



# **Britain's Next Top Model**

## **The impact of role models on literacy**

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**April 2008**

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*Role models are key references for adolescents because they provide a window to the future (Bryant and Zimmerman, 2003)*

The use of role models to promote literacy behaviour seems to make intuitive sense. Role models are an important part in numerous aspects of a person's life. For example, Bucher asserts that "models are one of the most important pedagogical agents in the history of education" (1997: 660). According to Eccles (1987), in order to understand how children and adolescents form their identity, it is necessary to explore the effects of the socio-cultural context that shape the self. Also, Giddens (1991: 3) argues that "the self, like the broader institutional contexts in which it exists, has to be reflexively made. Yet, this task has been accomplished amid puzzling diversity of options and possibilities."

As children and adults learn by, among other ways, observing and experiencing the behaviour of others, they may look to role models for direction. Individuals may act as role models by sharing their values and beliefs and by modelling appropriate behaviours (Bryant and Zimmerman, 2003). Indeed, "by imitating others, individuals learn not only discrete information and or isolate behaviour, but also complex behavioural patterns" (Biskup and Pfister, 1999: 200). According to Anderson and Cavallaro (2002), they may wish to emulate certain role models based on them possessing certain skills or attributes.

Research into role models has been rekindled by voices that have linked boys' educational underachievement and disaffection to a relative absence of male teachers and consequent lack of male role models for boys (e.g. Carrington and Skleton, 2003; see also Martino, 2008). According to a survey of school staff (Tinklin, Croxford, Ducklin and Frame, 2001: 110), "the gender imbalance was seen as exacerbating problems for those boys who did not have appropriate role models within their own families".

Yet, research (e.g. Bricheno and Thornton, 2007; Carrington, Francis, Hutchings et al., 2007; Lahelma, 2000) shows that pupils attach little importance to their teacher's gender and that teachers figure insignificantly as role models in young people's lives. A US study (Ehrenberg, Goldhaber and Brewer, 1995; but also see Dee, 2005) that matched teachers and students by gender and ethnicity showed that teachers' gender and ethnic background had little effect on educational attainment. Similar findings were also made by Carrington, Tymms and Merrell (2005) in England who showed that a teacher's gender was unrelated to children's educational attainment or attitudinal outlook, nor was there any indication that male teachers were particularly beneficial for boys or female teachers for girls. One welcomed side-effect of this debate, however, is the interest in the impact of role models on young people's attitudes and behaviours.

So why should role models not be an equally powerful motivator in the literacy context? The assumption is that children who do not read themselves are not very likely to realise the value of reading unless they see other people read. Indeed, there are numerous examples of programmes that use role models to boost the aspirations and self-images of a particular target group. For example, Reading Champions, an initiative delivered by the National Literacy Trust (NLT) on behalf of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), uses role models to engage pupils with reading. Indeed, in February 2008 the DCSF unveiled a £6 million young leaders scheme to turn young people into positive role models. The aim of the scheme is for young people to

champion local and national issues and become positive role models for their communities.

What also seems to come up in numerous academic and non-academic articles, especially those discussing male literacy, is a shortage of (male) role models who promote reading as something that is enjoyable. In this context, the reading role model can come from a variety of backgrounds, including family, school, the community and the glitzy world of celebrity.

According to Bricheno and Thornton (2007: 384),

*The re-emergence of 'role model' solutions as policy prescriptions to remedy boys' so-called underachievement and laddish behaviour (Francis, 2000), requires that past research be reviewed and new research undertaken to see if things have changed over time.*

While there is a vast amount of anecdotal evidence about the motivational role of certain individuals and while research on the related concept of mentors has flourished in recent years, there are only a few studies that have explored this area in a more rigorous manner. Similarly, while some research has examined who children and adolescents perceive as important in their lives, little research has explored how role models might influence individuals' outcomes. Indeed, researchers have struggled to determine whether and how people are affected by role models. As a result, little research has investigated the effect celebrities and other role models have on people's self-perceptions.

Who do children choose as reading role models, and why? Are celebrity role models "too glossily distant to be useful role models" (Walker, 2007: 515) and what is the relative impact of individuals from the direct social environment? Do children tend to choose role models who are of their same gender and ethnic background? These are the questions that are addressed in this review, and which will inform a survey of children and young people by the NLT. However, before these issues are explored, a working definition of the term role model is offered and the theoretical underpinnings are explained.

## **What are role models?**

Who or what is a role model? Biskup and Pfister (1999: 204) observed that "the significance of role models is multifaceted, ambivalent and often difficult to understand and interpret." Indeed, despite its popularity in general and in academic discourse, the concept of role model remains a vaguely defined notion (see Gibson, 2004).

Bryant and Zimmerman (2003: 37) believe that being able to identify role models indicates that "youth believe that these individuals are worthy of imitation in some respect and that their attitudes or values are ones they would like to assimilate". The educational aspect of role models is mirrored in Kemper's (1968: 33) conception: "The essential quality of the role model is that he possesses skills and displays techniques which the actor lacks (or thinks he lacks), and from whom, by observation and comparison with his own performance, the actor can learn."

Inspiration figures greatly in other conceptualisations of role models. According to Thomson and Sher, “role models are individuals who inspire others to believe that they are capable of high accomplishment”. Similarly, Carrington and Skelton (2002) suggest that “a role model today is most often equated with ‘a symbol of achievement’ and is sometimes conflated with being a ‘star’ or an idol”.

The aspirational dimension of a role model is also echoed by Allen (2000), who says that there are three possible definitions of a role model: 1) a person who is “an ethical template for the exercise of adult responsibilities”; 2) someone who is “a nurturer providing special educational services”; and (3) someone who is a “symbol of special achievement”. Solomon (1997: 399) also defines role models as: “People with whom respondents could identify, and whose achievement, lifestyles, philosophies, and/or values had a positive impact on their self-esteem and aspirations in life.”

Anderson and Cavallaro (2002: 161) broaden their understanding of the definition by examining the child’s social and emotional development. They write:

*As children shape their behavior and values, they may look to heroes and role models for guidance. They may identify the role models they wish to emulate based on possession of certain skills or attributes. While the child may not want to be exactly like the person, he or she may see possibilities in that person.*

Often, the terms hero and role model are used interchangeably. For example, Anderson and Cavallaro (2002) say role models may be attributed to known people (i.e. parents, teachers), while “heroes are defined as figures who may be less attainable or larger than life” (Anderson, 2002, 161). Bromnick and Swallow (1999) use the terms heroes and role models most frequently, but also use ‘mentor’ and ‘admired adults’ in their research. Fraser and Brown (2002) distinguished between heroes, celebrities and role models along numerous dimensions, which are reproduced in **Table 1**.

**Table 1: A comparison of heroes, celebrities and role models**

<b>Heroes</b>	<b>Celebrities</b>	<b>Role models</b>
Distinguished by achievement	Distinguished by image or trademark	Distinguished by their influence
Self-created	Created by the media	Created by psychological need
Public pulls into the spotlight	Pushes him/herself into the public spotlight	Can be in or out of spotlight
Admired for character attributes	Admired for name recognition	Admired for achievement, name or character
Private secretary is most important	Press secretary is most important	May have both private secretary and publicist
Interpersonal relationships provide status	Media coverage provides status	Provides desired status to others
Reputation propelled by actions	Reputation propelled by pseudo events	Reputation propelled by others who follow example
Have intrinsic and lasting value	Quickly fade and value may be short term	Endure as long as they are imitated

(Fraser and Brown, 2002)

Regardless of which term is used, the underlying meaning is identical. However, it should also be pointed out that, so far, role models have been seen as fulfilling a positive role. However, individuals can also be motivated by negative role models, i.e. individuals who have experienced misfortune or lack skills. According to Lockwood, Jordan and Kunda (2002: 854),

*Positive role models can inspire one by illustrating an ideal, desired self, highlighting possible achievements that one can strive for, and demonstrating the route for achieving them; negative role models can inspire one by illustrating a feared, to-be-avoided self, pointing to possible future disasters, and highlighting mistakes that must be avoided so as to prevent them.*

Overall, a role model is a person, living or fictional, who inspires either by imitation or by aspiration and who is someone we wish we could be more like (Zirkel, 2002). In line with Hutchings and colleagues (2007), in this research a role model is someone who a person *would like to be like in some way*. This definition allows a variety of individuals to be considered role models, including parents, peers, teachers, community workers and celebrities.

## Some theoretical underpinnings

Children tend to choose role models that they find relevant and with whom they can compare themselves (Lockwood and Kunda, 2000). It probably comes as no surprise that parents and other family members are important role models for children, especially young children. Other important role models can come from a variety of backgrounds, such as the school or the community.

The term role model draws on two prominent theoretical constructs: the concept of role and the tendency of individuals to identify with other people occupying important social positions; and the concept of modelling, the psychological matching of cognitive skills and patterns of behaviour between a person and an observing individual.

These two aspects of role models reflect two different theoretical traditions. The first, *identification*, is a process of social influence by which individuals adopt the values, attitudes and behaviours of another. At the heart of this process lies the notion that individuals are attracted to people based on similarity. They may perceive similarity in terms of interests, attitudes, behaviours, goals, or a desired status position, and they are motivated to enhance that similarity through observation and emulation.

The second, *social learning* theories, suggests that individuals take to models because they can be helpful in learning new tasks, skills, and norms. The process of adopting behaviours by modelling has been extensively explored by Bandura and his colleagues at Stanford University (e.g. Bandura, 1986). Social learning theory “emphasizes the prominent roles played by vicarious, symbolic, and self-regulatory processes” that occur within social mediated experiences (Bandura, 1977: vii).

The process of social influence by which individuals adopt the values and behaviours of others is best described by the theoretical construct of *identification*. Kelman (1958) suggests that there are three processes of social influence in which a person adopts the

behaviour of another because of an actual or perceived relationship with the person: compliance, identification and internalisation. Identification, in turn, is subdivided into two types: (1) classical identification – “attempts to be like or actually be the other person”; and (2) reciprocal role identification – “the roles of two parties are defined with reference to one another” (1961, pp 63-64).

Research on social comparison also indicates that perceived similarity between oneself and other increases the likelihood of a social comparison. In particular, individuals are more likely to compare themselves with others if they are similar to them in various ways (e.g. Wood, 1989).

Fraser and Brown (2002: 190) suggest that “one important reason people seek to imitate, emulate, and even impersonate celebrities is based on the need to enhance self-esteem through identification with certain values”. Individuals, celebrities and the media can reinforce decisions in which values, attitudes and behaviours are accepted in a given social context (Mitchell et al., 1979).

## **Beyond theory into practice – A not so straight-forward evidence base**

There is very little research into young children and their role models, and what research there is paints a confusing picture. The following sections explore who the role models are, what qualities people look for in their role models and what their background characteristics are.

### **Who are the role models**

Research shows that children and young people are more likely to identify role models from their immediate social environment. For example, Bryant and Zimmerman (2003) found that more than 90% of their study participants identified their primary role models from their immediate or extended family. Similarly, Wohlford and colleagues (2004) found that individuals rated role models they know personally as generally more influential than their famous role models.

In a US study of 179 children aged 8 to 13 (Anderson and Cavallaro, 2002), most respondents (85%) described as a role model a person they knew rather than a person they did not know, such as a media person (35%). Across studies, children and young people most frequently cite their parents as role models (e.g. Anderson and Cavallaro, 2002; Bricheno and Thornton, 2007), followed by their peers (Bricheno and Thornton, 2007). There is plenty evidence across subject areas to show that parents are an important role model for their children. For example, parental attitudes towards smoking and parental smoking habits strongly impact on young people’s smoking attitudes and habits (e.g. Smith and Stutts, 1999). Similarly, parents have been found to be more important role models in their adolescents’ purchasing behaviour than more distant celebrities (e.g. Martin and Bush, 2000).

Bucher (1997) studied the impact of role models on moral identity formation and collected data from 1150 pupils between the ages of 10 and 18 from Austria and Germany. The data on preferred models was collected in the form of a questionnaire. This included both an open-ended question (What persons are your personal models? Why?), as well as a list of 40 persons (musicians, movie stars, sports figures, intellectuals, politicians, religious persons, as well as persons of social nearness such as parents and siblings). The participants were asked to rate each personality on a scale of 1 ('no model whatever') to 4 ('a very important model for me'). The results from both types of questions contained in the questionnaire were clear. Those personalities of social nearness to the participants had the greatest "model effect" for them. Mothers, fathers, and relatives were mentioned with the greatest frequency. After that came religious models, and only then mass media personalities such as film and television stars, and sports figures. According to Biskup and Pfister (1999: 202),

*The popularity of sporting heroes goes hand in hand not only with intense competition in the mass media, the aggressive marketing strategies of the advertising industry and the commercialization of sport as well as of sportsmen and sportswomen, but also with young people's longing for someone to identify with.*

The Norwich Union Insight Report (2003) showed that young people respect their parents and see family members as strong role models. When asked who they most respected, the majority of young people (64%) named their parents. Interestingly, nearly half of teens from socially deprived areas named their mother as the person they most respect. Just 2% named their father. When the question was reversed to determine who young people least respected, 44% named the Government. Within socially deprived areas almost a third of teens named the police. Perhaps surprisingly nearly 49% of teens did not have any role models.

Comparable findings were also made by a survey for nfpSynergy (2007). When asked what kind of influence a variety of people had on their life, young people expressed the most positive attitudes towards their family – mum, dad and siblings – followed by friends, and the least positive attitude towards celebrities and 'my neighbourhood'. In fact, young people in this study were just as likely to say that celebrities had a negative influence as they were to indicate that they had a positive influence. Overall, these findings were influenced by the young people's social background and gender. For example, while young people rated their mum as having the most influential role regardless of background, a lower proportion of young children from a lower social background rated their dad as a positive influence. Also, girls were more likely than boys to say that their friends have a positive influence.

Interestingly, young people in the nfpSynergy survey were also asked which adult in Britain today they admire most. One in five young people spontaneously picked their mum, followed by their dad (9%). Both of these were higher than the most admired celebrities – Kylie Minogue (3%) and David Beckham (3%). Indeed, one in five young people believed that celebrities, footballers and popstars generally are bad role models for young people. According to Bricheno and Thornton (2007), young people tend to choose relatives, and parents in particular, as the best role models. Sports personalities came in a close second, particularly for boys, and pop, film and TV stars were second most popular with girls.

However, celebrities can also be important role models in the lives of children and young people. Indeed, there are some studies that indicate that celebrities may be more influential role models than their more proximate counterparts. For example, Biskup and Pfister (1999) interviewed nearly 100 children from different primary schools in Berlin, asking them whether they have a role model and if yes, who their role model is. They found that less than 10% of the role models were from the direct social environment (eg friends and relatives). Boys predominantly chose sportsmen, cinema figures and actors, while girls chose people mainly from the music world.

A study conducted by UNESCO (Steier, 1998) showed that about 30% of boys and 21% of girls named action heroes as their role models while 19% selected pop stars. Similarly, a survey for National Kids' Day (2007) found that when asked who is the most famous person in all the world, most 10-year-olds in this survey said that it was the Queen, followed by Harry Potter and God.

A recent survey by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (March 2008) also explored the influence of celebrities on pupils. Surveying over 300 teachers, this study showed that 70% of teachers believe that celebrities act as role models and influence pupils' aspirations for their future. Sports and pop stars were believed to be the most influential role models, followed by models and film stars. 44% of teachers believed that their students try to look like or behave like the celebrity they admire, by choosing a similar haircut, using their catchphrases and dressing similarly.

The picture painted by the above studies is not straightforward but it appears that children and young people have a range of role models, drawing both on close relatives as well as on more distant celebrities. However, what none of the above studies has explored is why children and young people choose role models from a variety of backgrounds and what functions these fulfil.

## **Role models – some concrete examples**

Several studies have identified who children and young people perceive as significant people in their lives. It should be noted from the outset that the following findings are likely to be constrained by changes in time and culture.

For example, a recent survey by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (March 2008) found that David and Victoria Beckham were believed to be the most important role models for both primary and secondary school pupils, followed by Frank Lampard, Keira Knightly and David Tennant.

The Norwich Union Youth Insight Report (2003) showed that the majority named family members over celebrities, friends or sports people. Other role models varied greatly from David Beckham, Britney Spears, Ms Dynamite and 50 Cent to God, Jamie Oliver, Stephen Hawking and Martin Luther King. Another study for Norwich Union (2005) showed that girls were most likely to choose Kelly Holmes (35%), David Beckham (31%), Paula Radcliffe (19%), Michael Owen (17%) and Wayne Rooney (12%) as their sporting role models. However, David Beckham (11%), Wayne Rooney (9%) and Jenson Button (5%) were also chosen as their worst role models.

Research undertaken in 2005 as part of a lifestyle tracking study conducted on behalf of Nationwide's specialist lending subsidiary, UCB Home Loans surveyed 1,080 youngsters aged between 16 and 21. When asked which one person they would most like to be, the largest number of children chose David Beckham, Bill Gates / Richard Branson, Jennifer Lopez, Victoria Beckham, Jennifer Aniston / Britney Spears. The boys' top five role models were David Beckham, Bill Gates, Richard Branson, Johnny Depp / Andrew Flintoff, Arnold Schwarzenegger. Other popular figures among boys included George Bush, Brad Pitt, Muhammad Ali, Robbie Williams, and a host of football stars, including Michael Owen, Steve Gerrard, Wayne Rooney and Thierry Henry. The girls' top five role models were Jennifer Lopez, Victoria Beckham, Jennifer Aniston / Britney Spears, Angelina Jolie, Beyonce. The girls' votes were much more closely focused on a smaller number of role models, with people such as Jordan, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Madonna, Julia Roberts, JK Rowling, Gwen Stefani and Mariah Carey also proving popular. Unlike the boys, girls proved happier to name someone of the opposite sex as a role model, with Richard Branson and Bill Gates in their top 20.

A slightly different picture emerges when parents are asked who their children's role models should be. For example, a recent Opinion Survey (Feb 2008) asked parents who their children should look up to and found that most said that they should look up to a family member, followed by Richard Branson, Jesus, teachers, Nelson Mandela, Diana Princess of Wales, Jamie Oliver, Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King and Bill Gates.

## **What are the *qualities* children and young people look for**

Compared to the types of people children and young people choose as their role models, comparatively little is known why they are chosen. When Anderson and Cavallo (2002) asked children why they looked up to their role models, the children most frequently said that it was because the person was nice, helpful and understanding, followed by the role models' skills. Boys were more likely than girls to name athletes for their skills (Anderson and Cavallo, 2002).

Similar findings were also made by Bricheno and Thornton (2007) who found that positive personality characteristics such as honesty, helpfulness and being hard working were the most frequently attributed characteristics, followed by a having a sense of humour and being successful in his/her career. When asked in the same study what they thought the most important attributes are for a role model, most pupils indicated that they should be 'caring' and 'trust'. Asking young people about the attributes they look for in role models, Bricheno and Thornton (2007) found that in their study of young people aged 10 to 16, most said that this role was a caring or loving one, performed by someone they know personally

It is perhaps of interest that those are also the characteristics children and young people look for in their friends. For example, a survey for National Kids' Day (2007) found that 10-year-olds in this study said they were best friends with someone because they are funny, helpful and kind.

Boys and girls appear to differ in the types of characteristics they attribute to their role models. Boys are less likely to have role models; but if they have role models, they are more likely than girls to attribute their role models with physical prowess, such as

athleticism and bravery. By contrast, girls were more likely to choose attributes relating to honesty and hard working, as well as to caring, trust and kindness.

These findings build on those made by Freedman-Doan and Eccles (1994) who found that girls were more likely to mention interpersonal/social characteristics, whereas boys were significantly more likely to mention possessions and activities as well as physical characteristics (in the case of famous individuals but not known role models).

## Role models and background characteristics

The choice of role models appears to be most commonly influenced by gender and social class (Lucey, 2001). Of note is the often forgotten fact that family members and close friends are very likely to share important characteristics with the children who choose them as role models, including gender, race and socio-economic background (Bricheno and Thornton, 2007). It is perhaps unsurprising that children and young people try to emulate people they perceive to be very similar to themselves.

### Gender and role models

Again, the picture about the impact of gender on the choice of role models is not straight-forward. There are a few studies in which children were more likely to choose same-gender persons as someone they look up to and admire (e.g. Anderson and Cavallo, 2002; Freedman-Doan and Eccles, 1994). For example, Bricheno and Thornton (2007) noted important differences between boys and girls, with girls tending to choose female relatives more often than boys, who are more likely to choose male relatives (with the possible exception of choosing their mother). Apart from male relatives, girls also named a wide range of other male role models, including footballers and film/TV personalities.

However, in their recent study of the importance of male teachers, Hutchings and colleagues (2007) found little evidence to support the claim that boys see their male teachers as role models. Indeed, they reported evidence to suggest that boys identified characteristics of both male and female teachers they would like to emulate.

There seem to be some gender differences in the *types* of role models that are chosen. Although both boys and girls are more likely to choose relatives as the most important role models (31.7%), girls tend to choose peers as their second most important influence, followed by musicians, while boys tend to choose footballers (Bricheno and Thornton, 2007). Similar findings that girls chose musicians and boys selected sports figures were made by Freedman-Doan and Eccles (1994) in a US sample.

Research undertaken in 2005 as part of a lifestyle tracking study conducted on behalf of Nationwide's specialist lending subsidiary, UCB Home Loans, surveyed 1,080 youngsters aged between 16 and 21. There were marked differences in the types of people chosen between the sexes in this study. Boys were heavily drawn towards sports stars, with 40% going for this category, followed by 21% choosing business entrepreneurs, 16% film stars and 10% musicians. Footballers accounted for 70% of the sports stars named by boys as role models. Musicians took first place among girls, with

35% of respondents choosing this category. Film stars were chosen by 26% of girls, women working in the fields of fashion and glamour were named by 15%, with business figures at 9% and sports personalities at just 5%.

Boys also have fewer role models than girls (e.g. Anderson and Cavallo, 2002; Bricheno and Thornton, 2007), partly because male role models are acceptable to both girls and boys while female role models are not acceptable to boys. Of interest may be the finding that boys are more likely to imitate those who are powerful (Gibson and Cordova, 1999) and may therefore be more likely to other males as role models because they are more likely to be portrayed to be in positions of power (Anderson and Cavallo, 2002).

There are some studies (e.g. Biskup and Pfister, 1999) in which girls were more likely than boys to choose role models from their immediate environment, such as family members and other relatives. Following 111 boys aged 11 to 21, Walker (2007) suggests that teenage boys may see the life experiences of figures such as teachers and parents as being too dated to be relevant to their own lives. Instead, they were more likely to mention friends as being important in their lives.

Studies also indicate that boys and girls differ in their reasons for choosing role-models. For example, Biskup and Pfister (1999) found that boys frequently explained their choice of role model by describing them as strong and courageous, while girls tended to emphasise both appearance and social behaviour.

### **Age and role models**

Research suggests that as children become adolescents, they rely less and less on parental role model figures and instead turn to friends, teachers, coaches and others (e.g. Freedman-Doan and Eccles, 1994). According to Freedman-Doan and Eccles (1994), younger adolescents admired characteristics in their heroes that were directly related to them (e.g., understands me, does things for me), whereas older adolescents were more likely to admire their heroes because of the kind of values and qualities they possess.

### **Social background and role models**

Bricheno and Thornton (2007) did not find any significant differences between pupils' responses in socially advantaged and disadvantaged areas. But it appears that these researchers did not actually ask children about their socio-economic background but rather analysed their data in terms of the school's geographical location.

There is also some evidence that links role model influence to ethnic background. For example, Martin and Bush (2000) found that white adolescents rated their father's influence as a role model higher than did adolescents from an African-American background.

## The effects of role models

Research in areas other than literacy has suggested that the presence or absence of role models can be associated with psychological well-being, problem behaviour and educational or civic engagement. Among other effects, role models have been shown to impact young people's occupational goals and career aspirations (e.g. King and Multon, 1996) and moral beliefs (e.g. Lumpkin, 2008). Teachers have been shown to influence educational choices among college students (e.g. Basow and Howe, 1980) and trainee teachers (e.g. Lunenberg, Korthagen and Swennen, 2007), while superstars can affect young adults' self-views (e.g. Lockwood and Kunda, 1997). Female action heroes that are seen as role models have been linked to greater aggressive tendencies (e.g. Greenwood, 2007). Political role models can also influence political participation in young people and adults (e.g. Wohlbrecht and Campbell, 2007). Smoking role models have also been associated with young people's intentions to smoke and actual smoking behaviour (Wiiium, Breivik and Wold, 2006).

### The effect of role models on literacy behaviour

The only area that has explored the impact of role models on literacy behaviour concerns the influence of parents. Parents are the first teachers and role models for their children, and therefore have a strong influence on their learning. The evidence about the benefits of parents being involved in their children's education in general, and their children's literacy activities in particular, is overwhelming. Research shows that parental involvement in their children's learning positively affects the child's performance at school (Fan and Chen, 2001) in both primary and secondary schools (Feinstein and Symons, 1999), leading to higher academic achievement, greater cognitive competence, greater problem-solving skills, greater school enjoyment, better school attendance and fewer behavioural problems at school (Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons et al., 2001).

The importance of parents as reading role models is evidenced by the fact that children of high frequency readers are far more likely to read for fun every day than children whose parents are not high frequency readers. The Kids and Family Reading Report (2006) found that 53% of children whose parents are high frequency readers are reading books for fun every day; however, among children whose parents are low frequency readers (reading 2 to 3 times a month or less), only 15% read for fun daily. Parents who are high frequency readers are more likely to see themselves as responsible for encouraging their children to read than parents who are low-frequency readers (60% compared to 46%).

Similarly, simple interactions, such as being read to, and exposure to books, magazines, newspapers and environmental print, impact children's progress in learning to read (e.g. Whitehurst, 1998). Children who come from richer home literacy environments where parents and other family members model reading activities show higher levels of reading knowledge and skills at the start of nursery (Nord, Lennon, Liu and Chandler, 2000) and throughout primary school (Wade and Moore, 2000). There is also ample evidence that parents who promote reading as a valuable and worthwhile activity by reading themselves have children who are motivated to read for pleasure. Parents modeling reading must be in the open to promote children's and young people's reading (Weems and Rogers, 2007). Involvement with reading activities at home has

significant positive influences not only on reading achievement, language comprehension and expressive language skills (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich and Welsh, 2004), but also on pupils' interest in reading, attitudes towards reading and attentiveness in the classroom (Rowe, 1991).

While the impact of parental or family reading role models has received at least some attention in the last few years, there has been no research into the effects of celebrity or other more distant role models on the reading behaviour of children and young people.

The NLT will conduct a survey in 2008 to explore the impact of both proximate as well as distant role models on the literacy behaviour of children and young people. As part of this work we will investigate what the relative influence of direct role models (parents, family and peers) compared to more distant ones (community persons and celebrities) is on literacy behaviour. More specifically, we are interested to find out whether parents have still the most important influence on children's and young people's literacy patterns or whether the media-saturated environment, which has elevated celebrities to role model status, has an equally or more significant impact. It would also be interesting to see the extent to which the relative importance of these role models varies with age (primary vs secondary school pupils).

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