

# What impact does socio-economic status have on children's reading?

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## Introduction

Children from low socio-economic backgrounds have a range of barriers to overcome to become proficient readers. This UK study investigates how socio-economic status influences children's engagement with and enjoyment of reading. Over 8,000 pupils aged between 12-17 years were involved in this study into their reading.

The study found that pupils who received free school meals (used in the study as an indicator of low socio-economic status) held more negative attitudes towards reading, rated themselves as less confident readers, and gained less enjoyment from reading than their peers. Pupils also reported having fewer books at home, more limited access to educational materials (books, computers, magazines), and receiving low levels of encouragement from parents to read.

**Keywords:**

United Kingdom; Secondary schools; Socioeconomic background; Reading habits; Gender; Parental involvement

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## **What did the researchers find out about socio-economic status and pupil reading?**

The researchers found that pupils receiving free school meals (used in the study as an indicator of low socio-economic status) consistently experience barriers, both self-imposed and external, which influence their reading. These include:

- attitudes towards reading – pupils held generally negative attitudes towards reading;
- reading enjoyment – pupils, especially boys stated that they do not enjoy reading at all and never or almost never read outside school;
- reading confidence – pupils were less confident readers than their peers;
- access to educational materials (books, computers, magazines) – pupils had more limited access to educational materials and had fewer books at home than their peers; and
- parental influence – pupils reported that their parents read at home less and received less encouragement to read, especially from their fathers.

## **What role does the home and family play in children’s reading?**

The home and family were found to play important roles in children’s literacy. However the link between socio-economic status and reading was found to be mediated by a range of factors such as access to educational materials and parents’ attitude to reading.

### **Access to educational materials**

Access to educational materials, such as books, computers, magazines and a desk of their own are recognised as influencing pupils’ academic attainment. The researchers found that reading and enjoyment were related to the number of books at home. The data showed that pupils receiving free school meals had more limited access to educational materials than other pupils.

<b>Educational materials at home</b>	<b>Free School Meals</b>	<b>Non Free School Meals</b>
Computer	82%	93%
Own desk	61%	75%
Own books	83%	90%
Access to newspapers	63%	73%

An important finding of the study was the pupils receiving free school meals who had no books of their own enjoyed reading less and rated themselves as less confident readers than their peers.

### **Parental influence**

Parents are key role-models for children, and their behaviour and attitudes have a significant influence on children’s motivation to learn and their reading behaviours. Parents who read for pleasure were found to positively influence children to see reading as a worthwhile and valuable activity. The study found that pupils receiving free school meals reported lower levels of parental reading at home and less encouragement to read.

### **Pupil attitudes towards reading**

All pupils involved in the study agreed that reading is an important life skill. More of the pupils who received free school meals believed that reading is boring and hard saying that they struggle to find books that interest them. Interestingly, these pupils were also more likely to say that they enjoyed going to the school library than pupils not receiving free school meals.

### **Reading enjoyment**

The majority of pupils receiving free school meals, especially boys stated that they do not enjoy reading at all and that they never or almost never read outside school and again boys were highest in this category.

There were surprising differences in the reasons given by pupils for why they read. A high proportion of pupils receiving free school meals said that they read to help them get a job, while pupils not receiving free school meals read for fun.

### **Encouraging pupils to read more**

The researchers considered ways to encourage pupils to read more, and found that all pupils said that they would read more if they had more time. Pupils receiving free school meals also indicated that they would read more if:

- books contained more pictures;
- books were read aloud to them;
- libraries were closer;

- they found reading easier;
- they received more family encouragement; and
- had better eyesight.

### **What impact does gender have on children's reading?**

The study identified a significant gender difference between boys and girls in attitudes they held towards reading for pupils receiving free school meals. Girls were found to be outperforming boys in all areas of literacy and experiencing more reading achievement and enjoyment than boys. The researchers found that boys predominantly held more negative attitudes towards reading, stating that "reading is for girls", is boring and that they struggle to find books that interest them.

The researchers made a link between boys' reading and parental influence, specifically the importance of fathers as role-models for boys' reading attitudes and behaviours. Other research supports this finding by demonstrating that boys are more likely to improve their socio-economic status if their father shows an interest in their education.

### **In what way does socio-economic status influence children's reading?**

This research study draws on a comprehensive review of previous research into how socio-economic status shapes and inhibits readers. Reading for pleasure has been found to influence children's writing ability, vocabulary and general knowledge.

Previous research has shown that children who struggle to read have been found to be less motivated as readers, and as a result their opportunities to learn decrease. This leads to negative attitudes towards reading and creates a vicious circle where poor readers remain poor readers. Other research ([Parson and Bynner 2002](#)) has found that people with poor basic skills (including literacy) tend to experience a lower quality of life. Connections have been made between health practices, mental health, employment prospects, repeat offending and poor basic skills such as literacy.

### **What were the aims and design of the study?**

The study aimed to investigate the link between socio-economic status and reading by examining children's reading habits. The National Literacy Trust conducted a survey of pupils' reading habits for 8,206 pupils from 57 primary and 41 secondary schools in England. The pupils involved in the study ranged in ages from 5 to 17 years old, the majority of pupils were 12 (27.9%) and 13 (21.1%) years old. There was an even split between boys (52.9%) and girls (47.1%) in the sample.

Pupils completed a 23-point self-report questionnaire about their attitudes and enjoyment of reading, access to books and reading materials in the home, and parental involvement and influence on reading.

Pupils also reported whether they received free school meals, this was used by the researchers as an indicator of socio-economic status of the pupils and their families. At the primary school level 11.9% of pupils were receiving free school meals and at secondary level it was 11.5%, these figures are representative of national take-up figures (primary 14.5% and secondary 10.7%). The researchers identify that free school meals are often used as an indicator of socio-economic status recognising that this can be misleading indicator as it excludes pupils whose parents are on low income but not receiving income support.

## **What are the implications of the study for practitioners?**

In completing this digest the author began to ask the following questions about the implications for teachers and school leaders:

### Teachers

- Are the reading materials available to your pupils reflecting their interests? Could the range of reading materials be expanded to include websites, comics and magazines to appeal to a broader range of interests?
- What strategies are you using positively to engage pupils with reading and books? Have you considered replacing book reports with some thing more contemporary such as writing reviews and recommendations of books for websites similar to those found on Amazon?

### School leaders

- In what way could your school further develop a culture in which all pupils are encouraged to become enthusiastic readers? For example by scheduling visits to the local library.
- Children's engagement with reading at home was found to be important, could you do more to encourage reading at home? Has your school considered lending books to pupils to take home that are specifically chosen for reading with parents and accompanying these with written activities parents can do with their children?
- The study has identified that children are influenced by their parents, and that boys especially copy their father's reading habits. Could you address this issue in your school by specifically targeting 'sons and fathers' to promote reading for enjoyment?

## **Where can I find out more?**

Practitioners may be interested in other TRIPS summaries on reading and the benefits of parental interaction with children. Please have a look at the following:

*The effects of interactive reading homework and parent involvement on children's inference responses.* Available at:

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/literacy/interactivehomeworkandparents/> [Accessed: 24/08/06]

This study investigates the strategies teachers in the US have used to increase the level of parental involvement in pupils' homework, focusing on reading ability.

*Parental Involvement in raising the Achievement of Primary School Pupils: why bother?*

Available at:

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/parents/raisingachievement/> [Accessed: 24/08/06]

This study looks at the reasons for parental involvement in children's education and the role of parents as the first teachers of children and builders of learning identities.

*Parent academic involvement as related to school behaviour, achievement, and aspirations: Demographic variations across adolescence.* Available at:

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/parents/parentacademicinvolvement/> [Accessed: 24/08/06]

US based study investigating the ways in which demographic background (socio-economic status and ethnicity) influence parental involvement in children's schooling and how this affects achievement, aspirations and behaviour.

The National Literacy Trust website holds resources and information on their initiatives to promote reading for pleasure and a reading culture in schools.

Further information about the Reading Connects initiative can be found at:

<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/readingconnects/index.html> [Accessed: 08/02/07] and the

Reading Champions can be found at:

<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/campaign/Champions/index.html> [Accessed: 08/02/07].

The Internet 4 Classrooms (I4C) is a US website providing a vast range of resources for parents wanting to become more involved with their children's development

<http://www.internet4classrooms.com/parents.htm> [Accessed: 24/08/06].

This TRIPS study draws on a number of publications which are available online and contain summaries of the key information:

Blanden, J. (2006) *'Bucking the trend': What enables those who are disadvantaged in childhood to succeed later in life* Working paper No.31 London: Department for Work and Pensions. Available at:

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/WP31.pdf#search=%22blanden%20%2B%20bucking%20the%20trend%22> [Accessed: 24/08/06]

Parsons, S. and Bynner, J. (2002) *Basic skills and social exclusion: Findings from a study of adults born in 1970* Basic Skills Agency, London. Available at:

<http://www.renewal.net/Documents/RNET/Research/Basicssocial.pdf> [Accessed: 31/01/07]

This is an electronic version of the report, giving a detailed insight into the relationship between education and social exclusion.