

Executive summary

Background to this research

In 2007, an American publication, *To Read or Not to Read*, set out a US perspective on the wider benefits of literacy. The document highlighted many areas familiar to English literacy research. To allow individuals to better understand the wider benefits of literacy, the National Literacy Trust has compiled this equivalent document for England. It draws on a number of sources that make use of longitudinal studies that have tracked their subjects from birth, such as the National Child Development Study (NCDS), which started in 1958, and the British Cohort Study, which began in 1970 (BCS70).

This research presents overwhelming evidence that literacy has a significant relationship with a person's happiness and success. It gives a clear indication of the dangers of poor literacy and also the benefits of improving literacy for the individual, the community, the workforce and the nation.

Reading for pleasure has been revealed as the most important indicator of the future success of a child (OECD, 2002), and improvements in literacy, at any point in life, can have a profound effect on an individual.

The reasons why people from all ages struggle with their literacy are manifold, ranging from severe educational needs to a disaffection from learning and low aspirations. This paper does not give any guidance on how the reasons for low literacy are best addressed. Rather, its purpose is to collect information about the tangible impact of literacy on a person's life and present it in an accessible form to a wide audience.

Although the relationship between literacy and other variables may not always reflect direct causal connections, the picture that emerges does point to the prominence of poor literacy in the profile of disadvantaged adult lives. This suggests it is part of a vicious cycle of socio-economic factors that lead to economic and personal deprivation.

Socio-economic background and many other factors may be outside the control of an individual. However, what matters is that for many addressing literacy skills is a key first step in beginning to address and helping to overcome other related factors that lock individuals into a cycle of disadvantage.

The impact on an individual

Profile of a person with poor literacy

More likely to live in a non-working household

22% of men and 30% of women with literacy below entry level 2 live in non-working households.

Less likely to have children

Individuals with low levels of literacy are more likely to lead solitary lives without any children.

More likely to live in overcrowded housing

Individuals with low literacy levels are more likely to live in overcrowded housing with reduced access to technology.

Less likely to vote

Men and women with the poorest literacy or numeracy skills were the least likely to have voted in the 1987 and 1997 general elections.

Profile of a person with improved literacy

Becomes less likely to be on state benefits

Men who improve their literacy rates see their likelihood of being on state benefits reduced from 19% to 6%.

Becomes more likely to own their own home

A modest rise in literacy level sees the likelihood of a man owning their own house rise from 40% to 78%.

Becomes more likely to use a PC at work

Increased literacy rates improve the chances of using a PC at work from 48% to 65%.

Becomes more involved in democratic processes

16% of men who improved their literacy between the ages of 21 and 34 had contact with government, compared to 0% of those whose literacy remained poor.

Evidence also shows that literate individuals contribute to and are successful in a range of areas, and help create literate families, who live within literate communities, which contribute towards a literate nation. The benefits of these three literate units are listed below:

Profile of a literate family:-

Less likely to experience divorce

A literate family is less likely to experience divorce, as divorce rates amongst those with high literacy are low, and significantly lower than those with poor literacy.

More likely to live in a working household

Families with high literacy levels are far more likely to live in working households, with only 2% of families with good literacy living in workless households.

More likely to own their own home

Families with high literacy are more likely to own their own houses and not live in overcrowded conditions.

Profile of a literate community:-**Far more likely to participate in community**

Individuals with good literacy are far more likely to be involved in community participation. Among those with level 2 literacy 21% of men and 29% of women actively participate in community activities.

More likely to trust people in community

Scottish data shows that individuals with good literacy are significantly more likely to trust people in their community, with only 2% of men and 1% of women saying they didn't trust people at all.

Perceives community to be safer

Literate residents also consider their communities to be much safer, than those with low literacy. Only 1% of men and women with high literacy levels reported never leaving their houses.

Profile of a literate nation:-**More likely to vote**

Highly literate individuals are more likely to vote and have an interest in politics, therefore participating in the democratic process and holding an interest in the governance of the nation.

Smoke and drink less, better mental health

High literacy levels are associated with lower drinking and smoking, as well as higher levels of good mental health. This takes pressure off the health service and public funds, and contributes to a healthier nation.

Better skilled and more flexible workforce

A literate workforce is advantageous to both employees and employers. Good literacy skills provide an opportunity for flexibility in the workforce across all sectors, as data collected by the CBI show.

The full report: Literacy changes lives: an advocacy resource is available to download from: www.literacytrust.org.uk

If you have any questions or comments relating to the content of this document
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