



Reaching Out with Role Models

Role models and young people's reading

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April 2009

Executive summary

Do children and young people have reading role models? So, do these role models come from their immediate social environment? Or are more distant ones, such as celebrities, also influential? We addressed these questions in a recent survey of 2176 seven to 15-year-olds. The questions were asked as part of a wider survey about children's and young people's role models: who they are, and what qualities children and young people expect them to have.

Children and young people were asked about their reading habits and reading enjoyment, as well as about their notions of success and the types of attributes that they would look for in a role model. Questions were asked about the types of figures that could inspire reading, and how this could be done. For example, by suggesting reading materials, writing materials, reading by example or explaining why reading is important. The findings were then examined according to age, gender, socio-economic background (determined by free school meals – FSM) and whether they enjoyed reading (readers and non-readers).

The findings provide valuable insight for initiatives that aim to use role models to inspire young people, particularly to inspire reading. Overall, 72% of children and young people enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot. Technology-based materials are the most frequently read, with nearly two-thirds of children and young people reading websites every week. Half the sample also reads blogs/networking websites (such as Bebo and MySpace) and emails every week. Secondary pupils read more technology-based materials, such as website and blogs/networking sites, every week than primary pupils. Readers feel more confident about their reading skills and read a wider variety of texts than non-readers.

For most, being successful means being happy, having a good education and having a good job. Only a quarter said that being successful means having lots of clothes, being famous, having a flash car or being good at sports. 76% of children and young people believed that reading will help them to be successful. Though this equates to a large

proportion of the group, this finding also signals that there is more work to be done to reach out to the 24% of children and young people who do not recognise the vital link between reading and success. Perhaps unsurprisingly, children and young people who enjoy reading were significantly more likely to view reading as important to success (83.2% vs 56.8%).

Role models and inspiring reading

The study found that 78% of children and young people have a role model. These come predominantly from within the immediate family. A fifth of pupils spontaneously mentioned that their role model is either their mum or dad. Sportspeople, footballers in particular, are the most frequently mentioned role model after the immediate social environment.

More girls than boys have role models (82% vs. 75%). Girls are also more likely to choose role models from within the immediate family, while more boys chose a sportsperson. Primary pupils were more likely to have role models than secondary ones (81.4% vs. 76.5%), and more likely to say that having a role model who likes reading is important (39% vs. 16%). Role models from the immediate family figure prominently for all ages, but more secondary than primary pupils say that their role model is a sportsperson or musician. When the data was examined according to allocation of FSMs, role models from the immediate family figured prominently in the choice of both pupils receiving FSMs and those who are not. However, sports figures were particularly prominent for FSM pupils, who were over twice as likely to choose a sports figure as a role model (15% vs 6.5%)

Cultural background, gender, age and celebrity status are largely not important characteristics of a role model. Instead, most choose a role model because of their internal qualities, such as being hard-working, honest and kind/caring. By contrast, only a quarter of children and young people believe that their role model needs to be famous, a reader, good-looking or make lots of money.

When asked about figures that could inspire reading, again the immediate family are the most prominent figures, followed by their friends and teacher. The immediate family are the most important in inspiring reading for both boys and girls, but more boys than girls said that a sportsperson, politician, religious figure or cool kids at school inspire them to read. Primary pupils are generally more likely to say that a range of people are very important people who inspire them to read, while friends at school are prominent in inspiring reading for secondary pupils.

Both children receiving FSMs and those who are not also selected the immediate family as the key figures to inspire reading. However, FSM pupils have a wider range of people who could inspire reading, including other family members, neighbours, adults outside of school (e.g. family friend, youth worker), teachers, cool kids at school as well as politicians, celebrities, musicians, actors/actresses, sportspeople and religious figures. Pupils who do not receive FSM say that their dad inspires them to read, which reflects the fact that FSM pupils are more likely to live only with their mother (34% vs. 16%).

Children who enjoy reading also have a wider range of people who could inspire reading, including other family members, neighbours, adults outside of school (e.g.

family friend, youth worker), teachers, while non-readers say that cool kids at school and sportspeople are important figures who could inspire them to read.

Most children and young people said that their role model could promote reading by providing reading recommendations or explaining why reading is important. However, FSM pupils say that the key way that their role model could inspire them to read is to explain to them why reading is important.

Conclusion

This survey highlights the continuing importance of parents in the life of children and teenagers. Parents are not only role models in a general sense but are also the prime figures who can inspire reading. Almost without exception, every breakdown of the data found that family members, normally parents, were the most likely role models for that group of children. For instance, while children on free school meals (FSM) were more likely than those not on free school meals to choose sportspeople and women as their role models, parents were still the most likely to be their role models.

Programmes that aim to work with the already powerful influence of parents, especially on younger children, should therefore work alongside parents and work from a position of parents as knowledgeable partners in the process. These findings are particularly important from a policy perspective, as policies regarding parents and families can be a complex area and the differentiation between interfering and guiding is vital.

However, we should not underestimate the power of using famous role models to underpin the reading messages being promoted. Along with boys, children on FSM and children in primary school were both likely to pick sportspeople as role models. Importantly, this survey reveals that even if a celebrity is not famous because of their reading skills, young people said the materials they recommend would encourage them to read.