



National Literacy Trust response to the Literacy Enquiry of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Education

The National Literacy Trust is an independent charity that transforms lives through literacy. We believe that society will only be fair when everyone has the literacy skills they need to communicate, to fulfil their potential and to contribute more to society. We campaign to improve public understanding of the vital importance of literacy, as well as delivering projects and working in partnership to reach those most in need of support.

The enquiry covers a wide range of policy issues, many of which have been addressed in other submissions. Because of this the National Literacy Trust's response will focus on the home learning environment, barriers to literacy in the UK and the role of business in delivering literacy.

An overview of the literacy in the UK can be found in "[Literacy: State of the Nation](#)"

An evaluation of the impact of low literacy on an individual's life can be found in [Literacy Changes Lives](#)

The Home Learning Environment

The impact of the home learning environment on literacy acquisition cannot be overstated. Parents and carers are the first educators and their impact on language and skill development continues throughout a child's life. The amount of time parents spend with their children gives them a unique role to play in developing literacy skills. In fact throughout childhood only 16% of time is spent in school and the rest is spent with families and within communities.

The following key areas are particularly relevant with regards the home learning environment

1. Early Years Matters

In 2010 the National Literacy Trust commissioned the University of Dundee to carry out a literature review of the evidence supporting communicating with babies: http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/6770/F2F_literature_highlights.pdf

Highlights from the review include:

- The time parents spent reading to their preschool children is related to children's language growth, emergent literacy and reading skills.
- The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project found that while the social class and levels of education of parents were related to child outcomes, the early years home learning environment was more important than family socio-economic status and income effects.

2. There is a strong relationship between access to resources at home and attainment at school

Two National Literacy Trust research papers in particular highlight the strong relationship between access to resources, attitudes to reading and writing and attainment at school.

["Young People's Reading: The Importance of the home environment and family support"](#) was released in June 2010 and shows the clear links between being encouraged and supported to read and write and positive attitudes to literacy.

The National Literacy Trust's in depth study of attitudes to reading and writing and how these impact on attainment, further highlights the importance of resources in the home. Key findings included:

- Young people who read and write below the expected level for their age were less likely to say that they have a computer, have a desk or books of their own or have access to magazines and newspapers.

[http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/8266/Attitudes towards Reading Writing Final 2011.pdf](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/8266/Attitudes_towards_Reading_Writing_Final_2011.pdf) (table 5, pp29)

3. Role models

In 2009 the National Literacy Trust surveyed children on their role models, both generally and in terms of reading. The results showed that children overwhelmingly consider their parents their role models, both generally and in terms of reading.

This was true for young people from key stage one through to key stage 3

[http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/0404/Role models Executive summary.pdf](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/0404/Role_models_Executive_summary.pdf)

Barriers to Literacy

The majority of the UK's population have excellent literacy skills; however, a significant minority have literacy levels below that expected of an eleven-year-old, and one in five children do not leave primary school with the expected reading levels. Those with low literacy levels are not a cross section of society and are overwhelmingly drawn from the lowest socio-economic groups.

1. Low literacy and prisoners

This problem is clearly demonstrated by the case of prisoners. In the UK 60% of prisoners are said to have difficulties with their basic literacy, far higher than the 16% of the general population. However, prisoners are overwhelmingly from lower socio-economic backgrounds and research has shown that prisoners' literacy difficulties are in line with the communities from which they are drawn. This suggests that the key issue is the link between socio-economic background and literacy.

[http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/0422/Literacy changes lives prisons.pdf](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/0422/Literacy_changes_lives_prisons.pdf)

2. International Evidence

International comparison studies, such as Progress in International Reading Literacy Survey (PIRLS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), reveal that the link between socio-economic background and skills is particularly strong in the UK. In fact the 2009 PISA data, which assessed the literacy levels of 15-year-old pupils across the OECD, found that the link between socio economic background and literacy was strongest in Luxembourg and the UK. The report found that, “strikingly 77% of the between school differences in student performance for the UK is explained by differences in socio-economic background.”

<http://www.pisa.oecd.org/dataoecd/33/8/46624007.pdf>

3. Low demand for literacy

The issue of low literacy among certain groups in the UK is wide and complex. Within schools and communities the demand for improved literacy is lowest among those with the lowest skills. As the government strives to ensure that synthetic phonics and the mechanics of reading are taught consistently and effectively across all schools, there is also a need to assess the comprehension and motivational factors which follow this.

[National Literacy Trust research](#) has shown that fewer children on free school meals report that they enjoy reading than those not on free school meals. This pattern is repeated in adulthood as those with the lowest skills are the least likely to sign up for courses to improve their skills.

The previous government invested heavily in providing more courses, both through employer lead schemes such as Train to Gain and through community provision as part of the overarching Skills for Life strategy. However, more work is needed to raise the demand for literacy skills.

The changing policy landscape at both a national and local level provides a framework in which businesses, community groups and others can work to promote literacy and the impact it can have.

Business and literacy

The links between the business community and literacy is particularly important. In part because businesses are often disappointed by the literacy levels, particularly the communication skills of school leavers. A recent report from the Confederation of British Industries (CBI) found that almost half of the businesses they had surveyed had to give new employees some form of remedial training.

However, the survey also found that 54% of businesses are willing to do more to help literacy levels, a figure which rises to 66% for large firms.

The National Literacy Trust has been working to link businesses to schools and partnering with well know brands in order to raise the profile of literacy.

[Words for Work](#) works with business volunteers and year 9 pupils promoting the importance of good communication for work, while Reading for Life partners with well know brands such as Marmite and Little Chef to provide messages promoting reading to families across the country.