused on the teaching standards of early years practitioners, improving early years qualifications and encouraging high-quality entrants to the profession, through the Teach First program in the Early Years.

This approach has been proven to be inconsistent. Research by Save the Children has exposed how some parts of England are doing vastly better than others at getting poorer children reading.

It is no surprise that Prime Minister David Cameron is one of many high-profile politicians quoted on their web site to back the "Read On, Get On" campaign: "These past five years we have been about getting changes in place which stretch our children, but also making sure that they master the basics," he writes. "That's why we [the Conservatives] absolutely back Read On, Get On's ambition to eliminate illiteracy by 2025. We must make sure that every child gets the best start in life."

Cameron's statement reeks of hypocrisy. Since the 2008 banking crisis, successive governments have carried out devastating austerity policies that have impacted upon the institutions needed for every child to succeed. Latest figures show annual numbers of visitors to libraries have fallen by 40 million in just four years. The worse affected are deprived communities, where austerity measures have forced closures of libraries.

The *Independent* reported in February that "across the UK, there are now at least 330 fewer libraries open for 10 hours or more a week, a fall of 8 percent. ...

"The Independent Library Report for England, at the start of the year, raised the alarm over the combination of funding cuts and declining attendance facing libraries. Its author, William Sieghart, warned the network was at a 'critical moment' with the future of many libraries in jeopardy."

The reaction to this crisis from the "Read On, Get On campaign" is to call for urgent government investment to boost skills of nursery staff to improve language development before school starts, but it fails to identify the root causes of barriers to standards of literacy.

In their May 2015 book *Breadline Britain: of Mass Poverty*, authors Stuart Lansley and Joanna Mack chart the devastating rise in poverty over the last three decades.

They show that adults are going to enormous lengths to protect their children, with some parents sacrificing everyday necessities. Pressures on parents have increased due to the prioritising of children's needs and more are skimping on food so that their children have enough to eat: "This figure has doubled since 1983, from 13 to 28 percent. Within families there is an intra-household distribution in favour of children, so while overall poverty rates for children are around 30 percent, around half of children live in households in which adults are deprived."

Four million children (one in three) miss out on at least one family activity such as holidays, day trips and celebrations on special occasions. Some 1.6 million school-aged children (nearly one in five) lack at least one of the necessities seen as crucial to children's education and development—books, a space to study, indoor (educational) games, construction toys (such as Lego), a PC and Internet for homework, and school trips.

In 2013, a Channel 4 news report revealing the appalling levels of poverty among children interviewed, featured Carmel McConnell, founder of the Magic Breakfast organisation, which feeds 8,000 school children each day. She explained that between half a million to a million children go to school each day too hungry to learn. Half of teachers are bringing in food to feed their pupils.

Last year, 10,000 children were admitted to hospital suffering malnutrition. In a survey of school support staff carried out by the Unison public sector trade union, 79 percent reported children arriving to class hungry each day.

Ignoring the link between poor literacy and rising inequality, poverty and austerity, the chairwoman of "Read On, Get On," Dame Julia Cleverdon, says, "Poor children, and poor boys in particular, are being set up to fail because too many haven't developed the building blocks of learning before they arrive at the school gate for the first time. The government has made a strong commitment on literacy by setting clear goals to get all children reading well by the age of 11. What this research tells us is that this target is at risk unless

we close the language gap."

The pressure to meet targets such as these has been put on the shoulders of educators and parents alike. Meanwhile, the government declares for "raising standards" even as it raises class sizes, cuts funding to education and slashes wages and pensions to crucial staff and parents.

Gareth Jenkins, director of UK Poverty at Save the Children, which backs the campaign, said, "To change the story for the poorest children, we need urgent investment to boost the skills of early years staff and ensure every nursery is led by an early years teacher. Only then can we give every child the foundation they need to read and succeed at school and in life."

Jenkins and other commentators are missing the obvious: That is, in order to change the story of the poorest children demands the wholesale change of the political and economic system. Short term "urgent investment" will not change the destruction by the ruling class of cultural institutions like libraries and community schools. The relentless drive for austerity measures and cuts to social services is instead closing access to education and vital services required by the poorest and most vulnerable. The social crisis that envelops the working class can only be fought by taking up the fight for socialism.



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