

Literacy and young people

Literacy levels in the UK

Literacy - the combination of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills - is essential to our happiness, health and wellbeing. But in the UK today:

- at least seven million adults are functionally illiterate (annual United Nations survey)
- one in six people has a literacy level below that expected of an 11-year-old
- 84% of 11-year-olds achieve the expected levels for reading
- 75% of 11-year-olds achieve the expected levels for writing.

(National Literacy Trust)

The importance of literacy

Like many other young people, Donnie struggles to read and write. He says: 'It's difficult. I don't live in a world of hope. I don't wake up thinking I'll be smart and successful'. A person with poor literacy skills can be very disadvantaged. S/he is:

- more likely to live in a non-working household
- less likely to have children
- more likely to live in overcrowded housing
- less likely to have access to technology
- less likely to vote

(National Literacy Trust)

Differences in literacy between boys and girls

The gap in achievement in reading and writing between boys and girls has widened since 2005. National Literacy Trust research shows that:

- 43% of boys say they enjoy reading compared with 58% of girls
- 24% of boys think reading is boring, compared with 13% of girls
- twice as many boys as girls 'never' write
- in English Sats, 40% of girls obtained a standard higher than that expected of their age group, compared with 26% of boys.

Children in care

Donnie says 'I'm not as dumb as they make me out to be'. Donnie is a bright lad but he lacks confidence and feels frustrated and angry. Ava is applying for university, but young people in care seldom have this opportunity. Looked after children have lower literacy levels than their peers:

- in 2009, only 15% of children who had been in care for at least a year achieved five good GCSEs compared to 70% for all children
- last year 14% of children in care were unemployed after leaving school compared with 4% of all children.

Success stories

However many children who grew up in care have gone on to lead successful lives including world famous DJ Goldie, soul artist Seal and poet and writer Lemn Sissay.

The actor Neil Morrissey, best known for his role in *Men Behaving Badly* was brought up in care. He completed his A-levels and won a scholarship to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Recently he said 'I feel secure in my life and I'm happy with where I'm at'.

Improving literacy skills

Practical skills in English, maths and ICT are considered essential by employers. Even before young people get a job, they need to be able to search for jobs and write a CV or a letter of application.

The good news

Literacy skills among children are improving. According to the latest figures, 53% of school children gained five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths - 3.6% up on the previous year.

It's never too late to learn. There are free courses to help young people to improve their reading, writing and numeracy skills throughout the UK.

'Skills for Life' qualifications are designed to help people develop their reading, writing or maths. Young people can take a Skills for Life qualification if they:

- are over 16 years of age
- have left compulsory full-time education
- do not have an up-to-date English or maths qualification at level 2 on the National Qualifications Framework (such as a GCSE)

There is also a Skills for Life qualification in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

How to find out more about improving literacy

The National Literacy Trust is an independent charity that supports those who struggle with literacy and the people who work with them.

See: www.literacytrust.org.uk/

Skills for Life: for more information about reading, writing and numeracy courses, see:

www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/QualificationsExplained/DG_10039031

Or phone the free 'Get On' helpline: 0800 66 0800 (8.00 am to 10.00 pm, seven days a week).

The BBC Skillswise website has guides and tools on how to improve reading and writing. See: www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise