

# Children researching links between poverty and literacy

Findings  
Informing change

September 2007

This study explores what can be learnt about education and poverty from children's own perspective when they are empowered as active researchers. It focuses on reading and writing proficiency as a potential route out of poverty and studies two schools in contrasting socio-economic areas.

## Key points

- Children from affluent backgrounds exuded confidence about their reading and writing. This derived from a variety of opportunities:
  - routine support for homework;
  - parental help and conversation;
  - favourable 'private' environments for reading and writing;
  - absence of distractions while doing homework; and
  - opportunities to talk about literacy.
- By contrast children from poorer backgrounds had few, if any, of these opportunities.
- Children at both schools identified reading aloud and writing as activities requiring 'public confidence', which needed a lot of practice 'privately' to develop.
- A striking characteristic of children from affluent backgrounds was how easy it was for them to access opportunities to build 'private confidence'.
- At both schools, children's confidence about writing was much lower than their confidence in reading. Children wanted opportunities to practise writing without their efforts being made public.
- Homework clubs could be 'a lifeline' and an essential route to educational progress for children in poverty.
- However, the research raises concerns that Extended Schools could simply lengthen school hours and school curriculum.
- The researchers conclude that offering children personal space, opportunities for learning in their own way and some degree of autonomy would help improve their confidence and their literacy levels.

## The research

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## Background

There are plenty of adult studies on the subject of literacy and poverty but an absence of research by children. The authors trained and supported two groups of eleven-year-old children to undertake their own research about aspects of literacy they thought were important to them. The children came from two UK primary schools, one in an area of socio-economic advantage (Riverside Primary) and one in an area of disadvantage (Valley Town Primary). Identification of poverty as a factor was addressed through adult analysis of the children's studies to avoid any possible distress or stigmatization for the children.

The research produced six case studies:

- *How confidence affects literacy at our school.*
- *Children's attitudes to literacy homework in our school.*
- *What do children think and feel about TV and literacy?*
- *Do you have any difficulties with your homework?*
- *What environments do children like doing their homework in?*
- *Children and spelling.*

These studies provided rich descriptions of children's own literacy experiences and gave voice to their own perspective. The simplicity of the children's questions and of the language in their questionnaires and interviews elicited open and honest responses from their peers. The absence of power relationships ensured that children's responses were untainted by efforts to 'please the adult'.

The research revealed marked differences in the experiences of children from affluent and poor backgrounds.

## Homework

Very few children from Valley Town Primary got help with homework from a parent on a regular basis and nearly one fifth reported never getting any help at all. When children did get help, this was commonly restricted to five minutes and only for subjects such as maths

which could be dealt with quickly. Children rarely got support with literacy because this was seen as a longer homework and a parent would have to read a text first before being able to help. Riverside children had contrasting experiences, as parents invariably helped and offered views and opinions to stretch their children's thinking and speaking skills.

*"I'm in the kitchen and it's very tempting to ask for help from all the people that are around me. So, I do get quite a lot of help. I tend to go to adults, rather than use books, but I have books around the house that I can use if I want to ...".*  
(Riverside Year 6 girl)

The impact of affluence and poverty was evident in children's reflections on the kind of environments they could do their homework in. Children from Riverside Primary had their own bedroom or garden to escape to whereas the experiences of Valley Town children focused around crowded, noisy conditions with distractions such as "smoking, banging, swearing, loud music and TV" affecting the homework they were trying to do.

Watching TV was a central theme that emerged in relation to homework. Approximately half of Valley Town children viewed TV as a distraction when doing their homework, whereas Riverside children would have TV quotas policed by parents and TVs were turned off until homework was completed to parents' satisfaction. Some 15 per cent of children at Valley Town Primary never read a book at home by themselves or with another person and almost a quarter of children watched TV for more than four hours a day. The data showed that large groups of Valley Town children watched programmes that came on after the watershed, particularly Big Brother. For a significant number of Valley Town children, TV took the place of reading and 10 per cent of children thought that reading books was 'pointless'.

Children from Riverside reported more regulated TV viewing, and sometimes were not allowed to watch pre-watershed programmes, such as Eastenders. There was also monitoring and joint watching of television which could encourage conversation within the home.

## Literacy opportunities, confidence and self-esteem

A strong theme in data from both schools was the link between literacy attainment and confidence levels. Children at Riverside reported very high levels of confidence in their reading, writing and speaking skills. Child-to-child interviews revealed that these high levels

of reading confidence and self-esteem arose from frequent opportunities to practise in private. Children from all backgrounds found that reading out loud was daunting and intimidating.

Children talked about building up what they termed their 'private confidence' by reading on their own, sometimes rehearsing pronunciation and expression in whispers. As they grew in 'private confidence' they became less afraid of being called upon to read in class or to talk about what they had read in class. The facilitation of these opportunities in the home (quiet reading environments, encouragement to read as a leisure activity, plenty of books readily available) was a notable difference between Riverside and Valley Town schoolchildren.

The children suggested that one way of boosting their confidence in reading aloud would be to read to children younger than themselves. This would benefit those younger children being read to and would also allow older children to develop confidence in their public reading.

## Writing confidence

At both schools, confidence in writing was much lower than reading. Indeed, children saw writing as the most public of all the literacy activities they engaged in. There were fewer opportunities to practise 'private' writing at home, even for Riverside children. Children viewed school writing as a painful process of endless drafts, scrutinised by adults and publicly displayed on classroom walls.

**"I don't like people looking at my writing because people will think that that's so messy or she's so stupid. I don't like giving my opinion."**  
(L, Year 6 girl)

Private confidence developed through writing practice and resulted in a positive feeling towards that skill. Before children could develop confidence in their writing, they felt they needed to develop some private confidence and have opportunities to practise writing where their efforts would not be on display. Children also made a direct link between reading skills and speaking and listening skills.

## Gender differences

A final theme covered gender differences and the extent to which boys' attainment is falling behind girls. One of the reasons identified was the absence of male role models in reading. This is more acute in areas of

poverty than in areas of affluence and boys living in poverty are therefore the most vulnerable group in terms of literacy proficiency.

## Policy observations

This research shows that children from affluent backgrounds exuded confidence in their literacy, derived from a variety of opportunities:

- routine support for homework;
- parental dialogue providing role models;
- favourable environments for reading and writing;
- absence of distractions; and
- opportunities to talk about literacy.

By contrast children from poorer backgrounds had few, if any, of these opportunities.

An important self-development strategy uncovered in one of the children's reports was the need to 'practise your private confidence' in reading and writing before developing 'public confidence' by reading aloud and writing. A striking characteristic of children from affluent backgrounds was how easy it was for them to access opportunities for building 'private confidence'. The Extended Schools programme may do nothing to facilitate this unless sufficient personal space, personalised learning opportunities and some degree of autonomy are offered to children.

The findings point to homework clubs as 'a lifeline' and an essential route to educational progress for children in poverty. These findings have implications for the Extended Schools programme, where homework clubs could be offered more widely. However, the research also highlights the importance of access to adult expertise and raises issues about reading opportunities that promote private confidence-building and enjoyment. Thus it is important that homework clubs are facilitated by staff with the right skills to support children.

The research also raises concerns that Extended Schools could simply lengthen school hours and school curriculum – meaning more of the same diet for children with limited personal space and personal autonomy. Homework clubs should offer quality reading experiences with good books and quiet, comfortable areas that allow children to practise private reading and build private confidence.

Throughout the studies at both schools, themes of enjoyment, choice and ownership came through strongly as being effective ways for children to engage with literacy. Therefore, a closer examination of how much time children are allowed to read quietly or read

to younger pupils in non-threatening environments would be welcome, as would a debate about children's writing and how opportunities can be created for private writing where children can experiment, enjoy and own their writing.

Skilful help by parents was a further factor that affected children's literacy attainment in the two schools. Extended Schools could bring together the needs of parents and children. Adult literacy classes and other life-long learning skills, such as ICT, could be offered alongside homework clubs. The Government's commitment to wraparound affordable childcare could make some of these opportunities possible for families living in poverty.

Gender differences emerged in the findings, including the extent to which boys' attainment is falling behind girls. There is an opportunity to reverse this trend, if this knowledge is used to plan Extended Schools provision. Primary schools have relatively few male teachers and even fewer male classroom assistants. However, Extended Schools offer opportunities for other male professionals (such as sports coaches, social workers or youth workers) to be learning role models.

## Possible solutions

This research uncovered areas where the literacy achievement gap is at its widest for children living in poverty. The findings point to possible action to improve this situation:

- Using Extended Schools' core provision services to bridge some of these gaps, both at child and parent level.
- Creating environments in classrooms which give children opportunities to build literacy confidence 'privately'.

- Providing opportunities for children to read quietly or read to younger pupils in non-threatening environments.
- Facilitating 'private' writing opportunities for children.
- Providing homework clubs and ensuring they are accessible to the children who need them most.
- Offering help and training to parents to support their children with literacy.
- Addressing enjoyment and motivation issues in the current 'teaching' approach to literacy learning.

## About the project

Two groups of six children were trained in research processes at two UK schools. Riverside Primary is in the centre of a university-dominated town where a large percentage of the parents of pupils are academics. The SATs results for the school are above average. Valley Town Primary is located in a deprived area near the centre of a city with a large Somali refugee community. The free school meal rate is 72 per cent. SATs results for 2006 were low enough for OFSTED to put the school into special measures. There were 80 participants in the research at Riverside and 159 at Valley Town. Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

The child interviewers were trained from January to April 2006 and were then supported to undertake their own research projects between April and July 2006. Methods chosen by the children included observation, questionnaires and interviews.

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## For further information

The children's individual research studies can be found at <http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk>. Further information on this research is available from The Open University. Tel. 01908 653295, email: [m.kellett@open.ac.uk](mailto:m.kellett@open.ac.uk).

The full report, **Children researching links between poverty and literacy** by Mary Kellett and Aqsa Dar, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

It is available as a free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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