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Children researching links between poverty and literacy

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Mary Kellett and Aqsa Dar

This report offers a unique insight into what we can learn from children about education and poverty when we empower them as researchers.

Two groups of six children (aged eleven) in two UK primary schools – one in an area of socio-economic advantage and one in an area of socio-economic disadvantage – were trained in research methods. They were supported to undertake their own research projects about aspects of literacy, which they identified themselves. Areas explored include:

- homework experiences

- learning environments and

- how confidence affects literacy.

These research studies provide rich descriptions of children's own literacy experiences, generating data that is not easily accessible to adults. The absence of power relations in the data collection by having child researchers means that the responses are untainted by efforts to 'please the adult'.

This report will be of interest to teachers, educationalists, government bodies, policy makers and anyone with an interest in connections between education and poverty.

JOSEPH ROWNTREE
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Executive summary

This report is based on a small-scale, nine-month project, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) as part of its Education and Poverty programme. The JRF Education and Poverty programme aims to challenge some of the assumptions of the UK educational system, and uncover why it continues to fail low-income families and other disadvantaged groups. The report explores one discrete area within that larger programme – what can we learn about education and poverty through children's own eyes when we empower them as active researchers? Literacy opportunity was chosen as the focus because of a strong body of evidence pointing to reading proficiency as a route out of poverty. Literacy is a pivotal part of education and a platform on which much curricular endeavour is built. It is also an area of the curriculum that has been under the spotlight in the last decade, and this report challenges some of the assumptions about our understanding of, and approaches to, reading. Furthering our understanding of links between poverty and literacy opportunities can inform policy development and ultimately help to address the 'literacy poverty gap'. Crucially, this report provides evidence hitherto missing from the body of current research knowledge: children's *own* perspectives on literacy opportunities accessed *by* children themselves.

Brief description of the project

Two groups of six children (aged 11 years) in two UK primary schools – one in an area of socio-economic advantage and one in an area of socio-economic disadvantage – underwent a programme of research training and were supported to undertake their own research projects about aspects of literacy that interested or concerned them. The extent to which poverty could be identified as an inhibiting factor was addressed through adult analysis of the children's studies. This was done to avoid any possible distress or stigmatisation being occasioned to children through being labelled, or labelling themselves, as 'in poverty'. Thus the two groups of children worked independently of each another and then gave their informed consent for adult researchers to do some comparative analysis on their individual research studies. An Advisory Group supported the project throughout.

The children's research studies

Six research studies were carried out by the children.

- *How confidence affects literacy at our school.*

- *Children's attitudes to literacy homework in our school.*

- *What do children think and feel about TV and literacy?*

- *Do you have any difficulties with your homework?*

- *What environments do children like doing their homework in?*

- *Children and spelling.*

These research studies, spontaneously designed by children themselves, provided rich descriptions of children's own literacy experiences and generated data that is not easily accessible to adults. The studies gave voice to the children's own perspective and provided windows into their literacy worlds. The simplicity of the children's questions and of the language in their questionnaires and interviews elicited open and honest responses from their peers. The absence of power relations in the collection of data from children by a child researcher ensured that children's responses were untainted by efforts to 'please the adult'. This was evident in that some children were comfortable talking of their parents being too interfering and controlling about their homework, and some were prepared to admit to books being pointless – views that might not have been offered as freely to an adult researcher.

Main findings

The pictures painted through the 11-year-old researchers' projects were of children from affluent backgrounds exuding literacy confidence derived from a variety of opportunities: routine support for homework, parental oracy (speaking and listening) role models, favourable environments for reading and writing, absence of distractions and opportunities to talk about literacy. By contrast, children from poorer backgrounds had few, if any, of these opportunities. For them homework clubs were a lifeline.

An important self-development strategy uncovered in the children's reports was the need to 'practise your private confidence' before you could develop 'public confidence'. Children identified reading aloud and writing as activities requiring 'public confidence', and needed a lot of 'private' practice. A striking characteristic of children from affluent backgrounds was how easy it was for them to access opportunities for 'private confidence' building whereas children from low-income backgrounds had little, if any, opportunity for this.

Implications for policy and practice

There are two headline research findings. The first points to homework clubs as an essential resource for children in poverty and an important means of developing literacy. The second indicates that children in poverty do not have opportunities to build literacy confidence compared to their more socio-economically advantaged peers. In terms of implications for policy and practice, the findings translate into a number of approaches that may increase literacy opportunities for children living in poverty. These are summarised below.

1 Creating environments in classrooms that afford children opportunities to build their literacy confidence 'privately'. This could be done in a number of ways including:
   ■ providing opportunities for children to read quietly or read to younger pupils in non-threatening environments
   ■ facilitating 'private' writing opportunities for children.

2 Providing homework clubs and ensuring they are accessible to the children who need them the most.

3 Offering help and training to parents to support their children with literacy.

4 Using Extended Schools' core provision services to bridge some of the gaps both at child and parent level.

Introduction and rationale

This small-scale, nine-month project has been funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of its Education and Poverty programme. It explores one discrete area within that larger programme – what can we learn about education and poverty through children's own eyes when we empower them as active researchers? As such, it provides some research evidence hitherto missing from the body of current knowledge: children's *own* perspectives on literacy opportunities accessed *by* children themselves. Literacy was chosen for the research focus because of the strong body of evidence pointing to reading proficiency as a road out of poverty. Children from poorer families often do not have the same access to books in their home environment as children from affluent families and many may not have willing adults who will either read with them (some adults may themselves have poor literacy skills or English may not be their first language) or take them to libraries. Overcrowded living conditions also limit quality reading opportunities. More understanding about the impact of poverty on literacy opportunities in the home can inform policy and practice in the classroom, particularly with regard to strategies to compensate for identified disadvantages. Other research where the effect of poverty has been shown to have a detrimental effect on learning – for example, poor nutrition – has had positive impacts on policy and practice, such as the creation of breakfast clubs and improved school lunch initiatives.

This report is divided into five chapters. The first is a review of the literature situating literacy opportunities within pedagogical theory and policy practice frameworks relating to links between education and poverty. Chapter 2 focuses on the methodology of the study, its aims and objectives, and a description of how the project was carried out. Chapter 3 summarises the child researchers' findings and presents some examples of raw data to illustrate child perspective and child voice in the ways the data was collected. Chapter 4 summarises the adult researchers' findings from their analysis of the child data. Chapter 5 draws together adult and child findings, and discusses the implications of these for policy and practice.

1 Literature review

There is a substantial body of knowledge linking poverty to educational underachievement (e.g. Haverman and Wolfe, 1995; Mortimore and Whitty, 1997; Strand, 1999; Croll, 2002; Machin and McNally, 2006). One of the dominant issues within this debate is the 'literacy achievement gap' for children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Clark and Foster, 2005; Clark and Akerman, 2006). Poor literacy skills as a child can be a predictor of adult exclusion (Parsons and Bynner, 2002). However, the research is not entirely negative – Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) argue that engagement in reading can compensate positively for low family income and educational background. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2002), while acknowledging the causal relationship between educational underachievement and social exclusion, maintains that this is not irreversible and that engaging children in reading might be one of the most effective ways to bring about social change. The impact of recent government policies on spending patterns shows that low-income families are no longer lagging behind more affluent families on the proportion of income they spend on toys, books and games that promote children's learning and development (Gregg *et al.*, 2005). Expenditure on these items has increased faster than expenditure on other items and Gregg *et al.* state that low-income families with young children have particularly increased their spending on children's books. These figures are proportional to income and therefore the overall amount that translates into book resources is still very small for low-income families, but an encouraging trend nevertheless.

Reading for pleasure has been associated with increased literacy attainment, wider vocabulary and greater general knowledge (Cox and Guthrie, 2001). Baker *et al.* (2000) have shown that *motivation* is a key factor and, if children cannot be motivated to read, they risk losing out on other aspects of education too because literacy is a passport to so many other curriculum areas. If education is acknowledged as a route out of poverty, then reading proficiency has to be a key driver within that. However, despite all the rhetoric, this is still not happening. Raising literacy standards has been a primary government target for over a decade and, while there have been some pockets of improvement, these are not as widespread as had been hoped for. In 2005, the Commons Education Select Committee reported that the number of children entering secondary school with poor levels of literacy was unacceptably high. Current policies do not appear to be solving the problem nor addressing core issues of poverty as a barrier to reading proficiency. Solutions are not simple or straightforward. There are layers of complexity, both within and beyond the classroom, around what we understand by literacy itself, the factors we identify that influence it and the impact of government policies at classroom level. Fisher (2002)

shows us that the ability to read is the key to educational achievement. Without a basic foundation in literacy, children cannot gain access to a rich and diverse curriculum. Poor literacy limits opportunities, not only at school, but also throughout life, both economically and in terms of a wider enjoyment and appreciation of the written word.

Reading proficiency as a route out of poverty

So far, we have established two principles: first, that reading proficiency can be a key route out of poverty and, second, that this is not happening widely enough or rapidly enough. We need to have a better understanding of why this is not happening so that we can address, strategically, the challenges and barriers. The literature suggests that the National Literacy Strategy (launched in 1998) is not providing opportunities for children to read individually or motivating children sufficiently to read for pleasure. Neuman and Celano's (2001) research showed that children from deprived backgrounds do not enjoy reading as much as peers from more affluent backgrounds.

The PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) report compared the reading skills of 140,000 ten-year-olds in 35 countries (see Twist *et al.*, 2003). In this broader context, English ten-year-old readers fared well by comparison, coming in third behind Sweden and the Netherlands, and were placed higher than any other English-speaking country. However, that position was artificially boosted by the achievements of our more able readers who are world leaders (above Sweden and Netherlands) whereas our least able readers were at the bottom of the rankings, below their equivalents in former Eastern-Bloc countries like Latvia, Lithuania and Hungary. Our least able readers are largely populated by children in poverty. The Pirls report found a strong overlap between high reading ability and enjoyment of reading for fun outside of school. The report also found that 27 per cent of English ten-year-olds said they 'never or almost never' read for fun outside of school. It would appear that we need to look beyond the debates about relative merits of different teaching approaches in the classroom to a more holistic view of reading experiences for clues as to the large disparity between our most able and least able readers.

Clark and Akerman's (2006) survey found 8 per cent more children in receipt of free school meals reporting never or 'almost never' reading outside the school environment compared with their non-free-school-meals peers. Perhaps even more telling were figures that showed 18.2 per cent of children in receipt of free school meals had less than ten books in the home (2.6 per cent had zero books), compared

to 7.9 per cent of their non-free-school-meals peers. Furthermore, Clark and Akerman found a significant positive relationship between reading enjoyment and children having their own books at home, which was found to have a direct link with reading confidence levels. Other findings, such as less role modelling of reading by parents in low socio-economic households, all point to the widening opportunity gap and the difficulties of breaking a cycle where low socio-economic status continually compounds disadvantage.

Added into the equation is a further disadvantage for some children from poorer backgrounds who find it bewildering to adjust to teachers' use of language that does not concur with their pre-school experiences (e.g. see Tizard and Hughes, 1984). Comic, though it may be, Laurie Lee's reference in *Cider with Rosie* to a disappointing first day at school because he never got the gift his teacher had promised him (the teacher had told him to 'sit there for the present') still enjoys poignant currency today. Over-emphasis on Standard English in the first months of schooling can deskill children who arrive with different, albeit culturally rich, language experiences from their home environment. We need to craft our teaching in ways that are responsive to these. A more inclusive approach and a widening of our understanding of what constitutes 'literacy' can help to develop the literacy potential of such children. (Au, 1998; Robertson, 2002).

There is considerable data showing that boys' attitudes to reading are more negative than girls. According to Clark and Akerman (2006), a significantly larger number of boys perceive reading as boring and 'girly' and report being unable to find books that interest them. Fathers as reading role models are much rarer than mothers and significantly rarer in low socio-economic households. This would put boys from low socio-economic backgrounds at a triple disadvantage. Government statistics bear out the widening achievement gap between girls and boys, and would suggest that boys from low socio-economic households should be at the top of our action agenda.

Bridging the gap

Valuing the cultural diversity of language experiences that children bring to school will not in itself bridge the gap. Some regard structural disadvantage as pervasive because the upper socio-economic groups have superior access to resources, wealth and power (Lynch, 1999). The question that this research is interested in is – what can schools do to bridge the gap? In order to explore this question we need to have an understanding of literacy in its recent historical and political contexts.

A decade of national literacy strategies

A literacy 'task force' was established in 1996 with the purpose of developing strategies for raising literacy standards in English primary schools. Although the interim report included a chapter on addressing disadvantage and how the Government would make provision for extra staff and resources to be directed into poorer areas, this chapter was omitted from the final report. Educationalists were concerned about this:

> We welcomed the Government's recognition that social advantage is a
> factor in educational achievement [a reference to the interim report]; I
> hope that the new document [the final report] is not a retreat.
> (NUT Head of Education, John Bangs, as quoted in *the TES*,
> 19 September 1997)

In 1998–99, a 'national year of reading' campaign was launched to raise the profile of reading and to encourage parents to spend 20 minutes a day helping their children to read. The campaign was funded by government and private sponsors such as supermarkets who ran free book schemes. Three main conclusions emerged. The first of these was a need to effect a change in attitude to reading among different audiences, particularly male role models. The second highlighted the important role that libraries could play in developing readers and the third underlined how much could be achieved when agencies worked together in partnership to promote reading in society. Many positives came out of the national year of reading campaign but the gap between the most able and least able readers was still wide.

The national year of reading campaign accompanied the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998), an initiative to address the problem of the persistent literacy underachievement of a significant percentage of children. Its primary aim was to raise achievement in traditional school-based literacy to 85 per cent of children attaining Level 4 or above at age 11 (end of Primary School Key Stage 2 tests). This challenged the idea that social background largely determines school performance.

When it was first launched, The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) was regarded by some as an unprecedented opportunity for more effective teaching methods to be used as a way of raising standards (see Beard, 1999). Others regarded NLS as curriculum at its most prescriptive – objectives driven, didactic, public and uniform. All children were to be given access to the same style and same content in their literacy lessons (DfEE, 1998). Mroz *et al* (2000) found, in an analysis of transcripts of ten literacy hours, that interactive whole-class teaching was mainly teacher dominated, with the teacher controlling the agenda. Fisher's (2002) research, based on 170

hours of observation of 20 teachers teaching the literacy hour, similarly critiqued the didactic approach, which left little room for pupils to engage with content. The same approach was assumed to suit all contexts and all types of learners. This directly contradicted long-standing pedagogical theory about flexible teaching approaches that embrace learner style diversity, nor did the teacher-dominated model draw on classical pedagogical scaffolding models such as Bruner (1977) or Vygotsky (1962). It brought about a dissolution of individual reading time and a loss of opportunity for exploratory talk around reading texts where children can draw on their individual experiences. Children are unlikely to fully engage with the texts they read unless they are able to bring their own experiences to their reading, enabling them to predict, visualise, compare, assess and evaluate.

Sainsbury and Schagen's (2004) research for the National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER) compared children's attitudes to reading to those of five years earlier and claimed that children's enjoyment of reading had significantly declined since 1998. This was particularly true of older boys. Compared with 1998, they found that children are more likely to prefer watching television to reading and less likely to enjoy going to the library. Reading comics, however, was an exception to the pattern, maintaining a similar level of popularity to 1998.

NLS has responded to critical evaluation in a positive way and has implemented changes to the literacy hour that have led to more creative and flexible ways of facilitation. Where teachers have been able to adapt the literacy hour into more child-centred models, there have been good outcomes across the ability range (e.g. see Hanke, 2002). There was increasing recognition of the importance of a child-centred and context-centred approach to literacy underpinned by the Government's publication of *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfEE, 2003a). This document had five principal goals.

1   Every primary school is unique and different. The strategy will support schools to continue to build and develop their own ethos and character.

2   Schools should take greater ownership of the curriculum and be more innovative and creative about how they teach and run the school.

3   Targets, tests and tables should be used to maximise the progress of all children and help parents and the public to understand more about the progress of the school.

4   The Government will do more to remove constraints and increase the scope for school autonomy.

5   The Government will keep a strong focus on standards by maintaining the target for 85 per cent of all primary school children to reach Level 4 at Key Stage 2 as soon as possible.

In 2006, a renewed version of the primary literacy strategy was introduced in response to *Every Child Matters* and to the new emphasis on personalised learning initiatives (DfES, 2006). The new structure offers more flexibility and a broader pedagogical base. While it offers nothing specifically targeted at literacy and poverty, there are some positive steps that may help children in poverty. For example, there is a greater emphasis on oral language skills, reading for pleasure and children's individual reading – all areas that had been neglected at the expense of testing and league tables.

Providing opportunities

If we accept the findings in the literature and acknowledge that literacy proficiency can be a route out of poverty, then raising standards takes on a moral imperative. Easy access to good quality books, redressing some of the balance between children's public and private engagement with literacy and increasing male reader role models are all measures that address this. But the most powerful strategy is to create cultures that promote reading *enjoyment.* This is likely to make the biggest impact on literacy proficiency. Reading is an 'unparalleled means of recreation and personal discovery' (Fisher, 2002, p. 5) and we have to ensure that children living in poverty are afforded better opportunities to experience this. Well-known children's authors (among them Philip Pullman, Quentin Blake, Jamila Gavin, Michael Rosen, Bernard Ashley and Jacqueline Wilson) wrote a collection of essays titled 'Waiting for a Jamie Oliver: beyond bog-standard literacy', in which they protested about having extracts from their books being used as texts for language and comprehension exercises within the literacy hour, rather than children being allowed to simply enjoy them (*The Guardian*, 8 November 2005).

2 Methodology

Aims and objectives of the study

- To increase our understanding of the impact of poverty on children's experiences of literacy.

- To empower a group of 11-year-olds to research their experiences of literacy in school and home environments.

- To respect children as experts on their own literacy experiences, give voice to their perspectives and value the unique knowledge they bring to our understanding of children's literacy.

- To support children to disseminate their findings so that they can inform policy and practice.

- To avoid poverty stigmatisation or poverty self-labelling being occasioned to participating children.

- To raise awareness of issues related to poverty and literacy opportunities.

- To influence policy and practice in ways that will help to overcome educational impoverishment of low-income families.

Advisory Group

An Advisory Group was set up to support this project. It consisted of two young people, a representative from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), a representative from the JRF Education and Poverty programme, a link teacher from one of the schools involved in the study, an external academic with an expertise in children's literacy and the two authors of this report.

Participation

In the current climate of participation and consultation (DfEE, 2003b; Children Act 2004), children's views are frequently sought (Hart, 1997; Kirby and Bryson, 2002; Sinclair, 2004). However, there is much criticism (Alderson, 2000; Kellett *et al.*, 2004) of the tokenistic nature of this and its adult orientation. Sometimes children are involved as participants, even as co-researchers, but this is commonly at a data-collection level only and it is adults who formulate the research questions, design the methodologies, analyse the data and disseminate the findings. Adult filters are at work at every stage of the research process and adult–child power relations predominate. One way to minimise adult filters and maximise child voice is to hand over the research reins to children themselves, and empower them as active researchers in their own right so that they lead the research from conception to completion with adult *support* rather than adult *management.* Until recently, scepticism about children's ability to engage with empirical research was centred on age and competence barriers. This has been supplanted by an acknowledgement that social experience is a more reliable marker of maturity and competence. Children's competence is 'different' from adults' not 'lesser' (Waksler, 1991; Solberg, 1996). The claim that children do not have sufficient knowledge and understanding to investigate subjects in any depth does not stand up to close scrutiny (Kellett, 2005). To dismiss the research efforts of children as simplistic and conclude that adults could research the topics more effectively misses several important points.

■ Children succeed in getting responses from within their peer group in ways that would not be possible for adult researchers because of power and generational issues.

■ Their work generates a body of knowledge about children's experiences from genuine child perspectives.

■ The dissemination of research carried out by them, and, crucially, owned by them, is an important vehicle for child voice.

■ The experience of participating as active researchers is an empowering process that leads to a virtuous circle of increased confidence and raised self-esteem. This results in more active participation by children in other aspects affecting their lives.

One of the limiting factors is that children do not have the empirical research skills to undertake their own investigations. However, barriers to empowering children as active researchers are not centred on their lack of adult status but their lack

of research skills. This barrier is being systematically deconstructed by a recent initiative, the Children's Research Centre at the Open University (Kellett, 2003, 2005; Kellett *et al.*, 2004), which has pioneered a research skills training programme for children and exists to empower and support them as active researchers in their own right (see http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk). The expertise developed in the Children's Research Centre has been drawn on extensively in this project in order to train and support children to research aspects of literacy that interest or concern them.

School profiles

The project was undertaken in collaboration with two schools in socio-economically contrasting locations. The two schools were distinct in terms of their social and economic background, and were purposively chosen to reflect perceived affluence and poverty. The chosen schools were in different counties and 50 miles apart. Pseudonyms have been used for the schools and children to preserve confidentiality and anonymity.

Riverside Primary is in the centre of a university-dominated town where a large percentage of the parents of pupils are academics. The SATs results for the school are above average and the free school meal rate, at 10 per cent, is the national average. The Headteacher views the parents as predominantly middle class. A striking feature of the school is parental involvement in school-based issues, as well as the social contacts that parents have formed with each other.

Valley Town Primary is located in a deprived area near the centre of a large city. The free school meal rate is 72 per cent, although no hot dinners are available in the school because there is no kitchen. SATs results for 2006 for KS2 were judged by Ofsted to be so low that the school was put into special measures. The intake of children has recently changed as a result of a large Somali refugee community moving into the catchment area. This has increased racial tensions within the community and is something that has also affected the school.

Participants

Information leaflets describing a proposal that a group of six Year 6 pupils (11-year-olds) would have the opportunity to be trained in research process by university staff via an extra-curricular research club and then supported to undertake their own research on an aspect of literacy that interested them were provided to each school. The information leaflets provided enough information in child-friendly language for children to be able to make informed decisions about participation. Assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were given and an understanding that children could withdraw their consent at any time, for any reason. Participants were self-nominating (in consultation with their parents and school staff). In the event, all parents and children willingly signed consent forms, there was a 100 per cent attendance and none subsequently withdrew (although one child at Valley School did not completely finish his study). An overview of the training sessions provided for the children is outlined in Table 1.

Children's Research Centre training resources, which had been developed and piloted to facilitate children's interactive engagement with research processes, balancing knowledge transfer sessions with games, role play and group discussions, were used. Towards the end of the training, children had several sessions brainstorming what they understood by literacy and what aspects of literacy were important to them. They then chose their own research topics and developed questions around their interests and what they deemed to be important. A lot of attention was paid to ethical considerations and to practical aspects of their data collection. The children could choose to work individually, in pairs or threes. Six projects in total were completed by the children.

Table 1 Overview of pupil research training sessions

Week 1	What is literacy?
Week 2	What is research?
Week 3	Different types of research (overview)
Week 4	Your research question
Week 5	(Supervision) plus questionnaires
Week 6	Questionnaires
Week 7	Questionnaires
Week 8	Interview techniques
Week 9	Observation techniques
Week 10	Analysing qualitative data
Week 11	Analysing quantitative data
Week 12	Presenting your research

Ethical considerations

An ethical dilemma dominated our thinking from the outset. How could we avoid children identifying themselves as 'poor' if we were to explore links between literacy opportunities and poverty, since this would inevitably involve comparative data? Numerous research studies (e.g. see Hastings and Dean, 2000) attest to the harm and distress that can be caused when children realise they are being stigmatised as 'poor'. Even the potential for this to happen would be ethically unacceptable. We needed to find a different approach. We judged that, if two independent projects were run in different areas instead of one comparative project, the children would not be aware they had been identified for any poverty or affluence reason and could enjoy engaging in their own self-determined research around children's perspectives of literacy at a micro-level. The data they would collect in their different socio-economic environments would be richly insightful, and links between poverty and literacy opportunities could be extracted at a macro-level by adult researchers (with the child researchers' informed consent), thus avoiding the children in any comparative activity that might lead to self-labelling and stigmatisation. In other words, the project would involve two phases: a micro-phase in which the children engaged in their own child-led research about literacy and a macro-phase in which adults analysed the children's research studies for emerging thematic poverty links.

3 Findings from the children's research studies

This chapter presents the research studies undertaken by the children themselves. These appear independently and in summary form (interested readers can find the full text of the children's individual studies on the Children's Research Centre website http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk). It is important to remind readers that these children are 11 years old and the style of researching and reporting is in keeping with their age. In valuing their contribution, no attempt has been made to alter the character of this, so, for instance, when children express their findings in percentages for relatively small population samples (commonly between 30 and 90 participants in the various studies), this has been respected and retained. Percentage expression and bar charts are popular tools for this age group and help them, at their child level, to make sense of and analyse their findings. Readers should also bear in mind that, because the child researchers were self-nominating, there are ability variances across the studies. A subsection of this chapter is titled 'Child perspective and voice', in which some extracts from children's original data are included to illustrate the richness of the child–child dimension. Learning that can be gained from looking across the projects is explored in the adult analysis in Chapter 4.

The children at Riverside Primary chose to work in two groups of three and the children at Valley Town Primary chose to work individually and in one pair producing six small-scale research projects in total (one child did not completely finish).

Summary studies

Research study 1 (Riverside School): *How confidence affects literacy at our school*

In brainstorming sessions, the child researchers identified that confidence was a significant factor in educational achievement and wanted to explore levels of confidence children felt in their literacy skills. Three children worked together to design and distribute an anonymous questionnaire to children (aged nine, ten and 11) in Years 4, 5 and 6 to try and gauge this using Likert-style measurement scales. The return rate was 80 from 91. The questions they framed were very simple and, because they were directed child–child, the young researchers felt confident that their peers would respond more openly and honestly than they might do to adult questionnaires. The following areas were explored.

- How good do you think you are at reading?

- How good do you think you are at writing?

- How often do you read aloud in class?

- How do you feel when talking in front of the whole class?

- How often do you put your hand up if a teacher asks a question about a book?

- If you do not like putting your hand up sometimes, why is that?

- Do you prefer to work alone or in a small group?

- When you work in a small group, how do you feel?

- Do you think you would enjoy reading to a child younger than you?

- How do you feel when you work alone?

- Are you ever tempted to copy because you're not sure of your own answer?

- How often do you take pride in your literacy work?

Findings from this school in a socio-economic area of advantage showed that, of the 80 participants, 100 per cent of the girls and 88 per cent of the boys rated their reading ability highly. Reading was taken to mean quiet reading and children viewed this as a sign of an inner or private confidence. Confidence in their speaking skills was also strong, with 80 per cent of children 'not minding explaining their thoughts in class'. The child researchers noticed that those aspects of reading and writing that were 'public' posed greater challenges for children's confidence. Reading out aloud was one of those challenges. More than half the respondents preferred not to read out aloud. Further findings also pointed to children being much less confident in writing than reading.

Consequent upon their findings, the child researchers got together to talk about how they might use their findings to benefit their peers. They approached the Headteacher about setting up a reading initiative where older children could read to younger children in the school. This would provide a non-threatening environment in which to practise and increase confidence in reading aloud. They also thought it would be fun for the younger children and be good for social cohesion across the school.

Research study 2 (Riverside School): *Children's attitudes to literacy homework in our school*

These three child researchers were interested in children's attitudes to literacy homework. They designed their own anonymous questionnaire to explore peers' views on homework and included one unstructured question about how homework could be improved. Ninety-one questionnaires were returned (100 per cent) from pupils in Years 4, 5 and 6. The child researchers followed this up with one-to-one interviews with eight of their peers and a focus group interview with four of their peers. Findings revealed that most children expressed strong dislike towards doing homework. Dislike for literacy homework was interpreted as being due to the amount of writing involved. However, 56 per cent of children liked quiet reading homework. This was much higher than spelling or writing homework, which were unpopular.

Despite their dislike for various aspects of literacy homework, the majority of children at this school agreed that homework helped them to learn and that they needed to do literacy homework to help them get better at literacy. In their analysis, the child researchers identified a tension of not liking homework but yet valuing it too. Eighty of the 91 children reported that they could get help at home with literacy homework if they asked for it. Also, 57 out of the 91 children in the study agreed that the amount of homework that children got was the right level for their age and ability. The focus group interview provided insights into the ways that home cultures impacted on homework, including ways that parents could create favourable conditions for homework. Children also offered views on ideal homework conditions that might inspire them, all of which involved distraction-free environments and many involved having adults around to bounce ideas off.

Research study 3 (Valley School): *What do children think and feel about TV and literacy?*

The idea of this research came about as a result of the child researchers reflecting on their own family experiences. They wanted to understand better how TV impacts on literacy, particularly whether it interfered with time children might otherwise spend reading. They designed and gave out an anonymous questionnaire to 29 Year 6 children (25 returned) and conducted one-to-one interviews with eight children.

For the purpose of this research, watching TV was defined as including watching terrestrial and Sky TV programmes, watching DVDs and playing on PlayStations.

Findings showed that all of the children enjoyed watching TV and that 76 per cent of them enjoyed watching TV 'a lot' – a quarter of children watched TV for more than four hours per day. None of them thought that watching TV was pointless, whereas 10 per cent of them thought reading books was pointless. Forty-four per cent of children preferred to watch TV rather than do any form of literacy activity and 15 per cent of children said that they never read a book at home either by themselves or with another person.

In analysing their findings, the child researchers concluded that children in their year group at school found TV much more appealing than reading and spent large amounts of time watching this or playing on PlayStations. They admitted to going to bed late and feeling tired at school next day.

Research study 4 (Valley School): *Do you have any difficulties with your homework?*

Starting from his own experiences, this child researcher wanted to explore his hunch that literacy homework was difficult for most of his friends. He was interested to find out how difficult or easy children in his Year 6 class found literacy homework. However, rather than ask just about literacy, he chose to frame his enquiry within other homework subjects too, so that he would get not just a sense of how difficult literacy homework might be but also some comparison with other types of homework. He based his research on a self-designed questionnaire to the 29 pupils in his class (return rate 24) and followed this up with 11 one-to-one interviews. The child researcher reported that a large percentage of children found most homework easy. Art and maths homework were the top two favourite subjects. Literacy homework was the least favourite. Forty-five per cent of children got help from their mums (no dads) but there were 17 per cent who got help from nobody. Of those 45 per cent who did get help from their mums, this amounted to five minutes of help per school night. Children got significantly less help with literacy homework than any other subject. Participants explained this as being because literacy was usually a 'big' homework, took longer and needed mum to read some text first before she could help and she often did not have the time to do this so they had to do it on their own. Several children attended a homework club and stated that this was specifically so they could get help from teachers because they couldn't get help at home. Some children even brought homework back to school in order to get help from a teacher and then took it home to do the next night.

Research study 5 (Valley School): *What environments do children like doing their homework in?*

This research wanted to find out about preferred environments for doing homework in. It explored reasons why children might choose to attend a homework club and whether they liked this better than doing homework at home. The child researcher was also interested in what kind of home environments children had to do work in and how distracting these might be, e.g. whether they liked doing their homework in a quiet environment and whether they had distractions at home while they did their homework. The project aimed to get a broad view of this by collecting questionnaire data from 50 children (aged eight and 11) in Years 3 and 6. The child researcher then conducted two focus group interviews with four children in each of the two year groups.

The main findings of this child researcher were that about three-quarters of children[1] attended a homework club because help was available from teachers there and not at home. TV was found to be a distraction for about half of the children, partly because of the noise and partly because, when it was on, children wanted to watch it rather than get on with their homework. The two focus group interviews explored other kinds of distractions that children faced when trying to do homework in their home environments. These included smoking, banging, swearing, loud music and TV.

Research study 6 (Valley School): *Children and spelling*

This pair of child researchers wanted to find out what 60 children (ten and 11-year-olds) in Years 5 and 6 thought about spelling as part of literacy, and in particular what they thought about different ways of learning spellings. An anonymous questionnaire explored the following questions.

- Do you like spelling?

- Do you find spellings easy?

- Are you proud when you get your spellings right?

- Do you think you are a good speller?

- Did your parents help you with spellings when you were little?

- Do your brothers and sisters help you with spellings?

- Do you like it when your teacher helps you with spellings?

- Do you use Spell Check?

- Do you get frustrated with spellings?

Then, in seven one-to-one interviews, one of the child researchers asked about different ways of learning spelling. These are the methods that children found most helpful in learning spellings.

- Repeatedly copying out a word.

- Saying the word out aloud, just as it is spelt.

- Using mnemonics (these are catchy phrases that use the letters of a word in sequence and help to prompt the memory, e.g. a mnemonic for FACE might be 'friendly and cute expression').

- Using computer spelling games.

- Using songs.

Adult comparative analysis of the children's studies can be found in Chapter 4.

Child perspective and voice

Some extracts and examples of children's original work are presented in this section. The purpose of this is to demonstrate child perspective in the design and analysis of their studies. This is evident in the kinds of questions the children chose to ask in their questionnaires and focus group interviews. It is also evident in their comments about what surprised them in their data analysis and how they interpreted these findings at their child level. Four examples are included: a child-designed questionnaire; an extract of raw data; an illustration of child analysis of a questionnaire; and an extract from the transcript of a focus group interview.

Example 1 A child-designed questionnaire

Our names are Tom, Liam and Harry. We are carrying out some research about 'children's attitudes to literacy homework'. We are interested in your views. We will keep you anonymous (your name will not be known) and your answers will be gratefully appreciated. Thank you for your time.

Please circle around your answer

1	Are you:	boy	girl	
2	Are you in Year:	5	6	7

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Circle a number from 0–10 when 10 represents very strong agreement and 0 represents very strong disagreement:

3	I enjoy doing homework	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
4	I find homework boring	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
5	I enjoy literacy homework	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
6	I enjoy spelling homework	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
7	I enjoy reading homework	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
8	I like asking an adult to help me with my spelling homework	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
9	Homework helps children to learn	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
10	We need to do literacy homework to help us to get better at it, whether we like it or not	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
11	I can usually get help at home if I get stuck with my literacy homework	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
12	I like to do my literacy homework by myself	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

(Continued)

13 I like to discuss my work with my family   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

14 I like to use the computer to do my
    literacy homework   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

15 I feel that the amount of literacy homework
    that I am getting is reasonable   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

16 I think that the homework I am getting for
    literacy is right for my age and ability?   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

17 I want more homework   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

18 We could make literacy homework better by

    ....

    ....

    ....

    ....

Example 2 Illustration of child analysis of questionnaire data

We gave out 91 questionnaires in total, to 55 boys and 36 girls. Forty-six children were from Year 5 and 45 were from Year 6.

1 Most children do not enjoy doing homework. When we asked them to rate how much they enjoyed doing homework, 52 of the children expressed disagreement with the statement 'I enjoy doing homework'. Twenty-five children gave the opposite view, and expressed that they enjoyed doing homework. Fourteen children did not express a strong opinion either way, because they circled the number 5 on the ten-point scale. We could say that 35 children didn't really mind doing homework, which is still less than the 52 who do not enjoy doing homework, but is still 43 per cent.

   If we think about the two extreme answers of very strongly agree and very strongly disagree with the statement 'I like homework', we can see that 25

   (Continued)

children strongly disagreed with the statement and only two very strongly agreed. This seems to suggest that asking children if they enjoyed homework has led to a strong response by those who do not enjoy it.

2   A lot of children seemed to agree that they found homework boring. The highest number of children said that they strongly agreed with the statement 'I find homework boring'. Twenty-seven children said that they found it very boring. Fifty-seven children said they found it boring. Only 18 found it interesting. Eighteen answered in the middle.

3   Forty-nine children said that they did not enjoy literacy homework. We thought that this might be because there is a lot of writing involved. Twenty-six children said that they enjoyed literacy homework and 14 were neutral about it.

4   Fifty-three children did not like doing spelling homework. Twenty-eight children did enjoy doing spelling homework. Eleven were neutral about it. It is interesting that, while only eight strongly agreed with liking spelling homework, 23 strongly disliked it.

5   We found that children preferred to do reading homework in literacy. Thirty-seven children said that they enjoyed doing reading homework. Although 39 said that they did not enjoy doing reading homework, this was less than the number that enjoyed doing spelling homework and literacy homework generally. Also, we thought that, because 14 children circled the number 5 on the ten-point scale, this meant that they thought reading homework was OK. This increases the number of children who like reading homework to 51. This is 56 per cent.

6   Quite a lot of children do like asking an adult to help them with their spelling homework. The number was 43. But 26 of the children felt strongly against the idea of getting help with their spelling homework from an adult. In fact, 48 children did not like asking an adult to help them with their spelling homework, 32 do like asking and a further 12 did not mind.

7   We asked the question: 'Does homework help children to learn?' We were surprised to see that the majority of children agreed that homework helps children to learn. Fifty-seven children said homework helps children to learn. Twenty-nine thought homework does not help children to learn. Only seven neither agreed or disagreed with this. But 28 strongly agreed that homework helped them to learn. This was the highest scoring answer.

(Continued)

8   Another surprising result was that 52 children agreed that they needed to do literacy homework to help them get better at literacy, whether they liked it or not. In fact, 30 children strongly agreed with this! While 24 children disagreed with this, only ten strongly disagreed and seven disagreed slightly. The majority of children realise that they need to do literacy homework to help them get better at literacy, whether they like to do that homework or not.

9   Most children can get help with their literacy homework at home. Only four could not usually get help with homework. Fifty-one answered very strongly that they could get help if they were stuck. Seventy-two said they could get help with homework.

10 Slightly more children preferred to do literacy homework by themselves, rather than with others. Thirty-seven preferred to do it by themselves, but 32 liked to do it with others. Twenty-one didn't mind whether they did it by themselves or not.

11 Thirty-eight children did not like discussing their homework with their family. Forty-one liked to discuss their homework with their family. Nine children had no strong opinions either way.

12 Most children preferred to use the computer to do their literacy homework. Forty-seven preferred it and 29 did not. Twelve did not hold an opinion either way.

13 Another surprising result was that most children agreed that the amount of homework they got was reasonable. Forty-seven thought it was reasonable, but 31 thought the opposite. Ten children circled number 5 on the ten-point scale.

14 Fifty-seven children agreed that the homework they were getting was the right level for their age and ability. Twenty disagreed with this. Ten children circled number 5 on the ten-point scale.

15 And, finally, most children did not want more homework. Eighty-three children said that they did not want more homework and two people said that they did.

Example 3 A sample of raw data

Some responses given to the open-ended question for how homework could be improved.

Being more interesting

getting no homework

having more fun activities at the end of your homework, like a wordsearch

smaller sheets plz

not giving it to us

giving us less and helping us understand

not having any – having less

less amount of homework and fun topics

don't give us any. Please don't, please don't!!!

less homework more interesting subjects in literacy

Nothing

many go on game *[referring to question 14]*

making presentations

better activities. More fun

making it more interesting and interactive and having funnier activities

By varying the subject and amount

have a bit less homework

making it adventurous, fun

making it fun

(Continued)

Explaining it on the sheet

more explanation on sheet

making it so we can use the computer. Make literacy homework more adventurous

making it more enjoyable

giving more reading homework

giving us less

no homework

giving us homework that gives us the independence to choose what we want to write about

doing fings like drawing

putting a bit more fun into it

making it more fun and get more activitys for it

making It a little less dull

letting it be more fun and people to enjoy it

making funnier questions

having pictures on the sheet. Keeping it simple

making it easier to get stuck into it

making less homework

having less of it

adding in games and making sure it's not too easy

Less

(Continued)

making it harder, and easier to understand

write about things that you find interesting

having less homework

by getting none

making it suitable for different levels and maybe making it a bit shorter and more interesting

making it more fun to do and not getting as much

not getting as much. Making it fun

not having homework

doing more fun thinkgs and giving us more help!

giving us less and giving us clues

we could go through it properly at school and if we make it seem funnier to do

We could also get less and make it easer

children to do literacy

giving us less. Giving us more time to finish. Doing more reading homework

making it more fun and less homework

macking more under standing and more fun so we in Joye it more (or not)

making it more colourfull. Neefing to do artwork

making it more creative and active rather than having to do so much writing

getting no homework

(Continued)

could be allowed to do more illustrations in your book

doing different variety of work

giving less of it and make it easyer

going through it with us in school together

[Question 14] I don't have one. 'By making the homework exciting.'

Getting homework given to us in which we have to research something/print out somet

making the work more challenging,or doing some interesting research or use the internet more to find pictures and make our homework colourful

Making it a bit more fun and sometimes challenging

making it more fun by having more games and stuff like that

Making it a bit more hard so it's more of a challenge and it's more fun

not having it or making it just reading

choices of sheets we have in school

a clearer explanation of what we have to do

giving a thorough explanation of what we have to do

not having it and just being told to read

Explaining it more and making sure people understand

making it fun

not getting any

make it more fun and exciting

Example 4 Extract of a transcript from a focus group interview

Focus group with Brian, John, Louise and Nikky (Year 6) by Liam and Tom

T: Do you like doing homework?

B: Kind of. Sometimes I like it, sometimes I don't. I don't like it when it's too hard. I don't like it when there's loads of writing, because I'm not good at writing. I normally find literacy homework difficult.

J: I never want to do my homework, then my mum forces me, because it gets in the way when I want to do something. It gets in the way when I want to do something else. I like maths homework, but I don't like literacy too much, because I don't like writing either.

Lou: I don't like it either because I'm normally doing something else and I don't really like writing. I don't like people looking at my writing because people will think that that's so messy or she's so stupid. I don't like giving my opinion.

N: It's alright. It's a bit better when it's a bit more fun. I go to homework club because otherwise I don't do it. With some questions you're not really sure if it's a trick question and so you don't know what to write. If you have like a piece of writing that you have to answer questions about and the texts are really boring. For example, the SATS practice stuff was really boring.

L: How do you find reading homework? When you have to look stuff up on the computer?

J: Looking stuff up on the computer – yeh, I kind of like it. Reading homework, yeh, I kind of like it.

T: What do you think makes it more enjoyable? Like research and stuff.

J: I like the idea of research. I like how … *[trails off]*.

Lou: I like reading homework on the computer, because it kind of appeals to you instead of in front of a teacher. Instead of break

(Continued)

time for example you should be allowed to go on the computer. I like doing my homework on the computer.

N: It's alright, but it's a bit annoying when you can't find a site that tells you the right information that you want. And also, some people don't have a computer at their ... *[house?]* But I like reading.

B: I love reading.

Lou: It takes me a while to get into a book.

L: Is that because it doesn't drag you in or is it because you're thinking I could be doing something else?

Lou: It's just certain types of book that I like reading – such as Jacqueline Wilson and I can't remember the names of the other author. I like real life, serious books.

A: Do you discuss the books that you're reading with your family at all?

D: I do. I say 'wow, look at this picture'.

B: I don't really.

A: Do they ask you?

B: No.

N: My mum doesn't really have time for me to discuss books with her.

L: Writing was the homework that children said that they didn't really enjoy. What do you think of writing homework?

D: I don't like writing too much. I like writing stories but I don't like writing when you have to answer questions. You have to answer questions and you have to write a paragraph to answer a question.

(Continued)

L: So you think it's a bit boring when you have to write so much to answer a question, because you think why can't they be a bit shorter? Do you think they should be short but detailed answers?

D: Yes, short but detailed.

B: I don't really like writing homework that much because you have to write a whole paragraph to answer one question, as Dave said.

T: Children suggested ways of improving homework, such as making it more adventurous and fun. Have you got any ideas of how literacy homework could be improved?

D: I like it when they give you a little paragraph of writing and then they ask you to continue that and we're doing this big writing and we were writing a story using VCP (vocabulary, connectives and openers and punctuation) and I really liked. I like getting a little bit of help.

L: If you could choose to write a poem or a short story or a limerick, would you like that?

Lou: I would like that

L: Perhaps a word search or a game?

Lou: Yes, I would like that.

B: If you had a few more games that would help you to get into doing it.

N: I think if you gave children a choice between easy, medium and hard homework, the children would go for the easy homework.

J: I'd go for the hard one.

B: I'd go for the middle one because I like a challenge.

T: Where do you like doing your homework?

(Continued)

J: I do it in the kitchen usually. I like to do it where it is nice and silent.

B: I do it in my room because it's nice and cool in my room and nobody disturbs me in my room.

A: Do you get your homework done in your room?

Lou: This is one of the reasons I don't like doing homework, because I can never find a peaceful place to do my homework. Whenever I start to do my homework, everyone crowds around me thinking I need help and stuff.

A: Who's everyone?

Lou: My dad, my mum, my sister (because she thinks that I'm an idiot), she's younger than me and she wants to see what I'm doing. Sometimes my uncle and my aunty.

A: What do they do?

Lou: They'll say, what about this and that and it really gets on my nerves.

A: Do they do it to help you?

Lou: They think they're trying to help me but they're not.

N: I go to homework club on Fridays after school. We get homework on Fridays. That's for everyone. I go because at home just my mum and stepdad sometimes won't understand the work and can't help me. Whereas, at the homework club, the teachers are there so you can ask for help.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided some examples of the kinds of research projects undertaken by the children, how they went about designing them and the kinds of child data collected peer to peer. It has shown ways in which children themselves were able to do some simple analysis of their findings and set up a framework in which adults could carry out comparative analysis.

4 Findings of adult researchers

The findings from each of the children's individual studies have intrinsic value in their own right and in the original contribution they make to the body of knowledge on literacy from children's perspectives. However, the overarching purpose of the project was to identify whether the children's studies – conducted as they were in contrasting areas of affluence and poverty – would suggest any thematic links between poverty and literacy achievement. For the ethical reasons outlined earlier, and to avoid potential self-stigmatisation, we wanted adult researchers to undertake the comparative analysis from across and within their research. Therefore, after consultation with, and endorsement from, the Advisory Group, we approached the children for their consent for us to look at their data with 'adult' eyes, emphasising that this did not detract in any sense from their value as child studies but that the studies also had further currency in a larger comparative field. All of the children were happy for their work to contribute to this larger goal.

The adult phase of comparative analysis revealed two major themes:

■ the impact of poverty on literacy homework facilitation (and by implication on literacy progress/achievement)

■ the impact of poverty on opportunities to engage in activities that increased literacy confidence and self-esteem (and by implication literacy progress/ achievement).

The impact of poverty on homework facilitation

Children in both schools were given completely free choice on the literacy topic they would like to research. So it is interesting that half the children from both schools chose to centre their research around a theme of literacy homework. Adult analysis of their data points to the availability of skilled adult help and favourable study environments as being two of the most critical aspects for literacy success. Both of these were significantly absent in most of the experiences of the children of Valley School. Very few of the children of Valley School got help with homework from a parent on a regular basis and nearly one-fifth reported *never* getting any help at all. The situation was the opposite in Riverside school where children invariably got help from their parents:

> I'm in the kitchen and it's very tempting to ask for help from all the people
> that are around me. So, I do get quite a lot of help. I tend to go to adults,
> rather than use books, but I have books around the house that I can use if
> I want to, like dictionaries and I can go on to Wikipedia.
> (Riverside Year 6 girl)

The children's data showed that homework clubs afforded children important pedagogical opportunities because of the presence of skilled adults and material resources (even basic resources like pens, paper, etc. were helpful to Valley children). Although both schools offered homework clubs, at Riverside, homework club was less popular. Indeed, some children who attended were doing so as much to escape 'overcontrolling' parents as to get skilled assistance. One Riverside child in a focus group interview stated that she would like it if adults helped her less, so that her homework became less of a family endeavour. Perhaps this might explain why 38 out of 91 children at Riverside did not like discussing their homework with their family because parents were too zealous in monitoring it. It was an entirely different picture at Valley School. The children's data showed evidence of much greater reliance on help from a teacher and of homework clubs as being 'lifelines'.

We can see the impact of affluence and poverty in children's reflections on the kind of environments they liked to do their homework in. Children's questions about this were located in their own realities. Hence, questions about children experiencing distractions such as 'smoking, banging, swearing, loud music and TV' while doing their homework were raised by child researchers from Valley School but not from Riverside. Child researchers from Riverside were more likely to phrase questions about preferring to do homework in your bedroom or your garden, which assumes not only availability of quiet, attractive environments but choice too. Children from Valley School were unlikely to have a garden, or a bedroom of their own, as many lived in bedsits with single parents on overcrowded estates. (This point was further emphasised during a research training session on interview techniques. When asked what they understood an interview to be and to share any personal experiences, the Valley children chose to talk about being interviewed by the Police about vandalism on their estate.) In contrast, children from Riverside Primary talked about exploring the ideal homework environment, such as being surrounded by 'inspiring adult views'.

Even if parents did not always directly help children with homework at Riverside, they facilitated it by making sure that their child was settled to work in a quiet environment, providing a desk to work at, taking away distractions (such as noise from a younger sibling) and checking the completed homework. Again, there were marked differences in the experiences of Valley School children where similar levels of facilitation and monitoring were not evident.

Year 3 girl:	I never do my literacy *[homework]*.
Child interviewer:	Why is that?
Year 3 girl:	I don't know. I end up forgetting about it.
Child interviewer:	And then what happens when you come to school?
Year 3 girl:	I have to do it at school.
Child interviewer:	Does your mum sometimes remind you – saying 'don't forget to do your literacy homework'?
Year 3 girl:	No because she thinks that I've done them both because I said I would, but then I fell asleep.

There were striking differences also between levels of parental assistance in the two schools. When children did get help at Valley Primary, it was restricted to five minutes and this tended to be with subjects such as maths where discrete problems/ questions could be dealt with quickly. This was not the case for literacy. Children at both schools reported that literacy homework took longer than maths homework. It would take at least 25 minutes. A Year 6 boy at Riverside explained one reason why literacy homework might require a lot of time from parents, even if he was getting help with only one question:

> If it's a reading homework then I'll *[have to]* read out the story to them *[first]* so they are able to help.

Watching TV was a central theme that emerged in relation to homework. Approximately half of the children at Valley Primary viewed TV as a distraction when doing their homework, whereas Riverside children would have their TV quotas policed by parents and it would be turned off until homework was completed to parents' satisfaction.

Findings also showed that 15 per cent of children at Valley Primary never read a book at home by themselves or with another person. Almost a quarter of children watched TV for more than four hours a day. While the amount of time children spent on the TV tells us little about the quality of the watching, i.e. whether it is passive viewing or active, the in-depth child–child interviews did hint at large groups of Valley children watching daily programmes that came on after the watershed, particularly *Big Brother*. This late-night viewing might explain why more than a quarter of them

said they felt slower at school the next day after watching TV at night-time. For a significant number of Valley children, TV took the place of reading and 10 per cent of children thought that reading books was 'pointless', whereas 0 per cent thought that watching TV was 'pointless'. Furthermore, almost half the Valley children preferred to watch TV rather than engage in any form of literacy activity.

Children from Riverside seemed to be reporting more discriminating TV viewing, e.g. they were not allowed to watch certain programmes that were scheduled before the watershed, such as *EastEnders*. There was also monitoring and joint analysis of television viewing reported by children, which all fed into a form of discussion role modelling within the home.

A conversation with the Deputy Head at Valley Primary revealed that children entered the school with weak oral language skills, whereas the last Ofsted report for Riverside Primary points to the opposite experience: 'Children's knowledge, skills and understanding on starting school are a little above average overall'. One might speculate that an increase in passive TV technologies and a decrease in home-based conversation are impacting on the development of oral language skills. This is illustrated in the following quote from an interview with a Year 3 child at Valley School:

> *Interviewer:*   Where do you watch TV?
>
> *Child:*   In the living room and kitchen because when we're eating it gets kind of boring and also in the living room we've got a 32-inch TV, which I like a lot.

If this is the case, then the achievement gap will continue to widen, not narrow, for children living in poverty.

Valley Primary did try to engage parental involvement in helping their children with reading and to suggest strategies they could use with their children at home. However, the Deputy Head recalls that only three parents turned up to the meeting. One of those parents could not read himself and explained that he did not want the same for his own child. His attempts to break the vicious circle of illiteracy and poverty were to be applauded but were, nevertheless, ineffective – for example, insisting his child do one hour of 'copying' after school every day. By attending the meeting, he was able to receive assistance from teachers on how he could help his child in better ways, such as through the use of story tapes from the library.

Where children are not getting opportunities to read with parents at home, it is important to ensure they get opportunities to share books and ideas with skilled

others in school or community environments. This, and other implications for policy and practice, will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 5.

Literacy opportunities and the effects on confidence and self-esteem

A strong theme pervading data from both schools was the link between literacy attainment and confidence levels. Children at Riverside reported very high levels of confidence in their reading, writing and oracy (speaking and listening) skills. The child researchers' insider perspective is very important here in helping adults understand something that hitherto may not have been either realised or acted upon. Child–child Riverside School interviews revealed that these high levels of reading confidence and self-esteem were arrived at by ample opportunities to practise in private. Children, from all backgrounds, found reading out aloud daunting and intimidating. Before they could do this, they needed lots of reading by themselves or reading in safe, non-threatening environments like reading to younger siblings. Children talked about building up what they termed their 'private confidence' by reading on their own, sometimes rehearsing pronunciation and expression in whispers so that only they could hear themselves. As they grew in 'private confidence' they became less afraid of being called upon to read in class or to talk about what they had read in class. It is the facilitation of these opportunities in the home (quiet reading environments, encouragement to read as a leisure activity, plenty of books readily available) that is a big differentiator between Riverside and Valley School. Children suggested that one way of boosting their confidence in reading aloud would be to read to children younger than themselves. This would benefit those younger children being read to and would also provide an opportunity for older children to develop confidence in their public reading, because they saw it as less threatening to read aloud in front of younger children.

An interesting finding in the children's data was that, across both schools, confidence in writing was much lower than reading. Indeed, writing was seen as the most public of all the literacy activities they engaged in. There are fewer opportunities to practise 'private' writing at home, even for Riverside children. Children viewed school writing as a painful process of endless drafts scrutinised by adults and publicly displayed around classroom walls. Private confidence developed through writing practice and resulted in a positive feeling towards that skill. Before children could develop confidence in their writing, they felt they needed to develop some private confidence and have opportunities to practise writing where their efforts would not be on view to the public via classroom wall displays. They saw this as added peer pressure, which

affected their self-esteem. Children's thinking around literacy development also made a direct link between reading skills and speaking and listening skills, since private and public confidence in reading helps with the development of these, too, so it becomes a virtuous circle.

There is much that can be done in schools to help children living in poverty to build private confidence and this is discussed in Chapter 5.

5 Implications for policy and practice

This chapter draws together the headline themes from the research findings, sets them in the theoretical context framed in Chapter 1 and discusses how this impacts on current policy and practice initiatives.

It is widely acknowledged that education is a route out of poverty (e.g. see Card, 1999; Dearden *et al.*, 2004). Literacy is a pivotal part of education and a platform on which much wider curricular achievements are built. Furthering our understanding of links between poverty and literacy opportunities can inform policy development and ultimately help to address the literacy 'poverty gap'. How can the findings of this project inform policy and practice? The combination of children and adult research data offers a valuable dual perspective. Absence of power relations in the child–child data suggests that children's responses were very genuine and were untainted by efforts to 'please the adult'. This was evident in that some children were happy to talk of their parents being too interfering and controlling about their homework, and some were happy to admit to books being pointless – views that might not have been offered as freely to an adult researcher.

The pictures painted by this research are of children from affluent backgrounds exuding literacy confidence derived from a variety of opportunities: routine support for homework, parental dialogue providing role models, favourable environments for reading and writing, absence of distractions and opportunities to talk about literacy. By contrast, children from poorer backgrounds had few, if any, of these opportunities. What can we do to begin to bridge this gap?

Current political initiatives are prioritising the *Every Child Matters* agenda (staying safe; being healthy; achieving economic well-being; making a positive contribution; enjoying and achieving) through legislation (DfES, 2003b; Children Act, 2004; HM Government, 2005) and through organisational change (e.g. the setting up of the Children's Workforce Strategy and within that the Children's Workforce Development Council). In February 2006, the Government published its response to the Children's Workforce Strategy consultation, which set out how the children's workforce will be supported to improve outcomes for children, young people and families. (The response to the Children's Workforce Strategy Consultation can be found on the DfES website at http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/resources-and-practice/ IG00038/.) If all five strands of *Every Child Matters* could be achieved, then children living in poverty could genuinely become a thing of the past. Joining up the theory and the reality is the hard part.

The findings of this study can be mapped onto current policy initiatives, allowing us to identify where emphasis and direction might bring about positive outcomes. Integrated children's services and multi-agency working are current drivers in the *Every Child Matters* agenda. Raising standards and improving outcomes for children are being delivered through an ambitious programme of Extended Schools and Children's Centres. The intention is to bring together a complete range of children's services under community-based one-stop providers. Parental and local community involvement will be targeted as key elements, with affordable, wrap-around childcare being offered between the hours of 8.00 a.m. and 6.00 p.m. There are 1,051 Children's Centres up and running at the time of writing, 2,500 planned for 2008 and 3,500 by 2010 (DfES, 2007). Currently, half of all primary schools and a third of secondary schools provide access to a core offer of extended services and a target of 2010 has been set when all schools will offer this provision (DfES, 2007) This represents a real opportunity to draw on these resources to break entrenched patterns of deprivation and narrow the achievement and social mobility gaps.

The findings from this research point to homework clubs as 'a lifeline' and an essential route to educational progress for children in poverty. Clearly, homework clubs could be offered more widely within the scope of Extended School services. Availability up to 6.00 p.m. would make it easier for children in poverty to access this resource, as many parents could pick them up at 6.00 p.m., whereas a 4.00 p.m. finish (common for primary school homework clubs) is problematic for many working parents. However, the children's data also highlights the importance of access to adult expertise, and raises issues about reading opportunities that promote private confidence building and enjoyment. Thus there are two potential pitfalls to avoid. The first is running homework clubs with childcare staff rather than teaching staff, and not taking on board the children's identification of skilled adults to facilitate discussion about books. The second is not offering quality reading experiences with good quality books and quiet, comfortable reading areas that afford opportunities to practise private reading and private confidence building.

It is the need for the latter that raises some concerns about Extended Schools, not least that they will simply lengthen school hours and the school curriculum – more of the same diet for children in power-laden settings with limited personal space and personal autonomy. An important self-development strategy uncovered in one of the children's reports was the need to 'practise your private confidence' before you could develop 'public confidence'. Children identified reading aloud and writing as activities requiring 'public confidence' and that needed a lot of practice 'privately'. A striking characteristic of children from affluent backgrounds was how easy it was for them to access opportunities for 'private confidence' building. Extended Schools may do nothing to facilitate this unless sufficient personal space, personalised learning

opportunities and some degree of autonomy are offered to children who stay on until 6.00 p.m. It is of course much more expensive to offer these opportunities than to herd 25 children together in one place with one non-teaching supervisor. If set up appropriately and with due regard to findings discussed in earlier parts of this report, Extended Schools could offer a fantastic opportunity to children living in poverty to catch up with some of those private confidence-building opportunities that more socio-economically advantaged children can access with ease.

If we are thinking about how we can use Extended Schools to support children in poverty, we should also be looking at what we can do within statutory school time. Should we be examining more closely how much time children are allowed to read quietly or read to younger pupils in non-threatening environments? Perhaps we could also revisit the pedagogical debates about developing children's writing, and whether drafting and redrafting and emphasis on public display is the best approach. Can we create opportunities for private writing where children can experiment, enjoy and, importantly, *own* their writing. Throughout the research studies of children at both schools, themes of enjoyment, choice and ownership came through strongly as being effective ways for children to engage with literacy.

Skilful facilitation by parents was a further theme that differentiated children's literacy attainment in the two schools. It is not helpful to enter into blame cultures here, since many of the parents were themselves children living in poverty whose disadvantages had been compounded and carried forward into adulthood. A legacy of this is that they themselves may have poor literacy skills, be unemployed and/or have to work long hours in low-paid jobs to put food on the table. The poverty cycle will continue relentlessly until we can break it. This is why it is so important to do whatever we can to improve children's reading proficiency, as this is central to educational attainment. Educational attainment as we know, and as has been documented in Chapter 1, is a genuine cycle breaker, a route out of poverty. Here, again, provision of extended core services within the community setting of Extended Schools can bring together the needs of parents and children. Adult literacy classes, among other lifelong learning skills such as ICT, can be offered alongside homework clubs. The Government's commitment to wrap-around affordable childcare can make some of these opportunities possible for families living in poverty.

One final theme that dominated the research findings was gender differences and the extent to which boys' attainment is falling behind girls. One of the reasons identified was absence of male reader role models. This is more acute in areas of poverty than affluence and boys living in poverty are therefore our most vulnerable group in terms of literacy proficiency. Once again, we have an opportunity to reverse this trend, if we apply this knowledge when planning Extended Schools

provision. Primary schools have relatively few male teachers and even fewer male classroom assistants. However, Extended Schools offer opportunities for other male professionals (e.g. sports coaches, social workers, youth workers) to be learning role models.

Conclusion

The combined findings from the child and adult researchers in this project have illuminated areas where the literacy achievement gap is at its widest for children living in poverty, increased our understanding of the issues and pointed to possible transformative actions. To summarise these include:

- using Extended Schools' core provision services to bridge some of these gaps both at child and parent level.

- creating environments in classrooms that afford children opportunities to build their literacy confidence 'privately'

- providing opportunities for children to read quietly or read to younger pupils in non-threatening environments

- facilitating 'private' writing opportunities for children

- providing homework clubs and ensuring they are accessible to the children who need them the most

- offering help and training to parents to support their children with literacy

- addressing enjoyment and motivation issues in our pedagogical approach to the teaching of literacy.

Note

Chapter 3

1   This is the way in which the child researcher managed his data. He worked in approximated simple fractions of halves and quarters rather than any more sophisticated analysis. This was more meaningful to him and helped him get inside his data and be able to draw out the main headline findings.

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