

Young people's self-perception as readers

Recently, much literacy policy discourse has focused on family engagement and the importance of reading for pleasure. This focus has been supported by research and embedded within major policy documents. The Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS), published in December 2007, highlighted the close link between the amount of time children spend reading for pleasure outside of school and attainment in school.¹ Similarly, the Government's Children's Plan announces a raft of schemes aimed at promoting family involvement in children's literacy. Research published in January 2008 by the National Literacy Trust (NLT), which looks at young people's self perception as readers, further informs this discussion.²

Existing research has already shown that the way "an individual feels about him or herself as a reader could clearly influence whether reading would be sought or avoided".³ Taking this into account the NLT research investigated influences on children's perceptions of themselves as readers. Looking at family, peer groups and the school, the research looked into the materials pupils were reading, as well as assessing which materials pupils felt they were encouraged to read. As well as reinforcing existing research findings and policy directions, the research also highlighted areas of concern in less explored areas.

Through direct questionnaires to pupils about their reading habits, as well as their reading influences, the study provided important insights into young people's experience of literacy. Despite most children (58%) saying they enjoyed reading and 71% of young people defining themselves as readers, it is inevitably those who are not engaged with reading who present the greatest challenge for practitioners and policymakers. The research highlighted two key areas of concern. Firstly, issues surrounding the definition of reading and what young people feel they are being encouraged to read. Secondly, the vital role that families play in young people's perception of themselves as readers.

As mentioned, PIRLS and other international studies, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Reading For Change report, have stressed the importance of reading for pleasure on academic attainment and future success. These areas are currently of particular concern as research shows that young people in England read less for pleasure than their international counterparts.⁴ Discussion in this area has largely focused on how children can be encouraged to read more and to how to stimulate their interest in books. The NLT self-perception research mirrored other studies findings regarding young people's attitudes towards books, but also showed that encouraging reluctant readers to pick up books may not be the most effective solution.

Many of the 29% of young people who defined themselves as non-readers were actually reading outside of school but they did not feel that the material they were reading was socially defined as reading. Readership of magazines, websites and blogs was high amongst the self-defined non-reader. However, often the non-readers did not read fiction, poetry and factual books. The respondents stated

¹ National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (2007), *Readers and Reading*

² Clark, Osborne, Akerman, NLT (2008) *Young people's self-perception as readers: An investigation including family, peer and school influences*

³ Henk & Melnick (1995)

⁴ NFER (2007), *Readers and Reading*

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that these were the materials they were encouraged to read at school, and consequently young people considered that these materials made someone a reader.

This finding raises interesting questions about how to engage young people in literacy. Existing schemes that have promoted books have had considerable impact, however moving away from a narrow definition of what young people should be reading and instead starting from existing interests may be a key way to reach disengaged young readers. Given the clear and significant link between reading for pleasure and pupil attainment it is essential that policymakers acknowledge the role of redefining reading as a vital and socially attractive activity.

A shift in the definition of reading does not equate to promoting all forms of reading as fit for all purposes, nor does it suggest that the curriculum should rely less on traditional content. It does, however, engage with young people who do not consider being a reader as something desirable. Demonstrating and validating young people's literacy interests will reduce the view of reading as something for 'geeky or nerdy' children, a belief that was held by 43% of non-readers in the NLT research.

For a reading culture to become embedded and sustainable family involvement is essential. There has been increasing recognition amongst policymakers of the vital role families play in a child's development. Young people only spend 15% of their time at school,⁵ and families make up a significant proportion of the remaining time. The amount of time a child spends at home gives parents and carers a unique opportunity to engage with their children throughout their early lives.

The positive impact of family involvement on children's literacy levels has been firmly established over a number of years and some local authorities, such as Rochdale Metropolitan Borough, have had notable success with family literacy schemes. Despite this, almost a quarter of the children in the NLT's self-perception study (22.4%) said that no-one at home encouraged them to read, and 13% believed that no-one at home thought they were a good reader. Of the self-defined non-readers the percentage of those who felt no-one encouraged them to read was 56.3%.

The predictability of non-readers reporting that no-one encourages them to read makes it no less worrying. Those who define themselves as non-readers often felt that at school they are only encouraged to read material that doesn't interest them and at home they are not encouraged to read at all. Developments in local family literacy programmes across England are having significant positive impacts, and building a focus on what will engage learners, both parents and children, is key to the future success of such schemes.

Parents of pupils who felt that no-one encouraged them to read may suffer low literacy skills themselves, or feel disengaged from the type of reading their children think is promoted in school. Young people are far less likely to enjoy traditional forms of reading if their parents have no interest in it and don't provide a literature rich home environment. However, 66% of households have a daily newspaper and 93% have a home computer and both of these provide plentiful reading opportunities too form a foundation for a love of all forms of text types.

The NLT's research into young people's self-perception as readers, contributes significant insights into literacy policy discourse. The research suggests that many self-defined non readers are in part reluctant because their families do not promote reading in the home, something which can lead to the development of a negative attitude towards readers as well as reading. The challenge for policymakers is to succeed in making reading and the concept of being a reader an aspiration for more young people. This will create a far stronger position from which to encourage the literacy skills of young people who are currently disengaged from literacy and learning.

⁵ Conservative Social Justice Policy Group(2007) *Breakthrough Britain*
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