



Attitudes to Reading and Writing and their Links with Social Mobility 1914-2014

An Evidence Review

Executive Summary

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This review has drawn on a range of literature, archive material, family interviews and data gathered using social media to explore attitudes to reading and writing and their links with social mobility from 1914 to the present day. It identifies the many ways in which families read for pleasure and identifies ways in which Booktrust's activity might be developed.

The review covers:

- Changing conceptions of literacy in the UK from 1914 to the present day
- The impact of reading and writing on social mobility during this period
- Ways in which the teaching of literacy has changed in the last hundred years
- The impact of changes in society and of digital technologies on reading and writing
- The experiences of men and women around reading and writing, and the impact of gender influences on social mobility
- Issues of inclusion, and new arrivals¹ to the UK in relation to literacy

The review concludes that:

- Whilst there is little evidence to suggest a direct link between positive attitudes towards literacy and social mobility, there are strong indicators of the importance of reading, writing and 'literacy' in contributing to positive social mobility.
- We need to understand the need for social change and how educational intervention can support this.

"[My] Parents didn't read and write so only teachers supported us at this time. [...] I didn't have parent support for reading and writing in English. They could read and write mother tongue but not the English Language."

[Female, 55, family interview data]

¹ "New Arrivals" is the current generic term applying to those people coming into the UK to live for a variety of reasons, including asylum seekers, refugees, economic migrants, new EU citizens.

- Research strongly indicates that social class is one of the greatest predictors of academic achievement – and it remains very difficult to move from one social bracket into another.
- There is significant evidence that some people are less included in schools and society as a whole, particularly when their home language is perceived as low status and when they are economically disadvantaged.
- We must continue to understand and challenge social conventions that prevent individuals from accessing social mobility on the grounds of gender.
- Reading and writing are essential to achievement, yet literacy alone is not, and cannot be, responsible for social change.

"I do not agree that illiterate mothers raise illiterate children. My own grandmother was illiterate but when my mother attended school she was encouraged to learn everything that she could. [...] My mother passed an examination to become a teacher's help and it was suggested that she should train to become a teacher, but unfortunately this was not to be as her wages were needed to help the family."

[A1733, Female, Mass Observation Archive data]

- Research has shown how families can support their children at home, this needs to be further embedded in practice in order that more parents can help their children to enhance their literacy and their socio-cultural capital.
- The early years are crucial in fostering a love of reading for enjoyment, which runs in parallel with eagerness to learn to read and *self-confidence* in the *ability* to read from an early age.

"My earliest memories are sitting with my Nanna and reading poetry books. One of the poems was called "The clock upon the stairs". By the time I started School I was already way ahead of the other children. I loved my Nan and I loved reading."

[Female, late 30s, Facebook data]

- As we move further into the 21st century there is an urgent need not only to *recognise* the impact of digital technology, but to actively strive to understand how advancement in media and electronic text are changing constructions of literacy, text and notions of what it means to read and write today and in the future.

"But Gran – there's lots of reading to do when you are on the internet ...if you can't read someone would really struggle on the internet I think, ...it's still reading – just not in a book."

[Female, 22, family interview data]

The review highlights the following:

- Reading and writing are now part of wider 'literacy' practices incorporating digital technologies unheard of in 1914.
- Being able to read and write puts individuals in a position where they are more likely to be included in communities and society more widely. Those new to communities, with different literacy practices and different languages, can experience exclusion and social injustices.

- Being a reader does not in itself carry a promise of greater positive social mobility, yet it seems that without a capacity to read and write and engage in literacy practices necessary to understand and challenge power, social mobility is less likely.
- The home and family are crucial in the development of reading and writing, particularly in terms of reading for pleasure. Whilst we found no direct correlation between parents' reading practices and the literacy of their children, it seems to be the case that reading for pleasure 'rubs off' in the home.

*"Now I read aloud to my daughter more than reading quietly to myself...because it's helping her language development (her vocabulary at 22 months is ENORMOUS), it's fun to put on different voices and vary my delivery for dramatic effect (I've always had a yearning to perform), and because she's absolutely addicted to books and constantly clamours to be read to. I don't have much time to read *for me* these days, but I take such joy in her developing love of books."*

[Female, mid-30s, Facebook data]

- Whilst boys' achievement in literacy has been a concern in recent times, for most of the period under study it has been women's opportunities to learn to read and write that should give most cause for concern. Whilst working to promote positive attitudes in boys towards reading for pleasure, girls' and women's reading and writing should not be neglected in the future.

[As an adult] "she was always busy with her household chores and looking after her husband and children and even if she had been literate, she would certainly never have had the time to help her children with their reading."

[B89, Female, Mass Observation Archive data]

- Clear links are identified between success in employment choice and reading and writing abilities and limited ability to read and write remains a concern of employers and government to this day.
- Whilst governments have focused primarily on children's literacy and the teaching of reading and writing (and later 'literacy') in schools, there remains a need for adult literacy education initiatives to support those adults who do not succeed in schools.

[My friend] "Ellen – well I wouldn't say Ellen was 'illiterate' – no – but she struggled. [...] I said 'go to lessons' but she didn't want to – said people might think she was stupid. Now, no, she wasn't stupid – just didn't managed to pick up enough at school to be able to read and write for herself."

[Female, 86, family interview data]

- Oral cultures as they relate to reading and writing have a crucial place. 'Literacy' is socially constructed and we must remember that issues of

'illiteracy' and social difficulty need to be considered in relation to when and where they occur.

- Different 'modes' of expression have always been used for reading and writing, new technologies have increased the 'modes' and possibilities available.
- Some adults still struggle with literacy, although significantly fewer than in 1914. While this review has mainly focused on the relationships between positive attitudes to literacy and social mobility, it is important to also be aware that negative attitudes to or experiences of literacy can inhibit life choices.

"I think – for me – I didn't want to grow up not being able to read... It's a personal choice – I didn't want to go the way my parents went. I decided that I was staying on at school. I chose my options an' stuff. My mum and dad were never interested."

[Male, 36, family interview data]

We make the following recommendations to Booktrust:

- It will be important for Booktrust to continue to consider how new arrivals in the UK who bring different languages and literacy practices to communities can be included in a socially just society. Additionally, Booktrust's work should seek new ways to work within communities where many languages are spoken.
- Without doubt, families can support early reading development. Booktrust has had success in involving parents in reading for pleasure with their children. It may wish to consider reviewing its current programmes as a whole to identify and highlight successful approaches to enhancing home engagement in literacy.
- New technologies are now strongly impacting on, and shaping, literacy practices for all ages. In the future, Booktrust may wish to consider the development of Story Apps to maximise the availability of technology in terms of reading for pleasure using smart phones, tablets and laptop technologies.
- Stereotypical constructions of women and men in books and magazines have had an impact on opportunities for social mobility. This suggests a continued need to encourage skills of critical engagement with literature in order to challenge accepted discourses and social conventions.
- Given the connections between academic success and social mobility, it would appear that, although there is no explicitly identifiable linkage between the social mobility of new arrivals to the UK and their literacy, the combination of multiple factors (undervalued home language, low economic status, lack of strength in the community) can lead to underachievement. Booktrust may wish further to consider how its programmes reach into communities with records of low social mobility.