**Response to Education Select Committee inquiry on left behind pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds**

The National Literacy Trust is an independent charity dedicated to raising literacy levels in the UK. Our mission is to give disadvantaged children and young people the literacy skills to succeed in life

**The extent of underachievement for white pupils who are eligible for FSM (free school meals), and how well the DfE’s statistics (including Progress 8 measures) capture that**

DfE data clearly shows that white pupils who are eligible for free school meals have lower attainment compared to pupils from other ethnic backgrounds who are eligible for free school meals. This is an issue of concern that should be investigated further. However many reports, including reports produced by the DfE, tend to use FMS eligibility interchangeably with the term ‘working class’, which is not always helpful. Many of those who would define themselves as working class would not fall within the FSM group: a Centre for Research in Race and Education survey found that 57% of British adults describe themselves as working class, but FSM pupils account for around 14% of 16 year olds[[1]](#footnote-1). Some research therefore argues that using FSM data as a proxy for the working class has potentially dangerous implications for the public debate about race and education[[2]](#footnote-2).

**The variation within the cohort of white pupils who are eligible for FSM (including regional variation, and variation between the five specific ethnic groups that sit under the broad ‘White’ category), and how well the DfE’s statistics capture that**

n/a

**The principal factors that contribute to this underachievement, with reference to:**

* **The availability and quality of early years provision**

Pre-school experiences can affect child outcomes up to the end of primary school and into KS3, and continue beyond the end of compulsory education[[3]](#footnote-3). Disadvantaged children in particular benefit significantly from good quality early years provision, in terms of intellectual and social behavioural development[[4]](#footnote-4). Early years settings can also support parents to improve the home learning environment, and help children make the transition to Year 1. Research for the DfE found that children who attended high quality pre-school for 2-3 years were almost 8 months ahead in their literacy development compared to children who had not attended pre-school.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, disadvantaged children spend significantly less time in pre-school than children from more affluent backgrounds.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The quality of pre-school has a significant impact on children’s life chances: it can predict total GCSE scores as well as English and maths grades, particularly for students whose parents have lower qualifications[[7]](#footnote-7). This suggests that high quality pre-school can narrow the attainment gap between children from well-educated families and those with few qualifications. There are a number of factors that influence the quality of early years provision. Our research shows that practitioners who had more experience in early years settings were more likely to report spending longer periods sharing stories with the children in their care and more likely to feel that they had an impact on children’s literacy development[[8]](#footnote-8). Practitioners with a higher level of qualification also felt more skilled and more confident in supporting children’s literacy skills[[9]](#footnote-9). This reflects other research that shows a strong relationship between the level of staff qualifications and the quality of early years education and childcare.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Ofsted statistics suggest that within England, the quality of provision in deprived areas is lower than average than in affluent areas. [[11]](#footnote-11) We have supported early years practitioners in disadvantaged areas through our Helping Early Language and Literacy Outcomes (HELLO) improvement framework - a quality improvement tool for early years settings who want to improve their communication, language and literacy provision. An evaluation of the programme found that practitioners reported significant improvements in several areas, including an increase in confidence, more positive relationships with parents and working with colleagues to improve practices within settings[[12]](#footnote-12).

* **The role of place (reflecting regional variations)**

Many areas in England are marked by concentrated poverty and social deprivation[[13]](#footnote-13). Children’s life chances are shaped significantly by the areas in which they live and grow up:[[14]](#footnote-14) one study, for example, found that different neighbourhood characteristics shape children’s educational outcomes over and above the effects of social class[[15]](#footnote-15). There is a clear relationship between deprivation and educational attainment[[16]](#footnote-16): for example, the concentration of poverty in the neighbourhood decreases a child’s readiness for school[[17]](#footnote-17).From poor transport links in coastal communities, to overcrowded living conditions in major cities, there are many factors that can impact on attainment. Evidence also shows that greater levels of neighbourhood socioeconomic disadvantage are associated with increased social, emotional and behavioural problems in children[[18]](#footnote-18).

It is the economically disadvantaged areas in England which have the lowest literacy. For example, Middlesbrough and Liverpool are among the areas with the greatest literacy need[[19]](#footnote-19), and both are ranked as some of the most disadvantaged areas in the country[[20]](#footnote-20). Our research shows that in the country’s most deprived areas, more than a third of adults lack the literacy expected of an 11 year-old[[21]](#footnote-21). Parents with low literacy skills lack the confidence to support their child’s learning, which can lead to an intergenerational cycle of poor literacy in these areas. Moreover, our analysis shows that people living in areas of England with the most serious literacy challenges are more likely to have shorter life expectancies than those living in communities with the fewest literacy challenges[[22]](#footnote-22).

* **The home learning environment**

The quality of the home learning environment is a key predictor of a child’s future success. As well as being a good predictor of early vocabulary and phonological awareness, the home learning environment can directly influence phonological awareness at the beginning of primary school[[23]](#footnote-23), and lead to increased reading fluency[[24]](#footnote-24), literacy competence and social functioning[[25]](#footnote-25). Home learning activities such as counting or doing simple sums with children or playing games with numbers have been found to predict better numeracy ability and attitudes[[26]](#footnote-26), while children who have good language skills at the age of five are 6 times more likely to reach the expected standard in English at age 11[[27]](#footnote-27). The benefits of a good home learning environment can continue until much later in life: children with poor vocabulary at age 5 are more than twice as likely to be unemployed at the age of 34[[28]](#footnote-28).

The home learning environment is as important to a child’s intellectual and cognitive development as parental factors such as occupation and education[[29]](#footnote-29), suggesting that what parents do with their child is just as important as who they are, and that the home learning environment can moderate the effects of disadvantage. Although self-reported parental engagement in home learning activities, such as reading to children, has increased over time[[30]](#footnote-30), many parents struggle with regular, sustained and positive interactions, because of a lack of confidence, time or capacity, or because they underestimate their impact on young children. This is a particular issue for parents in low-income households: enriching home learning activities are consistently associated with family income and parental education. Middle and upper-class children are more likely to be read to[[31]](#footnote-31), and more likely to be exposed to cognitively stimulating activities[[32]](#footnote-32) in comparison with their low income peers. They also hear more words, and have higher vocabularies at school entry[[33]](#footnote-33).

The most disadvantaged children start school 19 months behind their more well-off peers in language and communication development[[34]](#footnote-34), putting them at an educational disadvantage from the start. Of the EYFSP scales, the best predictors of educational success are measures of communication, language and literacy.[[35]](#footnote-35) Yet 28% of children start primary school in England without the early language and literacy skills they need[[36]](#footnote-36). For that reason, our early years’ literacy programmes focus on supporting the most disadvantaged children. Our Small Talk programme, for example, helps parents turn everyday activities, like having breakfast and visiting the supermarket, into opportunities to build their child’s language and literacy skills. An evaluation found the programme has already had an impact in Peterborough and Swindon, where fewer parents engage regularly in positive home learning environment behaviours compared with parents nationally: parents who had been exposed to the campaign were more likely to engage in home learning environment behaviours on a daily basis compared with those who couldn’t remember the campaign.

* **The impact of role models**

Research shows that role models can influence young people’s educational aspirations[[37]](#footnote-37). The Behavioural Insights Team suggest that role models can influence young people’s interest in applying to university: one study found that inspirational talks led to an increase in young people accepting a university place[[38]](#footnote-38). As young people from lower income families are much less likely to apply to university[[39]](#footnote-39), providing pupils with a role model may boost enthusiasm for further education. Role models might include teachers, other pupils, family members, or public figures like footballers, actors or musicians, but some research suggests that role models will only influence people’s self-belief when their success is deemed to be attainable[[40]](#footnote-40).

A survey we conducted found that 78% of children and young people have a role model: these role models were predominantly from within their immediate family[[41]](#footnote-41). Similarly, a study in the US found that 65% of children named someone they knew as a role model[[42]](#footnote-42). This highlights the important role that parents can play in the home learning environment. Sports people (and footballers in particular) are also frequently mentioned role models, particularly for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Our Premier League Reading Stars programme, developed in partnership with the Premier League enables children to take part in football-themed challenges and practice their reading skills using football related resources and texts, with footballers acting as their Club’s Reading Star and nominating their favourite book. An evaluation found that the programme is having a positive impact on children’s attainment in reading and writing[[43]](#footnote-43).

Many of our media campaigns feature well known public figures. Our recently launched Family Zone (a website containing home learning resources for families), features author videos, while a range of celebrities from footballers to musicians have helped judge our writing competitions or have taken part in literacy events. Although some evidence suggests that people with large followings can increase responsiveness to campaigns on social media, other research suggests that those celebrities should come from a similar background to the target audience. Research shows that demographic and behavioural similarities with the person delivering a message can improve the effectiveness of role models, and that those from lower socio economic groups are more sensitive to the characteristics of the messenger.[[44]](#footnote-44) A longitudinal study of 80 teenagers found that those who had at least one race and gender matched role model at the beginning of the study performed better academically up to 24 months later, and thought more about their futures.[[45]](#footnote-45)

**The effects of COVID-19 on this group**

It is important to consider the impact of COVID-19 on all disadvantaged pupils. While the data shows that white pupils eligible for free school meals are falling behind, we know that COVID-19 has a disproportionate impact on people from BME backgrounds[[46]](#footnote-46), so it is vital that the challenges faced by this group continue to be addressed.

We are concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic will widen the attainment gap suffered by disadvantaged students, who are already twice as likely to leave formal education without GCSEs in English and maths compared to their better-off classmates[[47]](#footnote-47). Research from the Sutton Trust shows that only 16% of pupils from working class backgrounds are taking part in live and recorded lessons online every day, compared with 30% of pupils from middle class homes[[48]](#footnote-48). A new report from the IFS shows that higher-income parents are much more likely than the less well-off to report that their child’s school provides online classes and access to online videoconferencing with teachers, and that children from better-off families are spending 30% more time on home learning than those from poorer families[[49]](#footnote-49).

Evidence already suggests that poorer students fall further behind during breaks from school, due to limited access to enrichment activities and food insecurity, and that the prolonged summer break may be one of the most fundamental contributors towards the attainment gap between richest and poorest children, accounting for almost two thirds of the gap by the time children reach the age of 14[[50]](#footnote-50). Recent Sutton Trust research shows that that teachers in the most deprived schools are more than twice as likely as those in advantaged schools to say the work their students are submitting during the lockdown is of a much lower quality than normal (15% vs 6%)[[51]](#footnote-51). 73% of teachers anticipate a negative impact on pupil’s attainment and progression[[52]](#footnote-52).

We are particularly concerned about the impact on children’s literacy. Poor literacy levels reflect and reinforce social and economic inequality. The areas in England with the lowest literacy are the most economically disadvantaged. Tackling low literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and improving literacy boosts life chances, increasing employability and earning potential. However, the COVID-19 pandemic will result in the gap between the literacy of children from poorer backgrounds and their more affluent peers becoming even wider.

While many organisations, including the National Literacy Trust, are offering free online educational resources, we know thatmany of the most vulnerable children don’t have the technology they need to access these from home. A survey of more than 6,000 teachers by Teacher Tapp found that only 2% of teachers working in the poorest communities believe all their pupils can access the internet at home[[53]](#footnote-53), while Sutton Trust research found that over a third of parents with children aged 5-16 reported that their child does not have access to their own computer, laptop or tablet[[54]](#footnote-54). While we welcome the Government’s commitment to providing free laptops or tablets and 4G routers to disadvantaged pupils, we are concerned that many disadvantaged pupils, including those who do not receive support from a social worker, will not benefit from this scheme.

In addition, the parents of the most vulnerable children frequently lack the skills, confidence and motivation to support their learning outside of a school environment. A survey conducted by the Sutton Trust and Public First found that just 37% of parents in the C2DE social grade were confident teaching their children and explaining things when they are learning from home, compared with 47% of those in the ABC1 grade[[55]](#footnote-55). Research also shows that disadvantaged families are likely to have less capacity to support their children’s home-schooling during this period: those with the lowest household income were six times less likely to be able to work from home and three times less likely to be able to self-isolate[[56]](#footnote-56).

Research from the Child Poverty Action Group found that families with dependent children are likely to be negatively affected by the financial, emotional and physical implications of lockdown. Many families are concerned about their finances, particularly when the closure of schools has led to mounting utility bills and food bills[[57]](#footnote-57): An ONS survey found that 39% of parents have had their household finances affected by COVID-19 compared to 22% of non-parents[[58]](#footnote-58), while Action for Children research shows that families reported being most worried about not being able to afford food, followed by electricity and gas, then nappies[[59]](#footnote-59), and a survey from the Food Foundation found that 5 million people living in households with children have experienced food insecurity since lockdown started[[60]](#footnote-60). Data from the Children’s Commissioner also shows that many children are living in overcrowded conditions, making it difficult to learn[[61]](#footnote-61). It is likely that these challenges will indirectly impact on attainment. There are also long-term implications when many children’s charities are at risk of closing: the Childhood Trust estimate that 40% of child poverty charities in London will be forced to close within 6 months. This is worrying when we know that child poverty was already rising before coronavirus[[62]](#footnote-62).

**The impacts of this underachievement, both for individuals and for communities**

We are particularly concerned about the impact of underachievement in literacy. Good speech, language and communication skills are essential for doing well at school[[63]](#footnote-63): for example, good literacy is associated with closing the attainment gap in science[[64]](#footnote-64) and can help pupils learn geography more effectively[[65]](#footnote-65). However, in 2019 only 51% of disadvantaged pupils reached the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, compared to 71% for all other pupils[[66]](#footnote-66).

As well as leading to underachievement at school, the impact of low literacy skills on individuals can be seen throughout their lifetime. Poor literacy can lead to unemployment: a study by the OECD found that the UK had the widest literacy gap between the unemployed and those in work out of 22 countries included in the analysis[[67]](#footnote-67). Strong basic skills like literacy and numeracy are associated with higher rates of economic activity and a lower risk of unemployment[[68]](#footnote-68). Our Literacy Changes Lives report also highlights the fact that low literacy is associated with low earnings[[69]](#footnote-69).

An evidence review that we carried out in 2018 found that those with low levels of literacy are also more likely to have poor health and engage in harmful behaviours[[70]](#footnote-70). For example, low literacy is associated with worsening health limiting conditions, and increased smoking in men[[71]](#footnote-71), as well as lower levels of mental health[[72]](#footnote-72). Those who are at the highest risk of poor health, such as those with low-income or low status jobs, are more likely to have low health literacy[[73]](#footnote-73), making it difficult for them to access health services effectively and understand information available to them. Poor literacy exacerbates risk factors associated with offending behaviour: for example, negative experiences at school can lead to youth crime[[74]](#footnote-74), and those with poor literacy are more likely to be excluded from school. Poor literacy is prevalent amongst the prison population: nearly half of prisoners have a reading age below the level of an 11 year old[[75]](#footnote-75). Literacy is also linked to life expectancy: people with poor literacy skills have low incomes, are more likely to be unemployed, and have poor health behaviours: all factors which can be linked to mortality[[76]](#footnote-76).

**Priorities for the Government in terms of tackling this issue, with reference to:**

* **The value of locally-tailored solutions, including youth groups and community organisations**

Locally tailored solutions are valuable in that they pay attention to geographical diversity and different socio-economic, political, and funding contexts. Different local areas have different local needs: each town, city and region has a different demographic make-up and ways of working, and interventions should reflect those differences. Research suggests that stand-alone policies and ‘one size fits all’ models are not always effective, and that national strategies for improving children’s outcomes should be supplemented by local area approaches[[77]](#footnote-77).

Locally tailored solutions are also valuable in that they often bring cross-sector organisations together to address the underlying causes of complex social problems in a more holistic and joined-up way. Even the most successful education policy interventions can only reduce and not eliminate disparities in educational outcomes when working in isolation[[78]](#footnote-78). Addressing disadvantage in one area of a child’s life (such as education) can be easily undermined by neglecting another (such as health)[[79]](#footnote-79). Many families face diverse and interconnected challenges that may be addressed more effectively when local organisations come together, combining their insights, knowledge and strengths. The rationale for locally tailored solutions is that it is more beneficial to focus on the whole community rather than disadvantage at the individual level.

The National Literacy Trust has been developing a place-based approach to literacy for over 10 years. By taking coordinated action at a local level to drive up literacy levels, we aim to support increased educational attainment and employability skills, and improve health outcomes and social capital. Our 14 National Literacy Trust Hubs, created in areas where there is the greatest need, bring together local authorities, libraries, sporting and cultural organisations, faith and voluntary community groups, businesses, health and education organisations to run a combination of educational programmes and media campaigns, to raise literacy levels among the hardest to engage. By co-creating programmes and campaigns in partnership with a range of local organisations, we are able to assess the literacy needs and assets of the community, and develop bespoke solutions to the specific literacy challenges that each area faces. This approach to improving literacy is already bringing benefits to local areas, with more children achieving a good level of development in Middlesbrough, more children writing outside school in Bradford, and more children enjoying reading in Peterborough.

* **The school system**

As we have outlined above, young people who leave school without good literacy skills are held back at every stage of their lives. Secondary schools should therefore prioritise literacy, embedding reading, writing, speaking and listening in every subject to ensure that no student is left behind. Research shows that the gap in reading ability between children from poorer and better-off families starts to widen significantly after the age of seven, highlighting the need for school-based interventions[[80]](#footnote-80). A report from the Education Endowment Foundation suggests that all teachers should be supported to understand how to teach students to read, write and communicate effectively in their subjects[[81]](#footnote-81). This might include having a literacy coordinator within the school to ensure children are supported to progress in their reading, or enabling teachers to take part in a literacy development training programme. Our Literacy for Learning training programme works with teachers to develop a range of approaches to supporting reading, writing, speaking and listening. We also run a Young Readers programme which encourages schools to form partnerships with organisations in the community to promote reading for enjoyment. Research shows that reading for pleasure between the ages of 10 and 16 has a positive impact on children’s vocabulary, spelling and maths skills, but children in poverty are less likely to read outside school than their better off peers, and less likely to have books of their own[[82]](#footnote-82).

School libraries can also help build pupil’s literacy skills, general academic attainment, and scores in history, mathematics and science, as well as pupil’s reading behaviour and attitudes towards reading[[83]](#footnote-83). Our survey found that pupils who receive free school meals were more likely to use the school library at least once a week compared with those who don’t receive free school meals[[84]](#footnote-84). However, research shows that schools with a higher proportion of children on free school meals are more than twice as likely not to have access to a designated library space[[85]](#footnote-85). This means that disadvantaged pupils are less likely to experience the positive benefits that a school library can provide. Our Love Our Libraries training programme helps schools audit and develop their libraries provision by improving their knowledge of children’s books, and teaching them how to create an effective reading environment. Schools supported through the programme have gone on to improve their book stock and hold themed events for reluctant readers.[[86]](#footnote-86) However, we are concerned that the provision of school libraries is decreasing due to issues with budgets and staffing.[[87]](#footnote-87)

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